

ABOUT THIS ENDEAVOR

The volumes in this series are offered in response to a time of fellowship with Brother Witness Lee in his home in Anaheim, California, on 20 July 1994. During this fellowship he shared with some of us who served with him that Watchman Nee and he¹ long had the intention to carry out two great lines of Christian work: interpreting the Bible as fully as possible and evaluating the history of the church in light of that interpretation. He told us that, for his part, he was preparing at that time to finish what the Lord had given him to do in the first line but that the second line in this work would be left undone. He expressed the hope that we and others with us would pick up the burden for the second line of this work and give our whole lives to carry it out faithfully.²

Now, over a quarter of a century later, in these volumes we finally come to the task of evaluating the history of the church in light of what this ministry

¹ Watchman Nee (1903-1972) became a Christian in China in 1920 at the age of seventeen and began writing in the same year. Throughout the nearly thirty years of his ministry, Watchman Nee was clearly manifested as a unique gift from the Lord to His Body for His move in this age. In 1952 he was imprisoned for his faith and remained in prison until his death in 1972. His words continue to be an abundant source of spiritual revelation and supply to Christians throughout the world.

Witness Lee (1905-1997) received the Lord at the age of nineteen in China. Early in his service, he met Watchman Nee and labored together with him under his direction. In 1949, as the Communists began to take control of China, he was sent by Watchman Nee and his other co-workers to Taiwan to ensure that the things delivered to them by the Lord would not be lost. In 1962 he felt led of the Lord to move to the United States. During his thirty-five years of service in the U.S., he ministered in weekly meetings, weekend conferences, and longer trainings, delivering several thousand spoken messages, which were ultimately published as hundreds of titles. In June 1997 he went to be with the Lord having served faithfully throughout the earth.

² About a year later, in a meeting with some of his co-workers, Witness Lee again expressed his desire to see this kind of evaluation of Christian history (Lee, *CWWL, 1994-1997*, 3:45-46). This gives further evidence to us of his great burden for this endeavor.

has opened up to us. On the one hand, we regret our delay and admit our shortage in picking up this burden sooner. But on the other hand, we recognize and appreciate the Lord's sovereignty even over our delay because only recently has the interpretation of the Bible under the one ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee been completely published, and now *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee* (62 vols.; 1994), *Life-study of the New Testament* (17 vols.; 1985), *Life-study of the Old Testament* (15 vols.; 1996), *The Conclusion of the New Testament* (8 vols.; 2010), and *The Collected Works of Witness Lee* (139 vols.; 2020) are able to serve as the full basis for the evaluation that we present in these volumes. Further, so great a task, left unfulfilled by such servants of the Lord as Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, certainly could not be fulfilled merely by those few who first received this commission, and again it is under the Lord's sovereignty that during our delay others have been prepared for this work and have been added to it. We who now serve according to that commission are truly grateful to the Lord for what He has done to enable us to carry out this endeavor, and based on His past faithfulness to prepare all things for this second great line of work, we fully trust that He will bear us along for its accomplishment. May He so do!

THE NEED FOR THIS ENDEAVOR

In considering carefully Witness Lee's fellowship, including some of the topics he suggested, we came to understand that this work should be the evaluation not of church history in the general sense but of the history of Christian thought in the particular sense. The distinction is important. While church history contemplates a narrative of persons and events insofar as they affect the activities and influences of the Christian church (e.g., its propagation, its practices, its involvements with government, society, and culture), the history of Christian thought focuses on the historical development of the teachings of the Christian church (e.g., concerning the Triune God, concerning the person and work of Christ, concerning the economy of God, including His complete salvation). Further, the history of the Christian church focuses on the activities of the church in society, or in a deeper sense, on the actions of God on the church in the world, while the history of Christian thought focuses on the church's growth in the understanding of its faith and, through that understanding, on its growth in the apprehension of the divine reality of its faith corporately. While we cannot say that progress in Christian thought is the same thing as growth in the apprehension of divine reality, it is safe to say that the former at least contributes to the latter. The steady gain in the understanding of our faith across the centuries has enabled the saints³

³ Throughout our work we use the term *saint(s)* in its biblical usage as a reference to God's chosen people, not in its post-biblical usage as a reference to special (deceased) persons

throughout time to seek after and attain to the experience that corresponds to that understanding and to grow not only in comprehension of the truth but also in apprehension of the reality. Thus, the history of Christian thought bears great significance on how the church *becomes* what it should be and what it eventually will be intrinsically, and that history deserves our careful attention and evaluation.

Such an evaluation may not immediately seem to be warranted, and some among us may even feel that an endeavor of this kind may be only an academic exercise and not one that respects the spiritual nature of the believers and the church. But since what we have today as the consummation of biblical interpretation relies in great part on a substantial historical process, it is worthwhile to consider the details of that process and how it has yielded what we possess today. In evaluating the history of Christian thought, we consider Paul's word concerning the Old Testament to be as relevant to Christian history: "These things . . . were written for our admonition, unto whom the ends of the ages have come."⁴ We expect that most believers will agree that much of what we have inherited from the past centuries aids us in our present Christian and church life but that some mistakes have been made, which we do well to avoid today. And while this is true in a general sense, it is hardly of practical value without a reasonable evaluation of the past. What are the particular things from the past that are beneficial to us today and worthy of our acceptance, and what are the specific things that we should never repeat in our understanding and teaching? Not to ask and not to answer these questions are to turn away from help already gathered in the Body of Christ, which is one universally and across the ages. Thus, a historical endeavor of this sort can serve as fellowship in the one Body of Christ in time, and there is much value in that.

But in a more practical sense, this evaluation is needed for the proper education and perfecting of our own brothers and sisters in the local churches worldwide. There are countless histories of the church already published, some very good and some not so good, and numerous histories of Christian thought, mostly very academic and very difficult to fully penetrate without academic training; and we must admit that each of these has its own approach to history and its own intention for history. They offer their lessons from history based on their particular perspectives, and these, we feel, should not have the final say on history for us. We, too, should do the work of evaluating history, based on where we are in our understanding of the truth of the faith; and we, as all others before us, should learn history and learn from

among God's people who have been officially recognized as worthy of veneration (e.g., St. Theresa) nor in its popular usage as a reference to any general virtuous person (e.g., "She is a real saint in her family").

⁴ 1 Cor. 10:11.

history. While some may wish to deny us this right and accuse us of being narrow and subjective, others who are more generous in their understanding will recognize our duty and responsibility to educate our own and will find nothing unusual, uncommon, or unique in this endeavor. As to any charge of narrowness and subjectivity, we leave our work to speak for itself and welcome scrutiny by those who are truly equipped to make such judgments and especially by Him who is the God of history.

THE STANDARD OF OUR EVALUATION

In carrying out this endeavor, we understand that there are certain implications that must be drawn out and addressed. First, as with any evaluation, there must be a clear standard for our evaluation, and for this endeavor our standard is the interpretation of the Scriptures that has been delivered to us through the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. We believe that, coming at the end of nearly two millennia of biblical interpretation, this ministry stands upon the shoulders of those who have gone before us and made progress in the understanding of the divine revelation, both by contributing to it and by defending it from attack. It is reasonable to assume that, as beneficiaries of this progress under the Spirit's guidance, we stand in a position that allows us to look back and consider the merits and the detriments in what precedes us. Our taking the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee as the standard for our evaluation has nothing to do with *who* we are in ourselves today, nor, in a real sense, with *who* Watchman Nee and Witness Lee are (let everyone account them simply "as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God"⁵); rather, taking this ministry as our standard has much to do with *where* we are today in the progress of the history of the Christian church. As was the case at every point in the past, our place in time today is the end of the ages that have gone before, and our vantage point is the most progressed thus far. And thus, it is fitting for us, who have received so much from the past, to look back on the past from our own perspective in order to affirm what has benefited and critique what has hampered the progress of the saints in the past.

Second, it is necessary to present our understanding of the truth to our readers before using it as an evaluative standard. Thus, for every topic to be considered we intend to first thoroughly lay out the truth of the topic according to our understanding of the Bible. Again, we trust the kindness and fairness of our readers to allow to us our interpretation of the Scriptures, even as all others before us have been allowed to interpret the Scriptures according to the light that they received from the Lord. We will say more below about our particular viewpoint on the Scriptures, i.e., our hermeneutic of the Bible,

⁵ 1 Cor. 4:1.

but here it should be sufficient to say that what anyone and everyone has at his or her disposal are only the Scriptures in an interpreted form. To think otherwise is naïve at best and harmful at worst. “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who proclaim him in the synagogues, he being read every Sabbath,”⁶ and to the Jew there is one interpretation, and to the Christian another. Likewise, for all the Scriptures there is (broadly) one interpretation for the Roman Catholic, one for the Eastern Orthodox, one for the Lutheran, one for the Calvinist, one for the Methodist, etc.; and there is one interpretation for us who have benefited from the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. The issue is not really the fact of interpretation; the issue is the quality thereof. Every evaluation, as opposed to mere recounting, of the history of Christian thought is based, to some degree, on an interpretation of Scripture. Our hope is that readers from other backgrounds will admit this much about what their own teachers do as they evaluate what our own teachers do and that they will cede to us what they cede to themselves.

Of course, while our understanding of the biblical truth of any given topic has certainly been delivered to us through the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, we believe that each truth has internal integrity that rests solely on the Bible apart from the ministry of our brothers; otherwise, we would not be here defending as biblical any topic we consider. Thus, we present each truth first according to its biblical presentation. Then, we turn our attention to the riches of the ministry of our brothers to fully explore and expound the truth of the topic. These riches, we hope, will shed more light on the Scriptures through the gifts that the Lord has given to His church for this purpose.⁷ Through the help of these gifted members we expect that what is first presented as the truth in the Bible will then be unveiled thoroughly, so that our readers will be led “unto all the riches of the full assurance of understanding.”⁸ Of course, those of us who already enjoy the riches of the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee will appreciate this part of our presentation, but our sincere wish is that many others also would gain an appreciation for these gifts from the Lord, for He has given them not just to us in the local churches but “to men” in the most general sense of the word⁹ so that all may come to the full knowledge of the truth.¹⁰

THE MINISTRY OF WATCHMAN NEE AND WITNESS LEE

The ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee focuses on the experience of Christ as life for the building up of the church as the Body of Christ, which consummates in the New Jerusalem for eternity.¹¹ This focus serves

⁶ Acts 15:21. ⁷ Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:28-29; Acts 13:1. ⁸ Col. 2:2.

⁹ Eph. 4:8. ¹⁰ 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Tim. 2:25.

¹¹ John 1:4; Col. 3:3-4; 2 Pet. 1:3; Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 14:3-4; Eph. 4:16; Rev. 21:2, 10-11; 22:1.

as the hermeneutical key for their understanding of the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Recognizing that the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, so named with titles in the semantic domain of life—is foremost a God who holds, expresses, and shares within the Godhead the divine life, this ministry attends fully to the function of that life in the accomplishment of God’s eternal economy.¹² Particularly, in God’s economy in the New Testament age, the Son, as the expression of the divine life, became a man to bear this divine life to humankind.¹³ Through His death He redeemed His believers and brought them into the realm of this life through His resurrection.¹⁴ Those who, through His precious gospel, that is, “all the words of this life,”¹⁵ believe in Him are regenerated by His life and begotten as His very children¹⁶ through His Spirit who imparts this life to them.¹⁷ Benefiting eternally, to be sure, from the mercy and grace of God, those who have been reconciled to Him through the death of His Son will be saved much more in His life;¹⁸ and it is in His life that they progress until full maturity. In the household of God, the children of God grow¹⁹ through the enjoyment of the riches of God’s life as their life supply²⁰ and, through the ministry of His New Testament apostles, reach maturity in life²¹ and ultimately reign in the divine life.²² Central to these operations in life is the dispensing of the Triune God into His tripartite²³ believers, and this divine dispensing of His life into them characterizes all their genuine experiences of Christ throughout their entire Christian life. While God can and does do many things exterior to the believers for their good according to His purpose,²⁴ what He does within them by the ongoing dispensing of Himself as life into them is what transforms them according to His image.²⁵ As they grow in life, they also grow in their organic function to build up the church as the Body of Christ in the local churches where they live and meet.²⁶ This work also depends on the divine dispensing of the divine life, but it is now also through the many members of His organic Body: out from Christ as the Head through the rich supply of His gifted

¹² Eph. 1:10; 3:9; 1 Tim. 1:4. In these verses the Greek word *οικονομία* (*oikonomia*) is used by the apostle Paul to refer to God’s special plan and arrangement in His household to carry out His eternal will for His chosen, redeemed, transformed, and ultimately glorified people. Generally, the English versions of the Bible translate this word in these verses as “dispensation,” “plan,” or “administration.” In the translation that we use in these volumes the word is translated “economy.” The Greek word connotes the arrangement, often under a steward (*οικονόμος*, *oikonomos*), for the distribution of goods to the members of a household and is sometimes translated “stewardship,” as in Luke 16:2-4 (cf. 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25).

¹³ John 1:14, 4. ¹⁴ Rom. 6:4; 8:11. ¹⁵ Acts 5:20.

¹⁶ John 5:24; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23; John 1:12-13; 1 John 3:1.

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 15:45; John 6:63; Rom. 8:11; 2 Cor. 3:6. ¹⁸ Rom. 5:10.

¹⁹ 1 Cor. 3:6-7; Eph. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:2. ²⁰ John 6:32-35, 51, 57; 4:10-11; 7:37-39; cf. Eph. 3:2.

²¹ Col. 1:28; 4:12; Heb. 6:1. ²² Rom. 5:17. ²³ 1 Thes. 5:23. ²⁴ Rom. 8:28.

²⁵ Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18. ²⁶ 1 Cor. 14:3-4.

members and by the operation within each one member, all the members in the Body build up the Body in love.²⁷ The Body of Christ refers to the identity of the church in its relation to the divine life, and what makes the church His Body is the Triune God's dispensing of the divine life into His believers to make them the many organic members of Christ. Thus, the Body of Christ proves to be the organism of the Triune God, that is, the corporate reality, constituted with God's life through the dispensing of God in His Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—into His believers, that expresses Him as the living Triune God. Watchman Nee and Witness Lee developed this revelation concerning the Christian life and church life in their ministry, and throughout these volumes this view is repeatedly referenced in our presentation of the biblical truths and serves as the standard for all our evaluation of the history of Christian thought.

OUR VIEW OF HISTORY

In any attempt to do historical writing, there is always at its base an approach to history and an intention for writing history,²⁸ and we do well to state our approach and intention clearly and to abide by these as faithfully as possible. History-writing is an interpretive process in that the historian decides what in the past is worthy of recounting and what the significance is for the present and future in the things that are being recounted. Thus, it is important to distinguish between history as what has happened in the past and history as what is recounted in the present and evaluated for the future. Of course, what has happened cannot be changed now, and thus, to recount and to evaluate are all that we can attempt to do now. But in doing this much, we should be thoroughly conscious of the basis of our interpretations of what has happened.

In carrying out this evaluative endeavor, we have been particularly guided by a statement in Witness Lee's introduction to the Holy Bible Recovery Version: "Throughout the centuries the understanding of the divine revelation possessed by the saints has always been based upon the light they received, and this understanding has progressed steadily."²⁹ Three aspects of our view of the history of Christian thought are inspired by this statement. First, there is a distinction between the divine revelation in the Holy Scriptures and the understanding of that revelation by the saints. The former we take to be fixed, constant, and once for all delivered to the saints,³⁰ the latter we take to be partial, imperfect, and varying across the centuries. We assert that to the divine revelation in the Holy Scriptures nothing can be added and that the Holy Scriptures contain the full compass of the revelation that God intends for human beings to possess in this age. But the understanding of

²⁷ Eph. 4:16. ²⁸ I.e., in technical terms, a historiography.

²⁹ Lee, "Intro." ³⁰ Cf. Jude 3.

that revelation is something that is received over time through the light that God shines on His Word both through His gifted ones (apostles, prophets, and shepherds and teachers)³¹ and in every seeking believer.³² Second, a chief quality of this understanding is that it progresses in time; that is to say, it increases and moves across the centuries toward full comprehension of the complete and constant divine revelation in the Scriptures. That is not to say that we will fully comprehend the complete and constant revelation in the Bible in our lifetimes or in the present age, nor that understandings held in earlier times are deficient insofar as our saving faith is concerned. Rather, we maintain that the Lord is still opening Christian minds to understand the Scriptures.³³ “The Lord hath yet more light and truth / To break forth from His Word.”³⁴ Yet in all the centuries since the first apostles an understanding of the Scriptures that reflects the basic Christian faith necessary for salvation has been sufficiently clear.³⁵ And third, the progress in the understanding of the divine revelation has been steady, that is, sure and continuing. This does not mean that this progress has been uniform in its rate over time (as the word *steady* can denote); it is apparent that at times this progress has been painfully slow or even nil and at other times breathtakingly fast. Nor does this mean that the motion toward a fuller understanding has always been forward: as we will see in many topics under our evaluation, sometimes there were temporary regressions in understanding while leading teachers in the church struggled with the full dimensions of a scriptural truth.³⁶ But viewed as a whole continuum, the understanding of the divine revelation has been moving forward across the centuries in a sure way, and what we understand today certainly surpasses what was understood in earlier times. Thus, our stance on the history of Christian thought—our historiographical motif, so to speak—can most succinctly be stated as *the steadily progressing understanding of the one, constant truth of the Scriptures*. Throughout the volumes of this endeavor this motif is evident.

³¹ Eph. 4:11. ³² Cf. Col. 2:2; Matt. 7:8-11. ³³ Cf. Luke 24:45.

³⁴ Rawson, “We limit not . . .”

³⁵ On this point, commonly referred to as the perspicuity (or, clarity) of Scripture, we heartily agree with the Westminster Confession of Faith, without necessarily agreeing with everything else therein: “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all (2 Peter 3:16): yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them (Ps. 119:105, 130)” (*West. Conf.* 1.7 [RC 4:236]).

³⁶ Jerome offers a vivid description of one such regression: “The Nicene Faith stood condemned by acclamation. The whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian” (Jerome, *Alt. Luc.* 19 [NPNF² 6:329]). Arianism is the heretical teaching, originating in the fourth century, that Christ is not God in the same sense that the Father is God but was merely created by God before the ages, and thus there was a time when He did not exist.

But on a deeper level, this motif implies a few other historical positions, which will also be evident in these volumes. The first of these is that since progress in the understanding of the one, constant truth of the Scriptures is forward-moving in time, our ultimate authority extends only as far as the boundaries of the Scriptures and not the early church that issued from the Scriptures. The common and traditional presupposition that the primitive church, that is, the church at the time of the apostles and then of the church fathers, should be “both the ideal and the norm”³⁷ for Christians has perpetuated a multitude of mistakes, and therefore, our view is that at no time in the past nor in the present has the church been ideal or normative.³⁸ What alone is ideal and normative is the teaching of the apostles, including the Gospels concerning Christ. In the volume germane to this topic we express this position most fully, but suffice it to say here that even at the time of the apostles the church fell short of their full teaching,³⁹ and so much the more after the time of the apostles, when degradation set in and intensified. The plenitude of the faith and of the knowledge of Christ is something that we all as the church, must arrive at;⁴⁰ it was not something fully realized practically in the church and then subsequently lost, only to be recovered in time. This may be the most intrinsic failure over the centuries in the understanding and evaluation of the primitive church. Thus, in our evaluation in these volumes we do not view the early church as something that the Lord is trying to bring us all back to, and therefore, we do not hold the early church as our authority. When we speak of recovery in these volumes, as we often do, we are referring not to a recovery back to the primitive church but rather to a recovery back to the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament, and we take that teaching as ideal, normative, and authoritative in our evaluation in these volumes.

Corollary to our understanding concerning what is ideal, normative, and authoritative is our understanding concerning the writings of the church across the centuries, which indeed serve as the primary object of our evaluation in these volumes. It is evident that among Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox believers the consensual teachings expressed in the writings of the church are authoritative, and for both groups of believers the writings of the church fathers particularly hold authority for historical reasons. Even among the Protestant Reformers, who took the lead to limit the scope of authority to the Bible alone (*sola Scriptura*), the writings of the church fathers

³⁷ Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 5:15.

³⁸ One might be tempted to say that the church on the day of Pentecost was ideal, but given the fact that the divine revelation concerning the church, particularly as the one new man and the Body of Christ in Ephesians, was not complete in those earliest days, we can hardly say that the initial church should serve as a normative standard.

³⁹ Cf. 2 Tim. 1:15. ⁴⁰ Eph. 4:13.

were often called upon to give credence (if not authority) to their claims, and this primarily because they considered that many of their claims were not new ones but ones to be found in the ancient church. In our evaluation we do not at all deny that there are ample and even abundant witnesses to the proper understanding of the divine revelation within the writings of the historical church, as these volumes attest. But in our evaluation we make of them nothing more than that; they are witnesses to the divine revelation, not authorities thereon. We call upon them as witnesses in our evaluation of the understanding of a given topic at a particular time and not as judge or jury for that evaluation. Of course, some witnesses are more expert than others. For example, Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin (to name only a few “giants”) offer much valuable testimony to the proper understanding of the apostles’ teaching. But the testimony of each on any given topic must be evaluated on its own, for there is much in the testimony of each that falls short of what we now understand concerning the divine revelation. Likewise, many less prominent writings of the historical church offer much to be appreciated and received as further testimony, and these as well are evaluated in these volumes.

OUR ATTITUDE, INTENTION, AND HOPE

In evaluating the history of Christian thought in these volumes, we present to our readers as accurately and thoroughly as possible an account of the development of every topic we consider. In doing so, we have the great desire and strong intention to present history with a soberness of mind and a largeness of heart that bespeak our calling as lights in the world and as the salt of the earth. Historical Christian thought is not simply the progression of teachings in the abstract but the thoughts of real human beings, and we wish to always be mindful that usually these ones are our faithful brothers and sisters in Christ. With them we share the same life of the same Father, the same Lord, and the same Spirit. If we are correct in saying that history can serve as fellowship in the one Body of Christ in time, we wish to speak of our past brothers and sisters as we would if they were in the same locality with us today and certainly as we should before the same Lord and Judge. In relaying the historical development of any topic, we do not wish to create for ourselves offenses from which we cannot be released in this lifetime; thus, indeed we hope to be well disposed toward our foregone brothers and sisters in Christ while we are now on the way.⁴¹ In this endeavor we feel that we must not fall short of that basic commandment: “You shall not testify with false testimony against your neighbor.”⁴² Further, insofar as we are able, we intend to relate the history of Christian thought not only accurately and thoroughly but, even more

⁴¹ Cf. Luke 12:58; Matt. 5:25.

⁴² Exo. 20:16.

importantly, fairly and kindly, with as much generosity to the saints in the past as our regenerated consciences will allow. This is important not only for the sake of our own conscience before God but also for the sake of our presentation before human beings.

Our intention in these volumes is not to condemn others but to equip the willing reader. We come to this endeavor with a double soberness that all human enterprise is afflicted by the tragic fall of man and harassed by the ever-active enemy of God. In looking back at the past, especially as we point out the imperfections of others, we remember that we ourselves are likewise afflicted and harassed and therefore prone to make new mistakes of our own. But we know that we cannot cower from our responsibility to learn from the past and to hopefully protect ourselves from repeating things that should not be repeated. While what we do in this endeavor is certainly framed in our own imperfections, we fully trust in the Lord's covering under His precious blood and have assurance that, going beyond our imperfections, He has genuinely led, strengthened, and enabled us to bring the past under His light and under His love for our learning from Him. May the Lord so bless this ultimate use for these volumes.

OUR APOLOGY

We feel that a word about the level of our research and writing is necessary. Our readers are our judges for themselves, and we fear that some may question the nature of the work that we are doing, especially those who may come to it expecting something similar to the ministry materials that our publisher normally publishes. Thus, we feel that a defense (or using the classical term, an apology) is in order.⁴³ We hope that in offering this defense we will allay any concerns among our readers that we have deviated from the normal way of ministry or that our work forebodes a new form of ministry among us.

The issues that we consider in our work are not trivial and were not treated lightly or superficially by our forbears, whom we are evaluating. These issues drew some of the greatest thinkers and writers in human history, persons who applied all their best efforts to expound the truth as they understood it in their day. The progressing understanding of the divine revelation was developed in all possible detail and with all possible precision by these writers. Thus, in recounting the history of that development, we have a responsibility not to oversimplify or ignore complexities, especially since we are endeavoring to evaluate the work of others. All our brothers before us deserve our most careful reading, understanding, and recounting of their positions. While we are happy to apologize (in the modern sense) for the way that we take in our work, we, of course, cannot apologize for what actually happened in the past.

⁴³ Cf. 1 Pet. 3:15, where Peter uses the Greek word *ἀπολογία* (*apologia*) for "defense."

As honest, true, and compassionate evaluators of the past, our first duty is to recount the past accurately and without distortion of its complexities, and this we intend to do. What we are doing is historical evaluation, and as such, we understand that it may not be palatable or even approachable for some of the believers among us. These ones, we hope, will not be bothered by our work but will graciously allow us to recount and to critique what we have inherited from all the foregoing writers and teachers as truthfully and thoroughly as we have the grace to do so.

WHO WE ARE

Finally, some comment should be made about the researchers and writers who have labored through God's grace to produce these volumes. Our mode of operation in producing these volumes makes it difficult to honestly attribute any particular section of our work to any one individual researcher among us. What is presented are not the distinct opinions of individual writers but the common views of a blended team. In coming to this endeavor, all of us made the commitment to one another, and indeed the consecration before the Lord, to lay aside our personal interests (and personal glory) in this work and to pursue a common evaluation, which we arrive at through much reading, prayer, and discussion together. Of course, the practicalities of engaging historical materials in order to forge written evaluations of them require actual individual work, and individual styles will be easily discerned in these volumes. But the evaluations themselves, however expressed individually, are truly and genuinely corporate in nature and content. We seek to have one heart, one mind, and, as far as practicality allows, one mouth;⁴⁴ and, therefore, we seek no individual recognition for our work other than what the Lord Himself, who knows us all by name, may wish to give us in His day.

The authors

⁴⁴ Rom. 15:6.