

PRODUCT REVIEW

THEOLOGIAN TRADING CARDS. Developed by Norman Jeune III, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, November 2012 (release date), 310 cards, \$26.99 (retail).

Theologian trading cards? Why should this sort of product be reviewed in *JSIRS*? My unflinching response is this: Why not?

One of the most neglected branches of theology is historical theology, that field which bridges the often unseemly divide between systematic theology and church history. It is historical theology that traces the continuity and change (development) of doctrine through the centuries, and it is ignorance of this field that underlies almost all heterodoxy and consequent heteropraxy (and wrong thinking and practice can pervade any academic discipline!), especially the re-packaging and re-propagation of old heresies and doctrinal extremes. But historical theology deserves our attention not only because it can expose error, but also because it powerfully provides the Church with a sense of *historical rootedness* (by God's grace, we are part of an ancient, resolute, resilient faith community) and *historical locatedness* (in God's grace, we are part of a providentially flowing, growing, ever-deepening faith community), both of which are bound up in the character and purposes of our sovereign and steadfast Savior. If you are still unconvinced about the importance of doctrine and its development, I highly recommend Alister McGrath's book, *Understanding Doctrine* (1995).

But why should Christians engaged in social sciences research/instruction care about historical theology? The same reason that every believer should care – each is a theologian by virtue of the new birth. Insofar as every Christian scholar should strive to view and teach their discipline through the lens of a biblical worldview, it is vital that they understand the flow of God's redemptive work in the world - especially as it touches their discipline. That current can be traced through the ebb and flow of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the Church Age. The *Theologian Trading Cards* are a superb means of recognizing and riding the wave of God's victory.

The developer of this card set is Norm Jeune, one of the co-founders of and writers for the theological blog *Christians in Context: From Orthodoxy to Orthopraxy* (CiC), and the Lead Hospital Chaplain at the CHOC Children's Hospital in Orange, California. As a faithful reader of CiC, I have eagerly followed the conception, gestation and now birthing of this beautifully produced set of cards.

Modeled after the all-American baseball card, these cards are of the same dimensions, weight and thickness as normal baseball-card-stock, with the same sort of glossy color finish as typifies the popular brands of baseball cards. The front of each card gives a likeness of the theologian or philosopher (i.e., if a photograph or artistic rendering is available), the theologian's/philosopher's name, and their team name/logo (more on the teams below). The heading on the reverse of each card repeats the name and gives the dates that the person lived

(e.g., Martin Bucer, 1491-1551). Below this heading, a short biographical blurb is followed by a “Significance” text block that explains the individual’s contribution to the life of the Church.

The 287 men and women included in this set are divided into teams on the basis of their broad theological inclinations and/or time periods, namely the *Orthodoxy Dodgers* (heretics), *St. James Padres* (church fathers of the Patristic era), *Avignon Crusaders* (medieval, excluding monks and mystics), *Constantinople Hesychasts*ⁱ (Orthodox Church), *Munich Monks* (hermits, monks and mystics), *Geneva Sovereigns* (later reformed church/early reformers), *Wittenberg Whistle-Blowers* (early reformers/late Lutheran church), *Münster Radicals* (radical reformation/Anabaptists), *Canterbury Monarchs* (English reformers/Anglicans/Puritans), *Los Angeles Knights* (Fundamentalists/ Evangelicals), *Berlin Aggiornamentos*ⁱⁱ (contemporary), *Jerusalem Resourcers* (contemporary), *St. Pius Cardinals* (Roman Catholic [primarily post-Reformation]), *Serampore Preachers* (missionaries), and *Athens Metaphysicians* (philosophers). The roster sizes of the teams are not uniform (they range from 13 to 29), nor are all of the qualities or associations that bind the teams equally narrow. In addition to the 287 theologian cards, there is a “roster card” for each of the teams, plus eight blank cards with which you can, ostensibly, add personal favorites that are not included in the set.

I can only imagine the roiling pathos as Jeune decided who would make the teams and who would be cut. Of course, some of the choices were no-brainers (unanimous All-Stars), but many others were deserving indeed. I personally would have liked to have seen included more of the great British Non-Conformist/Dissenting writers (Richard Baxter, John Bunyan, Matthew Henry... happily, John Owen *is* included). A few more personal favorites of mine who did not make the cut are Colin Gunton, Karl Heim, Alister McGrath and Jaroslav Pelikan; and considering the impact factors of C.S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton and C. H. Spurgeon, it is surprising that they are excluded. Nevertheless, Jeune chose a colorful group of influential thinkers/practitioners, for example, F. F. Bruce (evangelical New Testament scholar), Amy Carmichael (Protestant missionary to India), James Cone (leader in black liberation theology), Jacques Derrida (French postmodern philosopher), Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (leader in feminist theology), Balthasar Hubmaier (early German Anabaptist leader), Teresa of Avila (Carmelite nun and mystic), and N. T. Wright (Anglican theologian involved in the Third Quest and the New Perspective on Paul). From Alopen to Zwingli, there are representatives of almost every theological-philosophical stripe.

These cards might be used: 1) as a means for review (think flash cards); 2) for direct sequential reading as a summary of historical theology (as if you were reading short biographies from a book); or 3) for one-by-one reading of the cards as a teaching tool (think Scripture memory cards or “Operation World” country prayer cards). Although the theologians are organized into “teams”, there are no instructions included regarding how a game might be designed around these cards; I can, however, imagine ways that a quiz-type study game could be played. In any case, these sturdily boxed cards are attractive and handy – ideal for seminary students. They will

also be useful to some college and advanced high school students who are interested in the subject.

My baseball cap is off to Norm Jeune and Zondervan for producing this brawny *and* brainy card set. Apart from a few personal quibbles concerning selections and omissions, and the seemingly inevitable presence of some scattered errors (clarity issues, typographical errors, stylistic infelicities, etc.), this set is a keeper. Since I am viewing them here as an official scorer, these *Theologian Trading Cards* are worthy of being recorded as a two-run home run.

As William Frend (1985) has suggested, the Church should -in a sense- be thankful for heretics, for it is their aberrant doctrine that forces the Church to pore over the Scriptures in order to make a defense. Thus, in the sovereign purposes of God, the doctrine of the Church is becoming brilliantly faceted via the centuries-long abrasion of attacks from within *and* without. The light trained on this ongoing process by these *Theologian Trading Cards* will not only inform our faith but also give rise to worship of the Great Lapidary who superintends the selection, cutting, polishing and setting of the gem, His bride, the Church.

Steven K. Mittwede
EQUIP! Team

Works Cited

Frend, W. H. C. (1985). *Saints and sinner in the early church: Differing and conflicting traditions in the first six centuries*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

McGrath, A. (1995). *Understanding doctrine: Its purpose and relevance for today* (2nd ed.). London: Hodder & Stoughton.

ⁱ Hesychast - one of a sect of reclusive, quietistic mystics within the Eastern Orthodox Church.

ⁱⁱ Aggiornamento - the process of bringing an institution up to date; a modernization.