

# Editorial: Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

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One of my most favorite portions of Scripture is Hebrews 11, the great chapter of faith. In order to encourage these early Christians to run the race that is set before them in light of a number of serious external and internal pressures (see for example, 10:32-39 and 5:11-6:12), the author of Hebrews not only presents the supremacy of Christ in all of his beauty and splendor, but he also challenges them to persevere as did the ancients of old. By naming many an Old Testament saint, who not only believed in the covenantal promises centered in Christ but also acted upon those promises even though our Lord Jesus Christ had not yet come, the author challenges these Christians—even in a greater way—to take God at his Word, to live in light of his promises that now have been fulfilled in Christ and thus to persevere to the end, no matter what may come, as people of faith looking unto Jesus. In this way, Hebrews 11, along with countless other biblical examples, presents us with the importance of role models as we live our Christian lives. Scripture constantly reminds us that none of us function as islands to ourselves; rather we stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us, seeking to learn from them, positively and negatively, both in terms of their way of life as well as their theological convictions and formulations.

In this way, even though all of our life and thought must be subservient to Scripture and ever being reformed in light

of Scripture—*sola Scriptura* and *semper reformanda* respectively—“tradition” also serves an important, critical, and corrective role for us today as we seek to apply and live out the Scripture. As the old statements remind us—“there is nothing new under the sun” and “those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat its mistakes”—we neglect our theological forefathers to our detriment. In reality, tradition and the study of historical theology ought to be viewed as a kind of laboratory in which the strengths and weaknesses of past practices, ideas, and doctrines are tested under the pressures of real-life circumstances, denials, and challenges with the goal of learning from the past in order to better address the issues, debates, and challenges of our contemporary world.

However, today, one of our problems in the evangelical church, which no doubt reflects our larger culture, is that we do not know history, let alone church history and historical theology well. This is especially the case in regard to the era that we have now dubbed: “the Patristic era.” It is safe to say that for most evangelicals, including Baptists, we are more familiar with key people and theological ideas from the Reformation and post-Reformation era than we are of the people and ideas from the earliest years of the church. However, for the life and health of the church today, this lacuna in our knowledge of church history must be remedied for at least two important reasons.

First, we often forget, especially living in the West due to the incredible influence of the gospel upon our larger society and culture, how pluralistic the first centuries of the church were. In our day, we wrestle with the implications of living in and proclaiming the gospel in light of a post-modern, post-Christian, and pluralistic culture. But what we sometimes fail to remember is that in the early years of the church, as the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Judea and then to the uttermost parts of the world, it was first proclaimed in the philosophically and religiously pluralistic culture of the Greco-Roman world, very much similar to our present day. It should not surprise us, then, that some of the issues we wrestle with today—such as the exact status of people outside of Christ from other religions, or how to defend the gospel to people who did not believe in truth or who come from entirely different worldview frameworks, or how to live faithfully in the midst of a pagan and corrupt society—teach us invaluable lessons as we face a similar or analogous situation. No doubt, it must be admitted that their culture was more pre-Christian in outlook, while ours is post-Christian (which raises a number of challenges that the early church did not have to face), but with that said, the early church has a lot to teach us in how to live and proclaim the gospel faithfully today.

Second, it is also vital to remember that the Patristic era, in light of various heretical challenges, hammered out central doctrines of the Christian faith, especially in the area of the doctrine of God in its Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy. It has often been stated that the early church councils gave us theological statements that are no doubt subservient to Scripture, but which we neglect and

ignore to our peril and which it is very difficult to improve upon no matter how much we try. In fact, many of the heresies the church sought to combat in these statements—such as Arianism, Modalism, Adoptionism, Apollinarianism, Gnosticism, and so on—have not only been demonstrated to be false starts, but also, unfortunately, are still with us today. If it was not for the hard work, theological convictions, and personal sacrifices and perseverance of the early church fathers and theologians such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine, Jerome, Cyril, and many others, our understanding of these important areas would be greatly impoverished. Truly, we stand on the shoulders of giants and we honor them by knowing more about them, learning what they have taught, and seeking to apply insights from them, in light of Scripture, for us today.

It is for these two reasons, as well as many more, that this edition of *SBJT* is devoted to the Patristic era of church history. Even though we can only provide a snapshot of this era through some of its key theologians, it is our prayer that the articles and forum contributions will whet our appetites for more. Knowing this era of church history will not only enable us to be alert to trends in our own day that basically re-invent ideas from the past, but it will also help us better to live and proclaim the gospel faithfully today, for God's glory and for our good.