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SPIRITUAL CLASSICS, RETRIEVAL THEOLOGY, AND THE CURE OF SOULS

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More than 1,000 years ago, Gregory the Great wrote *The Pastoral Rule*, perhaps the most important practical theology text in the history of the church. The text has been used by every generation of pastors since it was written (c. 590), and I have found the text uniquely helpful with my undergraduate ministry students. In *The Pastoral Rule*, Gregory describes the pastor's work as "the cure of souls ... the art of arts." Approaching practical theology as "the cure of souls" is an angle advocated by those influenced by *ressourcement* or "retrieval theology."¹ While there are many methods advocated by practical theologians today, an approach rooted in retrieval theology bears significant promise for the global church.²

James Houston has played a major role in calling practical theology to an emphasis on "the cure of souls" that takes advantage of wisdom from the church's past.³ While his biography remains to be written, many theologians would be interested in his friendships with both C.S. Lewis (with whom he was in a faculty small group for over five years) and A.W. Tozer. Lewis and Tozer, both of whom died in 1963, are well known for their emphasis on reading spiritual classics.

Lewis endorsed some thirty spiritual classics, which he cited over 1,800 times in his published writings and personal letters.⁴ Lewis's advice to serious Christians was that "it is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between."⁵

Tozer grew up in a very different setting than the Irish Lewis, but he shared a deep love for the church's spiritual classics. Tozer never had the op-

portunity to graduate from high school or attend any formal theological training, but he loved Scripture and had a deep hunger to know God. When asked where he had learned and nurtured this deep love, Tozer pointed to thirty-five teachers. These "teachers" were thirty-five spiritual classics that had shaped his life and ministry.⁶

Spiritual classics like Brother Lawrence's *Practicing the Presence of God*, Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Bernard of Clairvaux's *On the Love of God*, and Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* are among the texts that made both Lewis's and Tozer's recommended reading lists. Like his friends, Houston has found transformational resources in the church's spiritual classics—resources that can serve as antidotes to many contemporary diseases of the soul. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Houston edited and introduced a collection of ten spiritual classics in a series titled *Classics of Faith and Devotion*.⁷

Houston, Lewis, and Tozer provide examples of how a practical theologian might make use of retrieval theology, defined as "a mode or style of theological discernment that looks back in order to move forward."⁸ During the past fifty years, various forms of retrieval have been advocated by evangelical theologians like Tom Oden (early church, Reformation church, African church), Robert Webber (early church), J.I. Packer (Puritans), John Webster (medieval church), Christopher Hall (early church), Andrew McGowan (early church), D.H. Williams (early church, Puritans), Don Davis (early church), Greg Peters (medieval church), and many others.

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In addition to Houston's Regent College, schools like Asbury Seminary, Denver Seminary, Wheaton College, Biola University, and Eastern College have all launched study programs in practical theology for those interested in recovering the wisdom of the past for the challenges facing the church's future.⁹ Resources to aid the church's work of ministry, mission, theology, worship, engagement with Scripture, and soul care are being rediscovered in long-forgotten places.¹⁰

The North American church faces significant challenges as we move into the third decade of the new millennium. It is my prayer that whether we teach theology, Scripture, ministry, or missions, we will accept our responsibility to introduce students to the many riches in the church's treasury of wisdom.

Some years ago, Pastor Rick Warren challenged a group of young leaders to engage the spiritual classics: "You should read 25 percent of your books from the first 1,500 years of church history, 25 percent from the last 500 years, 25 percent from the last 100 years, and 25 percent from recent years."¹¹ Professors of practical theology can accept Rick Warren's challenge and engage in retrieval theology by regularly including spiritual classics in their courses. These spirituals classics—texts that have proven valuable across centuries and cultures—can be expected to bring forth rich fruit in the lives of students and our own ministries. **D**

¹ For a discussion of these movements, see Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² For an example of the diversity of methods currently in use, explore the seventeen methods described in Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 89–265.

³ Personal conversation with James Houston.

⁴ Hank Voss and Isaiah Swain, "Lewis and His Spiritual Classics: Lessons for Congregational Leaders" (paper presented at the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis and Friends, Upland, IN, September 20, 2019).

⁵ C. S. Lewis, "On Reading Old Books," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 200–7.

⁶ I learned of these spiritual classics through a conversation with Bruce Demarest in 2003. The list can be found in David J. Fant, A. W. Tozer: *A Twentieth-Century Prophet* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1964), addendum.

⁷ See for example, Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Love of God and Spiritual Friendship*, ed. James M. Houston, abridged ed. (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1983). A number of these volumes have been reprinted; see, for example, Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor: A Pattern for Personal Growth and Ministry*, ed. James Houston (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2001).

⁸ W. David Buschart and Kend D. Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 12.

⁹ A helpful volume with representatives from a number of these schools is Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, eds., *Reading the Christian Spiritual Classics: A Guide for Evangelicals* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013).

¹⁰ See the helpful map of how fields like ministry, theology, missiology, and biblical studies have made use of retrieval theology in Buschart and Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval*.

¹¹ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "John Piper v. Rick Warren Postponed," *Christianity Today* (blog), October 4, 2010, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/october-web-only/50.13.0.html.



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