

Retrieval for the Sake of Renewal: Timothy George's Methodology

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Abstract: *This article explores the theology of retrieval of prominent historical theologian Timothy George, highlighting his emphasis on the importance of reclaiming the past for the present. George's approach to historical theology is examined within his identity as a Christian, an evangelical, and a Baptist. He proposes a hierarchy of ecclesial identity, where his primary identity is as a Trinitarian Christian belonging to the whole company of the redeemed across time. George's work involves understanding the Church's oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. He advocates for an ecumenical approach to theology, understanding the Church's universal nature, while also valuing denominational distinctives. He stresses the need for retrieval to counteract spiritual amnesia and to aid in the progressive holiness of the Church. George's commitment to biblical interpretation within the broader historical context helps foster a deeper understanding of the Scriptures and contributes to the ongoing growth of the Church. His work provides a model for theologians to engage with the past, promoting unity, renewal, and a richer understanding of their ecclesial identity within the context of the Christian tradition.*

Key Words: *Baptist theology, Church, historical theology, retrieval, Timothy George*

As a prominent historical theologian, Timothy George emphasized throughout his teaching and writing ministry the vital need to retrieve the past for the sake of the present.¹ In the 1980s George began his church history course at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary with this memorable statement: “My task is to convince you that there was someone between your grandmother and Jesus, and it matters.”² He discovered early in his teaching career that his students needed help

¹ Portions of this article have been revised and adapted from Christopher Hanna, “Evangelical Ecumenism,” in *Retrieval for the Sake of Renewal: Timothy George as a Historical Theologian* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022).

² See “Timothy George,” <http://archives.sbts.edu/the-history-of-the-sbts/our-professors/timothy-george/>.

grounding their understanding of the faith in the history of the church. “I found that students knew little, if anything, about those pioneers of the past,” he reflected, and because of that, he said, “I wanted to encourage a program of *réssourcement*—not a return to ‘the good old days’ but an appropriation of the warranted wisdom and spiritual insight they can offer to the church today.”³ This article examines Timothy George’s theology of retrieval by examining his approach to historical theology as a convictional Baptist within the Great Tradition, and by doing so, it seeks to advance ongoing conversations among Baptists in particular about the importance of retrieval in contemporary theology and practice.

George's Background

Despite growing up in poverty-stricken Hell’s Half-Acre in Chattanooga, Tennessee, George’s passion for learning and his determination to rise above his circumstances led him to pursue a rigorous education at Harvard University. These formative experiences played a crucial role in shaping the strength of his scholarship and the intensity of his concern for the practical application of historical theology in the lives of believers today. His contribution in these areas elevated his voice as a Baptist theologian both for Baptists and for the wider evangelical movement. From 1978 until 1988, George taught church history and historical theology to students preparing for ministry at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Gregory Wills describes him as an “intellectual leader among Southern Baptist conservatives.”⁴ In 1989 he founded Beeson Divinity School of Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, and now teaches as the Distinguished Professor of Divinity. At Beeson he established a History and Doctrine sequence of study that goes beyond the categories of church history or systematic theology. He held leadership roles in the SBC and the Baptist World Alliance, using the wisdom from the past to navigate and discern the fads and dangers of the present. He holds a key role in the evangelicals and Catholics Together dialogue. He also served as a senior editor and executive editor for *Christianity Today*. George’s influence within the context of North American evangelicalism, Reformation studies, and theo-

³ Timothy George, “The *SBJT* Forum: Profiles of Expository Preaching,” *SBJT* 8 (1999): 111.

⁴ Gregory Wills, *Southern Baptist Seminary 1859–2009* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 511.

logical education establishes the significance of capturing his vision for an evangelical method of retrieval.

Timothy George's Ecclesial Identity

This article analyzes George's ecclesial identity as a Christian, evangelical, and Baptist and how the four marks of the church encapsulate the major themes of his work to explore the essence and implications of his methodology of retrieval. Proposing a "hierarchy of ecclesial identity,"⁵ he presents an insight into his self-perception within the Christian communion, his interactions with other Christians as a historical theologian, and his approach to historical theology. In this context, he positions himself as "a Protestant, an evangelical, and a Baptist" in a hierarchical relationship.⁶ However, he does not accept these descriptions as his "spiritual and ecclesial identity at the most basic core level."⁷ While he does not minimize these traits, he does not personally see them as his central identity. Rather, these ecclesial traits are, for George, "important markers of my place within the community of faith."⁸ He explains, "There is a more primary identity I must confess: I am a Trinitarian Christian who by the grace of God belongs to the whole company of the redeemed through the ages, those who are 'very members incorporate in the mystical body' of Christ (*Book of Common Prayer*)."⁹ In essence, he identifies not only as a member of his denomination in his time but also as a member of the whole body of Christ throughout all time.

In proposing a hierarchy of ecclesial identity as a model for organizing theological priorities, George draws on an approach to levels of doctrine that he learned from Catholic theologians, who refer to a "hierarchy of truths."¹⁰ In clarifying the concept of "hierarchy of truths,"¹¹ George explains that Catholic theologians do not intend to suggest "that some truths are truer than others or that the Catholic faithful are free to

⁵ Timothy George, "Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist," in *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity*, ed. Anthony L. Chute, Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 94.

⁶ George, "Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist," 94.

⁷ George, "Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist," 94.

⁸ George, "Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist," 94.

⁹ George, "Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist," 94.

¹⁰ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 1. Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism* includes this concept. See Flannery, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 11.

¹¹ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 1.

pick and choose among the teachings of their church as they please."¹² Observing that "It means, rather, that in the economy of divine revelation, more theological weight, as it were, is given to those teachings that relate directly to the foundational truths of the Christian faith,"¹³ he highlights the perspective behind this concept. The truths that are *in accordance* with foundational truths carry more weight, while the truths that are only *in relation* to foundational truths carry less weight. Likewise, George's identity is first as a Christian, second as an evangelical, and third as a Baptist provides a unique point of view from which he carries on his work of retrieval.

Timothy George's Identity as a Christian

Using the story of Polycarp's martyrdom as an example, George emphasizes the central importance of Christian identity rather than other secondary labels or loyalties. He writes, "When Polycarp of Smyrna, a disciple of the apostle John, was brought before the Roman tribunal before being cast into the arena with wild beasts, he confessed publicly the faith that he knew would lead to his certain martyrdom."¹⁴ George imagines what the possible labels could have been, which Polycarp could have self-associated. Ultimately, he points to Polycarp's confession to make his claim about the centrality of Christian identity. Reflecting on Polycarp's potential labels, he explains, "In that critical moment, Polycarp did not say, 'I am a Paulinist. I am a Petrist. I am an Ignatian' (after his great contemporary Ignatius of Antioch). Nor did he say, 'I am an Irenaeus' (after his famous disciple, Irenaeus of Lyon). Rather he confessed, 'Christianus sum' ('I am a Christian')."¹⁵ Polycarp's confession of Christian identity amidst the severe persecution of the early church is a challenge to contemporary Christians today to prioritize their commitment to Christ above all other labels. George firmly believes that Chris-

¹² George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 1.

¹³ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 1. For a recent evangelical use of a hierarchical approach to theological truths, see Gavin Ortlund, *Finding The Right Hills To Die On: The Case For Theological Triage* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020). George also points out how Aquinas, in a similar way, distinguishes between articles of faith that are *secundum se* and others in *ordine ad alia*. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica Volume 2:II-II*, q.1, a.6. George recommends "the excellent study by the Capuchin scholar William Henn" ("The Hierarchy of Truths Twenty Years Later," *Theological Studies* 48 [1987]: 439–71).

¹⁴ George, "Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist," 94.

¹⁵ George, "Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist," 94.

tian identification with the person and work of Jesus Christ is a spiritual identity worth dying for in the first and the twenty-first centuries.

The Need for Particularity: Timothy George's Identity as Evangelical

Although George's commitment to Christ is above all labels, it is not without any labels. He warns, "Yet the desire for a Christianity shorn of all particularity carries its own risks."¹⁶ He gives biblical and historical examples of how this has already been attempted and failed.

A biblical example is instructive for George: "The Corinthian church of the New Testament had its own 'factions': the Paul-party, the Peter-sect, the Apollos-coterie."¹⁷ He explains how these divisions resulted in frustration, and "another group in the church at Corinth arose claiming to have no mere human leader at all: 'We belong to Christ,' they said."¹⁸ This alternative did not prove to be an adequate solution because "the Christ-party at Corinth was soon beset by the same spirit of arrogance and divisiveness that marked all the other partisan groups in the congregation."¹⁹ This example in the New Testament demonstrates that ecclesial identity should not enable arrogance and divisiveness; solely claiming Christ does not exempt someone from these pitfalls.

To demonstrate "a recurring theme throughout the history of the church,"²⁰ George selects a representative historical example. He refers to the attempt by Alexander Campbell in the nineteenth century, who tried "to eliminate denominational labels and restore the one true Christian church."²¹ Campbell's attempt failed.²² George explains, "Within a single generation, his movement had subdivided into several distinct and often mutually hostile church bodies."²³ He says that Campbell's failure should not surprise "anyone familiar with the history of Presbyterians in Scotland, Lutherans in America, Reformed churches in the Netherlands,

¹⁶ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 4.

¹⁷ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 4.

¹⁸ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 4.

¹⁹ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 4.

²⁰ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 4.

²¹ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 4.

²² For an evaluation of Alexander Campbell's movement and engagement with the Baptist tradition, see Timothy George, "Southern Baptist Ghosts," *First Things* 93 (1999): 18–24.

²³ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 4.

Anglicans in Africa, and Baptists almost anywhere."²⁴ As such, George offers both a biblical and historical model for the need for a more narrow category in which one should identify his role within the communion of faith.

As George applies the need for particularity to his own identity within the Christian communion, he places evangelical as the next tier below his Christian identity. In 1999 George wrote "If I'm an Evangelical, What Am I?"²⁵ In his argument, he contends that evangelicals "lay claim to the doctrinal legacy of the Reformation, the missionary and evangelistic impulse of the Great Awakening, and a trans-denominational fellowship of Bible-believing Christians with whom we share a common commitment to the Word of God and the task of world evangelization."²⁶ In George's view, evangelicalism is best described as "a renewal movement within historic Christian orthodoxy."²⁷ Therefore, "it cannot be equated with any one denomination."²⁸ Instead, he views evangelicalism by its theological commitments.²⁹

According to George, evangelicals are firmly located within Christian orthodoxy and in line with it: "Evangelicals stand in continuity with the Great Tradition of Christian believing, confessing, worshiping and acting through the centuries, while not discounting the many local histories that must be written to give a full account of Christian communities in any given era."³⁰ In George's view of evangelicalism, he identifies four theological commitments. The first theological commitment is the "trinitarian and Christological consensus of the early church."³¹ The second theological commitment is "the formal and material principles of the Reformation."³² The third theological commitment is "the missionary

²⁴ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 4.

²⁵ Timothy George, "If I'm an Evangelical, What Am I?" *Christianity Today* 43 (1999): 62.

²⁶ George and Dockery, *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, 7.

²⁷ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 5.

²⁸ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 5.

²⁹ See James Packer and Thomas Oden, *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 19–20. Packer and Oden also use a theological approach to defining evangelicalism. For a recent historical examination of evangelicalism, see Thomas Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

³⁰ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 5.

³¹ George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 5.

³² George, "Is Jesus a Baptist?," para. 5.

movement that grew out of the Great Awakening.”³³ The fourth theological commitment is “the new stirrings of the Spirit that indicate ‘surprising works of God’ are still happening in the world today.”³⁴

Timothy George’s Baptist Identity

George’s Baptist identity forms the bottom tier of his ecclesial identity. In establishing his place as a Baptist, though, he never leaves behind his identity as a Christian and an evangelical. Rather, he understands his role as a Baptist in the community of faith in relation to the two preceding tiers. In doing so, George offers a clarion call for Baptists to understand our unique place within the Great Tradition, not as an isolated sect outside of it.

Throughout the early stages of his Christian journey, George began developing his Baptist identity and later reinforced that identity through his own theological reflection. In retelling his story, he explains, “I am a Baptist because it was through the witness of a small Baptist church that I first heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.”³⁵ He also grew in his spiritual journey through the ministry of his Baptist church: “Many of the things I still believe in I first learned in that modest Baptist community of faith.”³⁶ Having come to know Christ through a Baptist church, he continued to grow as a Christian in a Baptist church.

While George’s Baptist identity was influenced by his early conversion and formation, he intentionally embraced it after much careful reflection and study. Further, in this season of development he reinforced his Baptist identity in relation to the other two components of his ecclesial identity. Reflecting on his journey, he recalls, “I came to see that being a Baptist was for me the most faithful way of being an evangelical, a Protestant, and a Christian.”³⁷ It was when he “studied the Bible more

³³ George, “Is Jesus a Baptist?,” para. 5.

³⁴ George, “Is Jesus a Baptist?,” para. 5.

³⁵ George, “Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist,” 108.

³⁶ George, “Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist,” 108. George mentions the doctrine of Christology and atonement. He says, “Jesus loves me and died on the cross for my sins.” He formed a strong conviction about the Bible during this time: “The Bible is the totally true and trustworthy Word of God.” He had a basic anthropology “that all human beings are made in the image of God and are infinitely precious in his sight.” His calling to the ministry: “When I was called to preach the gospel, it was in a Baptist church that I was set apart and ordained as a minister of the divine Word.”

³⁷ George, “Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist,” 108.

deeply”³⁸ and “became aware of many other church traditions, doctrines, and denominations”³⁹ that his “Baptist convictions grew stronger.”⁴⁰ As such, George positions the Baptist tradition in line with historical Christianity: “Baptists are orthodox Christians who stand in continuity with the dogmatic consensus of the early church on matters such as the scope of Holy Scripture (canon), the doctrine of God (Trinity), and the person and work of Jesus Christ (Christology).”⁴¹ Further, he sees his Baptist commitments as the best way to be an evangelical. In his line of reasoning, he explains, “If evangelicalism at its best is a renewal movement within the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church, then the Baptist tradition represents a renewal within the renewal.”⁴² He places his Baptist tradition within evangelicalism, which is within historic Christianity, and so, maintaining clarity in his own hierarchy of ecclesial identity.⁴³

By locating his Baptist identity within Christianity and evangelicalism, George presents an ecumenical vision for Baptists, instead of the sectarian identity some Baptists have embraced in our past. In a word of caution, he warns, “There is a fine line between retrieval for the sake of renewal and a projection of a ‘Baptocentricity’ (that’s a word that I’m inventing), an egocentricity that is self-satisfying and self-promoting.”⁴⁴ Rather, he encourages Baptists to recover and celebrate their shared commitment to Christian orthodoxy. He summarizes:

With all true Christians, Baptists profess loyalty to Jesus Christ the Lord, the eternal Son of the heavenly Father who “For us and our salvation” became man. He died for our sins on a cross, rose triumphantly over death, ascended to the Father, and one day will come again in power and glory. In the meantime, he still reigns, rules, and redeems through the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵

Baptists are called upon by George to recover their historic Christian commitments: “All Baptists need to cultivate a holistic orthodoxy, based

³⁸ George, “Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist,” 108.

³⁹ George, “Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist,” 108.

⁴⁰ George, “Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist,” 108.

⁴¹ George and Dockery, *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, 5.

⁴² George, “Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist,” 102.

⁴³ George and Dockery, *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, 5.

⁴⁴ Timothy George, “Baptist Identity II,” Lecture, Union University February 17, 2007.

⁴⁵ George, “Is Jesus a Baptist?,” para. 6.

on a high view of the Scriptures and congruent with the trinitarian and Christological consensus of the early church.”⁴⁶ According to his argument, there is no other way to “avoid the dangers of rigid reductionism on the one hand and liberal revisionism on the other.”⁴⁷

The Baptist movement, as George envisions it, should be understood in terms of its continuity and differences.⁴⁸ First, he establishes the continuity of Baptists with the Reformers and evangelicals: “The Baptist tradition finds a place within this narrative as a distinctive reform movement within the wider evangelical renewal, a reform within the reform, so to say.”⁴⁹ Second, he distinguishes Baptists from other evangelical groups of the Reformation: “Baptists are indeed heirs of the Reformation, but they are not, nor have they ever been, mere clones of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, the Anabaptists, or anyone else.”⁵⁰ Baptists are in continuation with the Reformation yet maintain a unique and distinct ecclesial identity from the other groups of the Reformation.

In his writings, George expounds upon the Baptist tradition’s unique formation and contributions. “Persecution and dissent”⁵¹ characterized the context of Baptist beginnings. Highlighting a key historical point, he notes, “Baptists began as a small, persecuted minority in pre-revolutionary England.”⁵² A unique contribution of Baptists was an “intense advocacy of religious freedom and, especially in the American setting, the separation of church and state (which does not equal the divorce of religion from public life).”⁵³

⁴⁶ George and Dockery, *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, 6.

⁴⁷ George and Dockery, *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, 6.

⁴⁸ For a “good overview of Baptist history,” George recommends resources for a general understanding of Baptist history: David Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries: A History of a Global People*, 2nd ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018); Anthony Chute, Nathan Finn, and Michael Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015); H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987). See Timothy George, “A Baptist Theologian: Reflections on Anglicanism,” in *The Future of Orthodox Anglicanism*, ed. Gerald McDermott (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 233.

⁴⁹ George, “Is Jesus a Baptist?,” para. 6.

⁵⁰ George, “Is Jesus a Baptist?,” para. 6.

⁵¹ George, “Is Jesus a Baptist?,” para. 6.

⁵² Timothy George, foreword to *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity*, ed. Matthew Emerson, Christopher Morgan, and Lucas Stamps (Nashville: B&H, 2020), 1.

⁵³ George, “Foreword,” to *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*, 1.

While George is grateful to be a Baptist, he also recognizes that his denominational affiliation has not been without its challenges: “Being a Baptist is a blessing but also sometimes a burden. From time to time, I have considered the possibility of becoming something else.”⁵⁴ For example, he remembers, “I once prepared a talk called ‘The Confessions of a Catholic-friendly, Pentecostal-admiring, Reformed Baptist with a Hankering after Lutheranism and a Strong Affinity for the *Book of Common Prayer*.’”⁵⁵ While maintaining his Baptist identity, George acknowledges the benefits he has received from other traditions:

Each of these ecclesial traditions, among others, has enriched my life and calling to serve the Body of Christ. Each brings distinctive treasures to our common labors *pro Christo et ecclesia*. Being a Baptist gives me all the freedom I need to appropriate as fully as I can the gifts they offer without abandoning the Baptist principles and ways that I cherish.⁵⁶

Taking a unique standpoint, George approaches his work of retrieval in the history of the church from the interior of the church as opposed to a secular and reductionist approach. Remaining firmly grounded in the historic community of faith as a Baptist, evangelical, and Christian, he engages in the work of retrieval. His emphasis on mere Christianity opens the scope of his historical interest to the wider church, his evangelical priorities inform his theological engagement with the historical figures and documents, and his Baptist convictions shape his ecclesial perspective and personal reflection.

The Essence of George’s Retrieval

As we turn our attention to George’s principles of theological retrieval and historical theology, his hierarchy of ecclesial identity begins to surface with methodological relevance. As he sees himself as Baptist, evangelical, and Christian, he also frames his work as theologian with some interplay between those tiered identities. The framework of this retrieval emerges from George’s foundational understanding of Church history in relation to the nature of the church as articulated in the Nicene Creed.

The foundation of George’s understanding of historical theology be-

⁵⁴ George, “Foreword,” to *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*, 1.

⁵⁵ George, “Why I Am an Evangelical and a Baptist,” 109.

⁵⁶ George, “Is Jesus a Baptist?,” para. 10.

gins with George Huntston Williams and his notion of “church history as a theological discipline.”⁵⁷ George defines church history as “the attempt to recall and recount the story of the people of God, in all of its manifold variations and to do so from the perspective of someone who recognizes that retelling, that reinvestigation, as his or her own story, which is to say from the perspective of faith.”⁵⁸ Thus, he claims, “This is why church history is not just secular history with a little sanctimonious water of baptism thrown over it.”⁵⁹

George bases his approach on the nature and function of history, particularly emphasizing that humans are historical creatures. By our nature, all humans “are finite beings limited in two respects: by space and by time.”⁶⁰ In terms of space, George expounds, “The fact that you were born in a certain place, in a particular culture, within a specific family is going to a very great extent affect the kind of person that you become. We are spatial beings.”⁶¹ In terms of time he explains, “But also the fact that you were born on a certain day, within a given decade or century or millennium is also going to place inescapable parameters around you and the kind of person you become.”⁶²

As finite humans, then, the purpose of studying history is “to enlarge one’s coordinates to move away from that particular intersection of time and space in which we find ourselves and to gain perspective on our self and culture.”⁶³

We expand those coordinates, though, not by pillaging the past and placing ourselves at the center of the universe. Rather, as we broaden our historical vision, we come to see our place in the whole more clearly. George recognizes that evangelicals have an engrained proclivity to fall

⁵⁷ Timothy George, “George Huntston Williams: A Historian for All Seasons,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 7.2 (1986): 75–93. Reprinted in *Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies* 51, ed. Raymond A. Mentzer, *The Contentious Triangle: Church, State and University: A Festschrift in Honor of Professor George Huntston Williams*, ed. Rodney L. Peterson and Calvin Augustine Pater (Kirksville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1999), 15–34.

⁵⁸ Timothy George, “Church History as a Theological Discipline,” Lecture given at Beeson Divinity School, Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama in 2011, in *Lectures on Church History*, disc 1, Beeson Media Archive, 2013, 14 CDs.

⁵⁹ George, “Church History as a Theological Discipline.”

⁶⁰ George, “Church History as a Theological Discipline.”

⁶¹ George, “Church History as a Theological Discipline.”

⁶² George, “Church History as a Theological Discipline.”

⁶³ George, “Church History as a Theological Discipline.”

prey to “the heresy of contemporaneity or, in less theological terms, the imperialism of the present.”⁶⁴ Expressing his lament, he points out, “We still place ourselves, our values, our worldview at the center of history, relegating whole epochs to the Dark Ages or pre-Enlightenment culture.”⁶⁵ He concludes, “Thus the Christian past, including ways earlier generations of believers have understood the Bible, becomes not so much something to be studied and appropriated as something to be ignored or overcome.”⁶⁶ In relegating our church’s history to irrelevance, we lose the vast resources to aid the church’s ongoing growth, and so, the lack of retrieval inhibits our efforts in contemporary renewal. We also lose our historical moorings, and so, lack the ability to understand our place in space and time. In some ways, it seems George’s understanding of his hierarchical ecclesial identity frames how he understands his own identity in space and time.

Theologians of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church

As George brings together his convictions about the nature and value of church history and his own position as a Christian, evangelical, and Baptist he proffers a vision for the ministry of historical theology and retrieval within the framework of the *notae ecclesiae* from the Nicene Creed. In the process, George emphasizes both the universal nature of the church across space and time and the local church in a particular place and moment in history. He summarizes, “Thus the church has both a local and a universal dimension, both a congregational and an associational form, both a covenantal and an ecumenical thrust, always and ever grounded on our confession in the one God who is forever Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁶⁷ The four marks of the church in the Nicene Creed provide the exemplar for the church’s nature. Within that framework, George carries on the charge of his mentor, George Huntston Williams: “The two parts of the creed that the church historian is to make meaningful are *Una Sancta*, the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church; and *Communio Sanctorum*, the church as the communion

⁶⁴ Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 23.

⁶⁵ George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers*, 23.

⁶⁶ George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers*, 23.

⁶⁷ George, “The Faith, My Faith, and the Church’s Faith,” 89.

of saints.”⁶⁸ In committing himself to this type of work as a theologian, George brings to bear all the facets of his ecclesial identity in his ministry.

The Church Is One

The scope of historical theology should be the *one* church, rather than a single denomination or sect. In other words, historical theology should be ecumenical historiography at its best. Within this broad universal heading, local communities of denominational theologians, like Baptists, can view themselves as contributors to this larger whole. In this way, George holds to “an ecumenism of conviction, not an ecumenism of accommodation. We do not advance the cause of Christian unity by abandoning our biblical understanding of the church. But how do we hold these together?”⁶⁹ In light of this tension between conviction and unity, George offers three ways to move forward.

First, Christians should “recognize the centrality of Jesus Christ. The closer we come to Jesus Christ, the closer we come to one another as brothers and sisters in him.”⁷⁰ Second, Christians should study the Bible together. George explains, “The Bible belongs to the whole people of God, not just to one denomination or church tradition. We can clarify differences and find a deeper unity by going deeper into the Scriptures.”⁷¹ Third, Christians should pray together. George writes, “Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father (John 17:21) that his disciples would be one so that the world might believe. We can join our prayer to the prayer of Jesus and in so doing become a part of its fulfillment.”⁷²

Theologians for *the church*, regardless of denominational conviction, must be theologians for *the whole church*. Highlighting his viewpoint, George argues, “An ecclesial theologian must also be an ecumenical theologian—ecumenical in the sound, orthodox sense of that word.”⁷³ Expanding on this idea, he explains, “That means, a pastor theologian is concerned with the entire people of God through the ages and also with

⁶⁸ George, “Remembering George Huntston Williams,” 10:48–11:03.

⁶⁹ Berry and Hottman, “Baptists and Ecumenism: An Interview with Timothy George,” *CTR* 14 (2017): 90.

⁷⁰ Berry and Hottman, “Baptists and Ecumenism,” 90.

⁷¹ Berry and Hottman, “Baptists and Ecumenism,” 90.

⁷² Berry and Hottman, “Baptists and Ecumenism,” 90.

⁷³ Timothy George, foreword to *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision*, by Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 8.

the *missio Dei* throughout the entire *oikoumenē* today, that is, the whole inhabited world (Luke 2:1).⁷⁴

The relationship between the theologian’s community of faith and the wider community of faith is elaborated on by George. He says, “Such pastors honor and cherish the discrete traditions from which they come, but they also know themselves to belong to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, which is the Body of Christ extended throughout time as well as space.”⁷⁵ Therefore, he argues, “Theology that is truly biblical and evangelical is done for, with, and in the context of this enlarged Ecclesia for which Christ died.”⁷⁶

The metaphor of gift-exchange is used by George to illustrate the relationship between his particular community of faith and the wider community of faith: “Baptists have special gifts to offer the wider Body of Christ and also lots to learn from our fellow Christians. At Beeson, you can do both at once with grace, goodwill and gospel hospitality.”⁷⁷ George notes, “One of the most important contributions that Baptists have made to the wider life of the church is the recovery of the early church practice of baptism as an adult rite of initiation signifying a committed participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁸ Baptists have made other contributions to the wider church including: the necessity of personal conversion, a regenerate church, congregational governance, and religious liberty.

The Church Is Holy

The goal of historical theology should be the progressive *holiness* of the church. The task of historical theology contributes to the holiness of the church through its project of retrieval for the sake of renewal. Retrieval rescues the church from its amnesia.⁷⁹ George diagnoses the spiritual problems facing the church today: “The two major diseases of the contemporary church are spiritual amnesia (we have forgotten who we are) and ecclesiastical myopia (whoever we are, are glad we are not like

⁷⁴ George, “Foreword,” to *The Pastor Theologian*, 8.

⁷⁵ George, “Foreword,” to *The Pastor Theologian*, 8.

⁷⁶ George, “Foreword,” to *The Pastor Theologian*, 8.

⁷⁷ George, *Baptists at Beeson*, 5.

⁷⁸ Timothy George, “The Future of Baptist Theology,” 9.

⁷⁹ Timothy George, “Remembering David Steinmetz’s Quest to Free the Church from Amnesia,” *Christianity Today*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/december-web-only/remembering-david-steinmetz-quest-to-free-church-from-amnes.html>. See also Steinmetz, “Necessity of the Past,” 176.

‘them’). While these maladies are not unique to the people of God called Baptists, they are perhaps most glaringly present among us.”⁸⁰ George’s purpose of recalling the history of God’s people is renewing the holiness of God’s people in the present. He reminds us, “The church on earth is holy not because it is set apart in its external organization, as though it were a sanitarium in the midst of contagion. It is holy only because it is animated by the Holy Spirit and joined with its heavenly Head, Jesus Christ.”⁸¹ It is reassuring that the positional holiness of the church is based on the person of Christ, not on the performance of the church. While the holiness of the church is secure in Christ, the church should be reawakened by the Great Tradition and rekindled to obey the greatest commandment (to love God and love our neighbor) and refocused to fulfill the Great Commission (to make disciples).

The Church Is Catholic

The source of historical theology should be an expression of *catholicity* by learning from the grand scope of the Christian tradition, best exemplified by the five-volume work *The Christian Tradition* by Jaroslav Pelikan.⁸² It was Pelikan who said, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”⁸³ There have been recent discussions within different denominations on how each can best pursue catholicity, such as Baptists in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition* (2020),⁸⁴ as well as Presbyterians in *Reformed Catholicity* (2015).⁸⁵ Mark

⁸⁰ George and Dockery, *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, 1.

⁸¹ Timothy George, “What I’d Like to Tell the Pope About the Church,” *Christianity Today*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/june15/8t7041.html>.

⁸² Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (100–600) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 2, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom* (600–1700) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 3, *The Growth of Medieval Theology* (600–1300) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 4, *Reformation of Church and Dogma* (1300–1700) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 5, *Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture* (Since 1700) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁸³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities for 1983* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

⁸⁴ Matthew Emerson, Christopher Morgan, and Lucas Stamps, eds., *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020).

Dever rightly observes that church catholicity “came to be used synonymously with ‘orthodox.’”⁸⁶

According to George, he is a “historical theologian, whose special vocation it is to listen for and expect to find the Word of God in the documents of the church.”⁸⁷ However, he does clarify the priority of biblical revelation in relation to these church confessions and creeds:

These documents are not infallible artifacts of revelation, but they do identify a consensual interpretation of the Bible within a given community of faith. For this reason, they are very useful in helping Christians to distinguish primary and secondary matters of faith. We must never forget, of course, that all such confessions are accountable to, and revisable in the light of, the Bible itself.⁸⁸

Through his writings and interviews, George commends the “reclaiming of Baptist tradition, especially its catholicity, seen in the writings and work of a number of younger theologians.”⁸⁹ He highlights the work of “the Center for Baptist Renewal, whose principal participants identify as Southern Baptists.”⁹⁰ He has promoted the goals of the center by writing an article for *First Things*⁹¹ and interviewing Luke Stamps on the Beeson podcast.⁹²

The Church Is Apostolic

The history of biblical interpretation, in George’s view, is not a dis-

⁸⁵ Michael Allen and Scott Swain, *Reformed Catholicity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

⁸⁶ Mark Dever, *The Church* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 18. See also Mark Dever, “A Catholic Church: Galatians 3:26–29,” in Richard D. Phillips, Philip G. Ryken, and Mark Dever, *The Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004), 71–72.

⁸⁷ George, *Dogma Beyond Anathema*, 692.

⁸⁸ George, *Amazing Grace: God’s Pursuit, Our Response*, 76.

⁸⁹ George, “A Baptist Theologian,” in *The Future of Orthodox Anglicanism*, 231.

⁹⁰ George, “A Baptist Theologian,” in *The Future of Orthodox Anglicanism*, 231.

⁹¹ Timothy George, “Retrieval for the Sake of Renewal,” *First Things*, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/05/retrieval-for-the-sake-of-renewal>.

⁹² Timothy George, “Baptist Renewal,” Beeson Podcast (MP3 Podcast), <https://www.beesondivinity.com/podcast/2019/Baptist-Renewal>.

traction from, but an aid to, the church's *apostolicity*. The historical theologian should share a commitment to understand the content of the apostolic teaching in God's Word by engaging with the long exegetical tradition of the church. George contributes to the church's understanding of the exegetical tradition through his work *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* and through his role as the General Editor of the *Reformation Commentary Series*.

From an evangelical and Baptist standpoint, George defines apostolicity. He explains, "Baptists do not define apostolicity in terms of a literal lineal succession of duly ordained bishops who alone have authority to ordain other ministers. Instead, Baptists define apostolicity in terms of the primordial character of the gospel, the inscripturated witness of the apostles, and the succession of apostolic proclamation."⁹³

Contemporary Christians, George argues, should read Scripture in community with "the fathers, the scholastics and the reformers."⁹⁴ He observes, however, a "dialectic of primitivism or presentism establishes two centers of scriptural engagement—the first Christian generation, which means the writings of the New Testament, and the most recent generations, notably my generation."⁹⁵ He warns, "This dichotomy governs the way Scripture is read in much of the Christian community today, both in liberal mainline churches and in conservative evangelical ones. There is, we might say, a presentist imperialism of the left and a presentist imperialism of the right."⁹⁶ Baptists are above all people of the book, but they are not the first people to read the book. While Baptists excel in championing biblical authority in the present, there must also be an engagement with the biblical interpretation of the past.

In expressing his high view of the Holy Bible and the role of historical theology in its interpretation, George states: "If we are to take this word seriously, we must engage simultaneously in a threefold hermeneutical move."⁹⁷ He states that the first hermeneutical move must address "what it meant in its original setting."⁹⁸ He categorizes this step in the process of determining the meaning of a text as the "special task of *Old and New Testament study*." The second hermeneutical move according to

⁹³ George, "A Baptist Theologian," 242.

⁹⁴ George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers*, 23.

⁹⁵ George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers*, 23.

⁹⁶ George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers*, 23.

⁹⁷ Timothy George, "Dogma Beyond Anathema: Historical Theology in the Service of the Church," *RevExp* (1987): 701.

⁹⁸ George, "Dogma Beyond Anathema," 701.

George is to investigate "what it means today."⁹⁹ He understands this as the "combined task of biblical, systematic, and practical theology."¹⁰⁰ The third hermeneutical move focuses on "what it has meant throughout the vast continuum of the Christian experience."¹⁰¹ He claims that this question regarding the history of biblical exegesis is the "special task of historical theology."¹⁰² Just as Gerhard Ebeling claimed, "Church history is the history of the exposition of Scripture."¹⁰³

Thus, George provides contemporary Baptist theologians with a model for historical theology and retrieval in which we can seek to contribute to the universal church, foster renewal in our ecclesial sanctification, reinforce our catholicity, and offer the contribution of our apostolic convictions. In doing so, we locate ourselves rightly in our own space and time.

The Implications of George's Retrieval

Retrieval in the Seminary

To borrow imagery from C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, Timothy George's perspective of historical theology is the wardrobe that seminary students can walk through to get to Narnia, an exciting new place where they discover the wonderful works of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, and many others. In many ways, George's vision of Beeson Divinity School is the embodiment of George's convictions about the nature of history, theological and hierarchical ecclesial identities.

With conviction, George asserts, "At Beeson we practice an ecumenism of conviction, not an ecumenism of accommodation."¹⁰⁴ He explains the unique ecumenical seminary environment of Beeson Divinity School: "Our charter documents call for us to be Christian, Protestant, evangelical, and interdenominational. We also like the words 'catholic,' 'orthodox,' 'Reformational,' and 'ecumenical.' Beeson is a place where Baptists and Anglicans alike, along with believers from many other de-

⁹⁹ George, "Dogma Beyond Anathema," 701.

¹⁰⁰ George, "Dogma Beyond Anathema," 701.

¹⁰¹ George, "Dogma Beyond Anathema," 701.

¹⁰² George, "Dogma Beyond Anathema," 701.

¹⁰³ Gerhard Ebeling, *The Word of God and Tradition: Historical Studies Interpreting the Divisions of Christianity*, trans. S. H. Hooke (London: Collins, 1968), 11.

¹⁰⁴ George, "A Baptist Theologian: Reflections," 228.

nominations, have been able to find *koinōnia* in our core commitment to Jesus Christ and in our love for his body, the church—the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”¹⁰⁵

The theological curriculum of Beeson Divinity School was revised by George based on his perspective of historical theology and the needs of the evangelical and interdenominational context. When referring to systematic theology and church history, he claims, “We’ve abolished them.”¹⁰⁶ He clarifies, “That is to say, we no longer have two stack poles and try to relate them disjunctively, but we brought them together in a sequence we call history and doctrine.”¹⁰⁷ He describes the sequence of history and doctrine saying, “The effort is to look chronologically, but in a more systematic doctrinal way at the movement in the history of God’s people of how these ideas have arisen and how they shape Christian life.”¹⁰⁸

At Beeson Divinity School, George’s approach to Christian theology has become known in the curriculum as “history and doctrine.”¹⁰⁹ George’s perspective on historical theology is the missing piece to the puzzle of how to train and teach students in the evangelical and interdenominational context of Beeson Divinity School. He reveals how his understanding of historical theology influenced the theological curriculum of Beeson Divinity School, as well as informed all of his writing ministry:

Several years ago at Beeson Divinity School we undertook a major revision of our curriculum, bringing together church history and systematic theology into an organic whole, a new integrated discipline that we call History and Doctrine. This approach has shaped everything I have written, including *Theology of the Reformers*. There is no such thing as a disembodied theology divorced

¹⁰⁵ George, “A Baptist Theologian: Reflections,” 227.

¹⁰⁶ Timothy George, “A Conversation on Theology,” Beeson Podcast (MP3 Podcast), Episode 417, 20:12–14, <https://www.beesondivinity.com/podcast/2018/transcripts/Beeson-Podcast-Episode-417-vanhoozer.txt>.

¹⁰⁷ George, “Conversation on Theology,” 20:14–23.

¹⁰⁸ George, “Conversation on Theology,” 20:24–35.

¹⁰⁹ See “Historical and Doctrinal Studies,” Beeson Divinity School, <https://www.beesondivinity.com/master-of-divinity>. “Unique in theological education, Beeson teaches theology and church history together in an integrated four-course sequence. Students learn key doctrines such as Scripture, Christology, Pneumatology, justification, creation, and anthropology as they unfold and develop in the history of the Christian church.”

from the mess and muck of real life. This is clearly stated in the central affirmation of the Christian faith: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).¹¹⁰

Within the context of theological schools, George elevates the place of historical theology in the curriculum. According to him, “Church history is the most important subject in the theological curriculum.”¹¹¹ He makes this claim not because of his identity as a church historian, “but simply because it is true.”¹¹² Explaining further he states, “Without a good grasp of the history of God’s people through the ages one cannot understand the Bible, doctrine, ethics, ecumenism, spiritual formation or any other topic related to the life of faith.”¹¹³ Central to his argument is the belief that historical theology provides the necessary perspective, background, and formation for all the other fields of study.

Retrieval in the Church

Historical theology, as George understands it, is “a theological discipline rooted in the self-revelation of the biblical God, the God who makes and keeps covenant with his people.”¹¹⁴ Therefore, George regards historical theology as “enormously relevant to the task of proclamation, the primary job of every God-called minister of the gospel.”¹¹⁵ He concludes, “I dare to say that, apart from the direct study of the Holy Scriptures themselves, no discipline in the theological curriculum is more important for the sermon preparation of the preacher.”¹¹⁶

For effective ministry leaders, George stresses the importance of the history of exegesis. He encourages the preacher: “We do not come to the study of the Bible alone but in the company of the whole people of God, the body of Christ scattered throughout time as well as space.”¹¹⁷ Thus, historical theology offers the history of exegesis as an indispensa-

¹¹⁰ Trevin Wax, “Reformation Theology or Theologies? A Conversation with Timothy George (Part 2),” *The Gospel Coalition*, October 17, 2013, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/reformation-theology-or-theologies-a-conversation-with-timothy-george-part-2/>.

¹¹¹ Timothy George, “An Evangelical Reflection on Scripture and Tradition,” *Pro Ecclesia* 9 (2000): 191.

¹¹² George, “An Evangelical Reflection on Scripture and Tradition,” 191.

¹¹³ George, “An Evangelical Reflection on Scripture and Tradition,” 191.

¹¹⁴ George, “The *SBJT* Forum,” 89.

¹¹⁵ George, “The *SBJT* Forum,” 89.

¹¹⁶ George, “The *SBJT* Forum,” 89.

¹¹⁷ George, “The *SBJT* Forum,” 89.

ble resource in the preacher's study.

Preachers, warns George, should be careful to not fall into the pitfalls of primitivism or presentism: "It is not sufficient for the preacher to have the New Testament in one hand and the latest word from Bultmann, Käsemann, or Conzelmann, or even the current evangelical gurus, in the other."¹¹⁸ Therefore, the preacher must embrace the history of exegesis or else go the way of Harvey Cox through either a fundamentalist reduction or liberal revision.

The theological basis of George's reasoning is pneumatological: "The Holy Spirit did not abandon the Church with the death of the apostles, and we have much to learn as we 'read along side' the church fathers, schoolman reformers, and theologians of ages past."¹¹⁹ The spiritual gift of teaching God's Word in the present and the past has the same source, the Holy Spirit. The ministry leader should benefit from the Holy Spirit's illumining work among God's people as they study the Bible throughout church history.

The limitations of the history of exegesis are addressed by George: "None of their interpretations is inerrant, and we must subject them all to the divine touchstone of God's perfect revelation in the Bible—*sola scriptura*!"¹²⁰ Thus, he reinforces the ultimate authority of Scripture and the importance of engaging the history of exegesis and evaluating the claims of past interpretation in light of sound biblical interpretation.

Examining the role of church history, George considers its impact in writing on his commentary on Galatians.¹²¹ He remembers, "In writing my commentary on Galatians for the *New American Commentary Series*, I gained much insight from Tertullian, Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, William Perkins, John Brown, and many others."¹²² These voices from the past contain insight and wisdom for today.

For George, the sermons from the past have value in the present: "In addition to studying commentaries and exegetical works, it is also good to see how a particular text has been preached in different historical moments. The sermons of Spurgeon, Wesley, and Knox are a rich treasury."¹²³ Thus, the preacher can discern not only what the text

¹¹⁸ George, "The *SBJT* Forum," 89.

¹¹⁹ George, "The *SBJT* Forum," 89.

¹²⁰ George, "The *SBJT* Forum," 90.

¹²¹ Timothy George, *Galatians* NAC 30 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).

¹²² George, "The *SBJT* Forum," 90.

¹²³ George, "The *SBJT* Forum," 90.

meant to the original audience, but what the text has meant throughout history.¹²⁴

The development of doctrine, George argues, equips the ministry leader: "The discipline of symbology, that is, the study of confessions, creeds, and catechisms, reveals the ebb and flow of doctrinal understanding throughout the history of the church. God has frequently used the occasion of heresy to bring orthodoxy to full clarity."¹²⁵ Therefore, the ministry leader does not need to re-invent the wheel with every doctrine every time he or she faces a difficult theological question.

George raises the question: "Why do we need these humanly constructed statements of faith, the creeds and confessions of the church, to proclaim the faith, once for all entrusted, passed on?"¹²⁶ He answers this question by referring to when his family lived for a year in Switzerland. He especially took note of the dangerous curves while driving through the Alps and remembers relying on the guardrails.¹²⁷ He compares the purpose of the development of doctrine with the necessity of guardrails: "Our confessions of faith are like those guardrails."¹²⁸ He starts by addressing the danger involved, "When you are traveling dangerous mountain roads, you are glad someone has put those guardrails in place."¹²⁹

The metaphor of the guardrails and the road is used by George to distinguish between the development of doctrine and the biblical revelation of Jesus Christ. He explains, "Now you do not want to confuse the guardrails with the road and start driving up there on the guardrails—then danger is really imminent! Stay on the road. The road is Jesus Christ. He said: 'I am the Way (the Road), the Truth and the Life' (John 14:6)."¹³⁰ In the same way that the guardrails support but are secondary to the road, the development of doctrine supports but is secondary to the biblical revelation of Jesus Christ. He concludes why the church needs these guardrails to stay faithful to God's Word: "But we need guardrails as we are tempted this way and that in the history of the church, guardrails to keep us on the road guided by the light that is the Holy Scriptures: 'Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my

¹²⁴ Timothy George, "Dogma Beyond Anathema: Historical Theology in the Service of the Church," *Review and Expositor* (1987): 701.

¹²⁵ George, "The *SBJT* Forum," 90.

¹²⁶ George, "The Faith, My Faith, and The Church's Faith," 84.

¹²⁷ George, "The Faith, My Faith, and The Church's Faith," 84.

¹²⁸ George, "The Faith, My Faith, and The Church's Faith," 84.

¹²⁹ George, "The Faith, My Faith, and The Church's Faith," 84.

¹³⁰ George, "The Faith, My Faith, and The Church's Faith," 84.

path' (Ps 119:105 KJV)."¹³¹ Thus, he maintains the primacy of Scripture and the centrality of Jesus Christ while urging the use of necessary secondary sources.

The doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of grace are offered by George as examples for which the ministry leader must appreciate their historical development: "How can anyone preaching on the doctrine of the Trinity ignore the great struggle between Arius and Athanasius in the fourth century? Likewise, in studying the doctrines of grace, we are theologically bereft if we know nothing of the debate between Augustine and Pelagius, or between Luther and Erasmus."¹³² In clarifying his point, George asserts, "This does not mean that every sermon must be filled with historical allusions to these doctrinal developments. But every sermon should be informed by them as we seek in our own day to pass on the faith intact to the next generation."¹³³

Thus, George provides contemporary Baptist pastors with a model for historical theology and retrieval in which we can seek to contribute to the local church, encourage evangelical renewal in our congregations, reinforce our Christian unity, and offer the contribution of our Baptist distinctives. In doing so, we locate ourselves rightly as Baptists preaching, worshipping, and serving within the Great Tradition.

Conclusion

The central question of this article, Timothy George's understanding of historical theology, has been answered by demonstrating how George's approach to historical theology emphasizes the theological value of church history, or in his words, "church history as a theological discipline."¹³⁴ The four marks of ecclesiology summarize George's approach to historical theology. He looks to the church throughout time and space to learn from its oneness (the unity of the church), holiness (the renewal of the church), catholicity (the whole tradition), and apostolicity (the basis of Scripture), in relation to his proposal of a hierarchy of ecclesial identity. He carries out his work of retrieval through his identity first as a Christian, second as an evangelical, and third as a Baptist. As a historical theologian, George commits to the four marks of the church through his emphasis on Christian unity, spiritual formation,

Christian doctrine, and biblical exegesis. The implications of his understanding of historical theology for Baptist academic-theologians and pastor-theologians demonstrates the relevance for theological schools and local churches.

¹³¹ George, "The Faith, My Faith, and The Church's Faith," 84–85.

¹³² George, "The Faith, My Faith, and The Church's Faith," 84–85.

¹³³ George, "The *SB/T* Forum," 89.

¹³⁴ George, "Church History as a Theological Discipline," disc 1.