

CHRISTIAN DOGMATICS

REFORMED THEOLOGY
FOR THE CHURCH CATHOLIC

Edited by
Michael Allen and
Scott R. Swain


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For our children:
Jackson and Will Allen
and
Caroline, Sophia, Josiah, and Micah Swain

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INTRODUCTION

MICHAEL ALLEN AND SCOTT R. SWAIN

Christian Dogmatics and the Theological Task

Dogmatic reasoning is the concerted attempt of the church to discipline its hearing of and testimony to the gospel according to that same gospel, specifically, to the promise that God makes himself known to and by his people. As Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson has articulated so well, “The church has a mission: to see to the speaking of the gospel, whether to the world as message of salvation or to God as appeal and praise.”¹ This is no easy mission, for the world is not eager to hear this message, and we are not naturally prone to profess it. Even regenerate Christians continue to resist the shape of the gospel at times and to return to their sinful ways. The practice of dogmatics nevertheless goes forward in its mission vis-à-vis the gospel because it is moved along by the promise and provision of the Lord. The possibility of faithful service in the task of dogmatics does not arise from within the resources of dogmatics itself but from within the infinite depths of the Triune God who speaks to his church and who wills through his church to shed abroad the knowledge and love of himself.

This volume includes essays on most of the major topics (*loci*) of dogmatics. They are written by accomplished theologians from across the world. The contributors bring differing areas of specialization and theological affiliation to the table and therefore do not constitute a unified school of thought

1. Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11.

on various methodological and theological matters (including some matters discussed herein). What binds the different essays together is their attempt to draw on the fecund resources of Holy Scripture within the context of the catholic church of the Reformed confessions.² The contributors to this volume are all committed to the proposition that theological renewal comes through dependence upon the generative resources of the Triune God in and through the gospel and that such dependence is best expressed in our particular historical moment by way of retrieval. In other words, theological fruitfulness in the future will be possible only if we first tend faithfully to the past: specifically, to the confession of our ancestors in the faith and to the root of that confession in the scriptural witness that God has generated through his Word and Spirit. Thus this volume seeks to bridge the classical and the contemporary by enlisting the contribution of some of today's leading theologians and by aligning itself with the catholic and Reformational heritage of the church. In this manner, these essays are meant to contribute to the flourishing of theology within the church today.

Because this commitment to renewal through retrieval functions on the margins of contemporary strategies for market success in our contemporary society (where it is invoked only when the retro might sell), and, still further, because it often exists even on the periphery of contemporary church life (where it is mostly perpetuated only for sentimental rather than principled reasons), we will reflect briefly on the theological impetus for such a commitment as more than a mere stratagem for success but, profoundly, as a promise of the gospel itself.

Renewal

Theology does not come easily. Better put, faithful theology comes by grace or not at all, while idolatry comes quite naturally to those of us who make our bed east of Eden. John Calvin famously referred to our hearts as idol-making factories.³ In a world of spin and with a heart full of idols, true wisdom and

2. In parallel to the intent expressed thirty years ago to address the catholic church from the Lutheran confession specifically, as stated by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., preface to *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1:xviii. That multiauthor confessional dogmatics exemplified for the editors what was needed now in addressing the catholic church from the Reformed confessional theology.

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1.11.8. Calvin made similar comments in his exegetical material, e.g., *Commentary on Ezekiel* 1:13, 80; *Commentary on 2 Corinthians* 11:3, 141.

genuinely faithful speech seem impossible. Idolatry without and within appears to throw all theological efforts into question. So, “The central theological principle of the Bible [is] the rejection of idolatry.”⁴

But grace does come, and it brings theology along with it. God sends a Word, and his Word does not return void. God speaks into the chaos, and his speech does bring order, beauty, and goodness. God does these things, so theology is by grace or not at all. Grace does not undercut or circumvent intellectual reflection. Rather, grace comes as this promise: “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Tim. 2:7). The nature of God’s gift is illumining. It does not augment our intellectual activity; it provides the context, conditions, and character for its proper functioning. B. B. Warfield, the noted twentieth-century Presbyterian theologian from Princeton Seminary, was asked which was more vital to theological work: ten hours of study or ten minutes on one’s knees in prayer. Warfield retorted that ten hours of prayerful study on one’s knees was surely the order of the day.⁵ His pastoral reminder points to a profound theological truth: the life of faith does not manifest itself in habits of inactivity but in free service and loving self-sacrifice. And Karl Barth, another famed Reformed theologian of the twentieth century, concurred with his assessment that “prayer without study would be empty; study without prayer would be blind.”⁶

Theology is not easy, and it is not natural, not for those of us who are sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, plagued by sin’s onset. But theology is a genuinely human practice and really does take shape in the context of the body of Christ. Minds are renewed. Eyes are opened. Congregations do hear. Grace takes the common, even the corrupt, and sets it apart for a sacred use. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). Indeed, “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world . . . the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:9, 18). So the saints do know their Lord and, in knowing him, love him. Our theological ventures are premised upon this promise: behold, the Lord makes all things new, including our sinful reason and our darkened suppression of the knowledge of the one true God.

4. Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 10.

5. “The Religious Life of Theological Students,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 1:412.

6. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (New York: Anchor, 1964), 151.

Retrieval

Renewal is promised by the “giver of life,” but we do well to ask how his lordly grace is bestowed and what effect his *modus operandi* should exercise on our intellectual efforts. A healthy dose of Christian anthropology puts the lie to any premonition that the path forward lies in cutting ties with the past. While we must put to death our sin, the way to glory surely does not involve a detachment from nature or from our history, at least not our history within the economy of salvation. Indeed, what we find is that the “great cloud of witnesses” draws us out of our delusions and overwhelms us with an illuminating testimony. With Nicholas Lash we confess, “Christian doctrine . . . functions, or should function, as a set of protocols against idolatry.”⁷

Many evangelicals have felt duty bound to shirk tradition and, specifically, the role of creeds and confessions in the church for the sake of maintaining an emphasis on God’s action in revealing himself to us. For these saints, tradition has become a surrogate or substitute for God’s own revelation. Contrary to the words of Lash, they view tradition as itself an idol, not a protocol against idolatry. Yet this sort of maneuver fails to honor the biblical emphasis on the way in which Jesus Christ reveals himself to us through the ongoing practices of his people. To keep the heritage of the church at bay, then, is not merely to make a judgment call about its history or to adopt a particular path for intellectual progress; no, to do so is to adopt a posture of disbelief in the promise of Jesus. Hilary of Poitiers writes that “only in receiving can we know,” and the Lord has determined that our reception of this knowledge come through the witness of one generation to another.⁸ To do so is to honor the fifth commandment, believing that in doing so we might live long and blessed in the divine kingdom.

Dogmatics is the disciplined effort to have our eyes and mouths retrained by the gospel. In so doing we inhabit the classroom of the communion of saints, and we seek to learn from its instruction. We read the creeds of the ecumenical church, and we study the confessions of the Protestant Reformation. We go to school in the texts of the ancient church fathers and the medieval doctors of the faith. We consider the modern articulations of the gospel and the contemporary testimonies to God’s Word. Dogmatics is receptive, believing that the Word of Christ dwells richly not merely when savored by individuals but also when sung and spoken by the people of God (Col. 3:16–17).

7. Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and End of “Religion”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 194.

8. Hilary of Poitiers, *The Trinity*, in vol. 6 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, ed. W. Sanday, trans. E. W. Watson and L. Pullan (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 2.35.

Whereas some approaches to dogmatics suggest a pacified relation between the gospel and tradition, our approach cannot be so sanguine. The gospel does generate a tradition (1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Tim. 2:2): this Christ does give birth to Christians. Yet the history of the church is one of conflict marked by that famed Reformational claim that we are simultaneously the just and the sinful people of God. Thus our appropriation of ecclesial tradition must always be a critical traditioning wherein we seek to be shaped by the truth, goodness, and beauty of our heritage and not to be drawn into a pathology of untruth, evil, and ugliness by our native resources. Such critique goes back not only to the way our incarnate Lord addressed the religious traditions of his day but to the prophetic witness of old as well. Catholicity and tradition are not about calm conservatism, then, but about honoring the context within which God names and makes Christians and speaks and sustains Christian reasoning. We entrust ourselves to the guidance of the church because we believe the Triune God and because we honor the path he has set before us, not because we find any of our ancestors to offer infallible readings of the Holy Scriptures.⁹ Holy Scripture calls us to embrace “tradition”—the faithful transmission of biblical truth through time, rather than mere “custom”—which may simply be the historical perpetuation of error. We find a precious touchstone to this faithful tradition in the creeds and confessions of the church.

Renewal through Retrieval: Reformed Catholicity and the Theological Task

The essays that follow chart a catholic and Reformed path forward, then, by pointing backward. In varying places and to different ends, they look to a number of figures and texts as resources for the journey.

These essays are not merely ecclesial but also dogmatic in that they seek to reflect intellectually and synthetically on the task of the Christian confession. They are not systematic if that means unpacking doctrines by way of logical deduction from a principle. But they are systematic in a synthetic sense in that they attend to the full breadth of the biblical witness as well as the order, emphases, and coherence of that full swathe of canonical teaching. The attentive reader will notice that the Triune God is the center of reflection in the essays that follow, since Christian theology is about God and all things as they relate to him. More often than not, chapters move explicitly from reflection

9. For further reflection on a distinctly Reformed approach to catholicity and tradition, see Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

on God's character (in and of himself) and only then (in light of the fullness and life that are his alone) to consider his works and wonders done for the sake of others: whether creation writ large or his covenant people.

This collection—and the wider practice of dogmatic theology of which it is but a piece—is not meant to replace the reading of Holy Scripture but to illuminate it. Just as pastors and evangelists serve to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12), so these essays seek to equip saints for a more faithful hearing of and testimony to the words of the prophets and apostles. Zacharius Ursinus reflected that the “highest” purpose for studying church doctrine is to prepare us “for the reading, understanding, and exposition of the holy Scriptures. For as the doctrine of the catechism and common places (*loci communes*) are taken out of the Scriptures, and are directed by them as their rule, so they again lead us, as it were, by the hand to the Scriptures.”¹⁰ Dogmatic reasoning is meant to flow from and send one back to the task of exegesis. Like good art criticism, it is drawn from careful viewing of a specimen, but it is beneficial only if it aids further interaction with the specimen itself.

Such is our hope for this volume: that readers will find its chapters a reliable guide to the mysteries of the faith attested by the prophets and apostles and a prompt in the ongoing journey of theological reason between the darkness of Egypt and the light of Canaan. By listening to the witness of pilgrims before us and by attending to the broader terrain in which we roam, we hope that the task of journeying well—that is, faithfully—will be aided and encouraged.

Recognizing that faithfulness on this path depends wholly on the resources of the one who has accompanied the church even before the onset of our own pilgrimage, we conclude with a plea for divine assistance.

May our most great and wonderful God, who begat his own eternal Son Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, by eternal generation and sanctifies him to us by eternal predestination, that he may be our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption—may that same God also bestow upon us the spirit of wisdom, that growing stronger by his power we may increase in the saving treasures of this knowledge and wisdom unto the unity of faith and recognition of him, until we become a complete man according to the proper measure of the stature which is fitting for that most distinguished and glorious body in Christ Jesus our head and Savior, for his glory. Amen.¹¹

10. Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1985), 10.

11. Franciscus Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology: With the Life of Franciscus Junius*, trans. David C. Noe (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 234.

1

Knowledge of God

MICHAEL ALLEN

A Theology of Knowing God

Christian theology is human reason disciplined by the gospel. Reason is not aloof or alone. It is implicated in the story of God's generosity. Reason is not shaped in only a parochial way, by things like sociocultural influences and partisan biases. It is baptized in the common life of the saints. Disorder arises when reason is considered apart from the rule of the gospel. When the context for intellectual self-awareness shifts from the country of the gospel to another land, fissures and imbalances set in.

The ills of recent thinking about thinking can be traced to a relocation of such reflection, no longer in the economy of sin and grace but instead transplanted to the orbit of (scientific) technique or (cultural) training. In his essay "What Is Enlightenment?," Immanuel Kant belittled reliance on religious formation, arguing for a moral necessity to question such indoctrination and proceed to reason independently of ecclesiastical and familial order. By now a veritable industry has arisen, offering intellectual histories of the Enlightenment and its roots in earlier shifts in thinking about reality as such, our minds, and the connection between the two.¹ We need not buy in hook, line,

1. For the most influential in recent years, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007); David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian*

and sinker to any given genealogy, though we can surely see that the broad emphases of Enlightenment thinking about thinking located the knowing subject as one with direct and immediate access to the known (irrespective of its nature: whether creaturely or, as we are considering, the Creator himself).

And supposed rejections of Enlightenment rationality tend to be predictable responses made by those who throw their arms up in protest without changing the fundamental terms of the game. Scientific technique may be trusted no longer as a reliable broker of truth, but now knowledge is political power. In place of objectivity comes spin. The mind no longer needs to learn a certain set of methods; the mind needs to be liberated from groupthink by having the biases of one's parents, priests, or president exposed and alternative approaches of "the other" articulated. Knowledge is reduced to angle, perspective, and approach. It may not be perceived as technique, but it is no less restricted to the realm of human action: now it is social rather than scientific, perhaps, but describable by means of materialistic processes just the same.

Roger Lundin has traced such a maneuver ably in his volume *From Nature to Experience*, focusing on the nineteenth century as a time of shifting beliefs about knowledge and truth. For a variety of reasons—ranging from Darwinian naturalism to the violence of the American Civil War—Lundin argues that faith in the idea of a nature that was given order from above and might communicate truth to those below sunk in this long nineteenth century. Biological evolution seemed to raise questions about nature and order in the world, while the moral ambiguities and failures of the American strife seemed to raise questions about anything like a natural law or common conscience granted from above.² Whereas Kant had turned us from revelation to natural order, the experiences of struggle (biologically and politically) in the modern era seemed to raise questions about nature itself. Some other source of reason and wisdom must be sought. The failure to perceive an illuminating order

Truth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), part 1; J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). The most recent intellectual history of this scale is Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2012); the most accessible entry to this genre may be Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001).

2. Roger Lundin, *From Nature to Experience: The American Search for Cultural Authority* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 3, 19; see also Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 69.

led, first, to the search for a cohesive aesthetic (experience) and, second, to a focus on pragmatic means (of varying sorts). Thus pragmatism became the philosophy of the twentieth century over against more metaphysical approaches to truth and knowledge.

We will not attempt to locate a theological fall from grace, whether in the rise of nominalism, the person of Scotus, or the philosophy of a René Descartes or (later) a Christian Wolff. Yet we must note that for various reasons, reason has been plausibly thought within very different contexts: no longer the space of sin and its overcoming, now the territory of technical mastery or political pull. Of such approaches, completely fixed on creaturely activity as they are, the verdict of William Butler Yeats is proven true: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”³ When centered fully in the creaturely realm, reason does fall apart, and wisdom cannot hold.

If we are to avoid such maladies, then our task is reflective, namely, to address the various ways that the gospel chastens our thinking about human reason. Elsewhere I have argued that the gospel can be summarized thus: “The gospel is the glorious news that the God who has life in himself freely shares that life with us and, when we refuse that life in sin, graciously gives us life yet again in Christ.”⁴ Life involves truth. Indeed, a theology of knowing God will focus on this aspect of the life we have with God in Christ. God gives truth as an essential facet of that ever-bountiful blessing of life. So we can modify our thesis statement and fix our eyes on this aspect of the gospel: *The gospel is the glorious news that the God who is truth himself freely shares that truth with us and, when we refuse that truth in sin, graciously gives us truth yet again in Christ.* Our reflections on the place of intellectual reason within the gospel are prompted by the confession of the first of the Ten Theses of Berne (1528): “The holy, Christian Church, whose only Head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, abides in the same, and does not listen to the voice of a stranger.”⁵ Knowledge is provided for by divine communication—the very Word of God—and we do well to consider the metaphysics and ethics of its communication. In the following reflections, we will address matters metaphysical by considering the context of theology within the economy of God’s external works, and we will then reflect on the ethics of theology by defining the character of theology within this same economy, according to its own rules.

3. William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming” (1919), www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172062.

4. Michael Allen, *Justification and the Gospel: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 3.

5. Ten Theses of Berne (1528), in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 49.

The Context of Theology

The discipline of the gospel can be best expressed by considering the story of the gospel. Human reason has a history, and its everyday exercise can be appreciated only when its biography is understood. To that end, we will consider the impact on human reason of the key moments of the redemptive-historical movement from eternity to economy: God's eternity, creation, sin, and reconciliation. At each point I will highlight a key distinction that has been employed by theologians to emphasize the operative nature of this doctrine. Such distinctions are not employed to tone down or cordon off the effects of doctrines; rather, they are flags reminding one of the doctrines and insisting that no side of the divide be ignored or obfuscated. Distinctions in doctrine serve to keep us alive to the breadth of God's address to us in Scripture. Thus these classical doctrines, if retrieved as exegetical signals, may well help to renew our efforts to think well in light of the gospel.

First, *the gospel is the glorious news that God is truth himself*. The God who has truth in himself *elects* to share that truth with others. "God is knowable to Himself; the Son to the Father, but also the Father to the Son. This is the first and last thing which is to be said about the knowability of God even from the point of view of the readiness of man."⁶

Scholastic theologians noted this truth of God's own self-knowledge by distinguishing between theology *ad nostra* (our theology) and theology *in se* (theology in himself). Duns Scotus employed the distinction to emphasize that only God's mind is proportionate to knowing God.⁷ John Calvin would point out that "there is a measure of impropriety (*improprium quodammodo*) in what is taken from earthly things and applied to the hidden majesty of God," showing that he employed the distinction between what is and is not proportional to its mental object.⁸ Many Protestant scholastics concurred, but other Protestants suggested that "theology" really applies—strictly speaking—only to our knowledge and talk of God.⁹ Richard Muller argues that William Perkins, William Ames, and John Owen each focus on human knowledge of God; they do not deny that God knows himself, but they refuse to speak of

6. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 151.

7. Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* prologue 3.1–3.

8. John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of Peter*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. William B. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 7–8 (on Heb. 1:3).

9. Many Reformed scholastics employed the language of Scotus while radically disagreeing with his repudiation of the analogy of being (*analogia entis*), wherein he argued that there is no proportion between theology *in se* and theology *ad nostra*.

this divine wisdom as “theology.”¹⁰ There may be other ways for these theologians to remember that knowledge of God begins in and with God, but refusal to speak of God’s self-knowledge as “theology” seems to set one up for one of two errors. Either one will lose the distinction between creaturely and divine knowledge of God (without a distinction to ward off the confusion) or one will believe the two wisdoms drift apart into completely different, that is, equivocal knowledge (without the distinction to remind us of their fundamentally analogous and participatory nature).

It is good news that God has knowledge in himself before any interaction with or even determination to bring about creatures. God knows all. God knows himself. Thus God is quite aware that any economy, that is, any interaction between God and creatures, will be for his glory and their good rather than mutual hostility or harm. God needs no experimental groups to learn of his fullness, and God has no need of history to demonstrate to himself the character of the Trinity or of creatures. From the foundations of all time, God knows. We should join Job and the prophets in returning to this fundamental truth (see Job 38–41).

Second, *the God who is truth himself freely shares that truth with us*. This inclusion tells us something fundamental about both God and ourselves. Regarding God, it shows us that his knowledge is relational in nature. His inner communication freely spills over into creative and covenantal speech. Regarding ourselves, it points to the type of existence and knowledge we can possess. Jesus Christ is the author and perfecter of faith (Heb. 12:2). This tells us something fundamental about knowledge of the divine. It occurs first in God (its author) even as it reaches out to include genuine human subjects (its perfection in faith).

Such knowledge is inclusive, that is, it participates within the knowledge that God has of himself.¹¹ Augustine addressed this idea in the conclusion to his *Confessions*: “When people see [your works] with the help of your Spirit, it is you who are seeing in them. . . . So also no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.”¹² In Christ we do live and move and have our knowledge, as an epistemological extension of Colossians 1 would have it. Knowledge is by means of revelation: either God makes himself known,

10. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 232–33. Muller also lists Turretin, but the quotation cited below (see note 14) proves this to be an inaccurate interpretation of his theology.

11. For an account of participation that is disciplined by the gospel, specifically by the Creator/creature distinction, see Allen, *Justification and the Gospel*, 33–70.

12. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1997), 13.31.46.

or he will not be known (1 Cor. 2:11–12). Thus knowledge must be participatory or nonexistent.

The shape of created knowledge is thus good yet limited. Here another distinction was cast to highlight its particular nature: whereas God possessed archetypal knowledge, humans were able to reason in ectypal ways.¹³ Francis Turretin provides an instructive description:

True theology is divided into: (1) infinite and uncreated, which is God's essential knowledge of himself (Matt. 11:27) in which he alone is at the same time the object known (*epistēton*), the knowledge (*epistēmōn*), and the knower (*epistēmē*), and that which he decreed to reveal to us concerning himself which is commonly called archetypal; and (2) finite and created, which is the image and ectype (*ektypon*) of the infinite and archetypal (*prōtotypou*) (viz., the ideas which creatures possess concerning God and divine things, taking form from that supreme knowledge and communicated to intelligent creatures, either by hypostatical union with the soul of Christ . . . ; or by beatific vision . . . ; or by revelation . . .).¹⁴

Both forms are “true theology,” though they are markedly different in shape. In one case, the knower is the known. But in the other case, the knower is a dependent—whether self-aware or not, faithful or not—of the known. And this plumbs down to a deep spiritual insight: grace precedes and creates the freedom for us to name and invoke God in worship, prayer, and witness. We follow the Word of God, given freely by the gracious Trinity of love. The key principle is that the gospel includes its telling; the way we come to know about God is itself gracious. “By grace alone” (*sola gratia*) applies across the theological board, affecting the very way that sinners come to reason about a holy God.

Knowledge of this God by these creatures is mysterious. And contrary to our immediate impulse, this is not necessarily a sign of a failure. As Katherine Sonderegger reminds us, “Divine mystery is not a sign of our failure in knowledge; but rather our success. It is because we know truly and properly—because we obey in faith the First Commandment—that God is mystery.”¹⁵

13. For the pedigree of this distinction, see Willem J. van Asselt, “The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64, no. 2 (2002): 319–35.

14. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 1.2.6. This distinction (archetypal/ectypal) is doing similar work to a patristic distinction (theology/economy) found in texts such as Basil of Caesarea, *Against Eunomius*, trans. Mark DelCogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 1.14.

15. Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 24. For similar sentiments, see Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 3: “[God] remains a

Mystery can be the result of sheer ungivenness. “The secret things belong to the LORD,” says Moses (Deut. 29:29). The vice of curiosity leads one to pursue or pontificate on things outside one’s knowledge. This vice is the noetic manifestation of pride: overconfidence in one’s own capacities and unbelief in one’s need to depend on the gift of another (which, in this case, has not been rendered).¹⁶ Humans are constantly inclined to describe the inner workings of reality rather than to depend on the Word in whom reality is upheld.

But mystery also comes from revealedness. Barth is instructive:

A fully restrained and fully alive doctrine of God’s attributes will take as its fundamental point of departure the truth that God is for us fully revealed and fully concealed in his self-disclosure. We cannot say partly revealed and partly concealed, but we must actually say wholly revealed and wholly concealed at one and the same time. We must say wholly revealed because by the grace of revelation our human views and concepts are invited and exalted to share in the truth of God and therefore in a marvelous way made instruments of a real knowledge of God (in his being for us and as he is in himself). We must say wholly concealed because our human views and concepts . . . have not in themselves the smallest capacity to apprehend God.¹⁷

The holy God really does show himself, yet that revelation is no simple possession. Our knowledge is in no way univocal (strictly identical) with God’s knowledge or reality, even though it is also not equivocal (strictly different) from them either. Hence medieval and post-Reformation scholastic theologians alike speak of the analogy between divine and human wisdom. We have true theology, but we have it mysteriously and imperfectly; this is no flaw, for in itself finitude is a good. Thus “the true goal of theological inquiry is not the resolution of theological problems, but the discernment of what the mystery of faith is.”¹⁸

mystery to us *because* He Himself has made Himself so clear and certain to us” (emphasis mine). Note that the mystery comes precisely because of the clarity and certainty, not in spite of it.

16. On the vice of curiosity, see John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 193–202; John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T. A. Smail (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 157 (on 2 Cor. 12:4).

17. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 341–42. Robert Price has observed that this distinction between veiling and unveiling functions similarly to a doctrine of analogy, though Barth seems allergic to such a doctrine at this point due to his worries about natural theology (*Letters of the Divine Word: The Perfections of God in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* [London: T&T Clark, 2011], 41–42).

18. Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 32.

As Protestants, we need not fear language of an analogy of being (*analogia entis*).¹⁹ By God's grace, we do participate in his knowledge: we do not possess it as he does (univocally), but we are also not left bereft of divine truth to find our own way to knowledge (equivocally). Rather, God is our light who illumines the world (John 1:4–5). God himself needs no illumination, for he is light. Thus our knowledge certainly is not possessed as God's. But God is our light, and we do see through his effulgence and radiance. If covenant includes communication, and if that communication is self-communication, and if that self-communication includes the other in one's own knowledge of oneself, then we must speak of a participation by grace in the knowledge of God that is God's by nature and, furthermore, this participatory knowledge must take the form of analogous knowledge (neither univocal nor equivocal).²⁰ All this talk of an analogy of being and of participation in God's knowledge by grace is a reminder to tend to the words of the psalmist: "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light" (Ps. 36:9).

Third, though *the God who is truth himself freely shares that truth with us, we refuse that truth in sin*. That is, the truthful God *was disbelieved* by those creatures who instead cast their lot in with the lie. While we have confessed that finitude is no flaw, we fail to believe this and buy into the lie that finitude is to be fled. We seek as sons of Adam and daughters of Eve to possess the divine knowledge in our timing and on our own terms: we think east of Eden.

Martin Luther reminds us that the exercise of human reason remains constitutively linked to the history of sin and its aftereffects. He employed the terms "theologian of glory" and "theologian of the cross" to signal the difference

19. Protests to the analogy of being stem largely from Karl Barth (who referred to it as the "invention of the Antichrist"). He protested ways in which late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologians employed this terminology without truly upholding the distinction between Creator and creature; over the next few decades, to some degree because of Barth's protest, Roman Catholic theologians recovered a robust approach to the doctrine that maintained that crucial distinction in a traditional and biblical manner (see Keith Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis* [London: T&T Clark, 2010]). Unlike Johnson and Barth, however, I would argue that the time has come for a Protestant return to our own classical resources, wherein the analogy of being was upheld. Barth's concern that this analogous knowledge can be enjoyed (that is, participated in) now only by those who experience grace as mortification and vivification before perfection can be upheld within the orbit of the traditional doctrine (even as held by Thomas Aquinas), according to Thomas Joseph White, "'Through Him All Things Were Made' (John 1:3): The Analogy of the Word Incarnate according to St. Thomas Aquinas and Its Ontological Presuppositions," in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?*, ed. Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 277.

20. On the link between participation and analogy, see Reinhard Hüter, "Attending to the Wisdom of God—from Effect to Cause, from Creation to God: A *relecture* of the Analogy of Being according to Thomas Aquinas," in White, ed., *Analogy of Being*, 209–45; contra Bruce D. Marshall, "Christ the End of Analogy," in White, ed., *Analogy of Being*, 280–313.

between one who thinks him- or herself to be on a paradisaal journey upward and onward and one who thinks him- or herself to be within a confrontational challenge marked by thrusts and parries, by being put to death and being made alive.²¹ “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil,” says Luther, suggesting that one who seeks to find glory in their own power will go the way of the lie. By contrast, “a theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is,” for this one “comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.”²² Luther’s distinction, like others before it, is meant to remind us of all the Scriptures teach: In this case we should not forget the words of 1 Corinthians 1–2, where Christ is not only our redemption but also our wisdom from God (1:30). And this wisdom will seem foolish to the natural intuition (1 Cor. 2:12, 14–15). Sin does affect all things—corporate and individual, cosmic and personal, physical and mental—and the intellectual faculties and their exercise surely reside within this terrain of destruction and despair. This side of Eden, there is a “wisdom of this age,” and we do well to remember that it is “doomed to pass away” (1 Cor. 2:6).

It is important to note that the tides of intellectual disarray do not simply occur out there in the world or the present age over against the settled and sanctified borders of the church. The plague of sin battles on within all creatures of our God and King. The mire of transgression stains our sight and deprives us of discerning wisdom. Even those in Christ must continue to pray—with the apostle—for “a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him [the Father of glory]” and that the eyes of their heart might be opened (Eph. 1:18 NASB). While the church is unlike the world in battling the falsehood by grace, the church is like the world in being beset by the lie’s temptation. The church does fall into lapses in wisdom and discernment from time to time, looking to resources other than God’s self-revelation for guidance and spurning the very notion of dependence in favor of self-constitution and self-preservation. But the Lord does not leave the church to its own devices: he pledges his Spirit to lead and keep the church in his truth (John 14–17). But we have moved ahead of ourselves: as we do remember that sin’s effects continue to plague even Christian knowledge of God, so we must see the sting of sin brushed aside by God’s life-giving work.

Fourth, *the gospel is the glorious news that the God who is truth himself freely shares that truth with us and, when we refuse that truth in sin, graciously gives us truth yet again in Christ.* The God who has truth in himself *gave*

21. Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation, 1518,” in *Career of the Reformer 1*, ed. Harold J. Grimm, vol. 31 of *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957), 39–79.

22. *Ibid.*, 53, 52.

truth yet again in Christ Jesus. Up to this point, the story sounds like little good news, of opportunity lost and none else. Indeed, the truth known by God of himself seems to hover over the darkened recesses of this rebellious country, where the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve recede back into the abyss of ignorance. Becoming wise, they turn foolish.

Of course, at this point man still seems to stand outside. Everything still seems to be invalid for him. For we are not God. Indeed we are not. But God is man. For Jesus Christ, the Lord attested in the Old and New Testaments, is as little God in Himself and as such as He is man in himself and as such. He is God who is man. This is Jesus Christ. In Him we do not stand outside but inside; we participate in the first and last.²³

The language of theological principles signals the dependence human reason maintains on the gifts of the Triune God for any knowledge of God. The seventeenth-century divine Johannes Wollebius prods us toward a distinction: “The principle of the being of theology is God; the principle by which it is known is the Word of God.”²⁴ That is, the ontological principle of all such knowledge is God himself, the only one who possesses this knowledge. God’s overflowing wisdom comes to humans in two forms. “The Church is *creatura verbi divini*: the creature of the divine Word. The Church is constituted by God’s action and not by any human action. . . . And the way in which the Church is constituted by divine action determines the character and scope of human action in the Church.”²⁵ The church’s life and knowledge are enjoyed in a creaturely manner determined—in both character and scope—by their dependence on the divine Word. The Word’s activity takes two forms: external and internal.

The external principle is a person, the incarnate Son of God. His hypostatic union provides the surety that humans can know the only true God in a faithful and fitting way. This humanity of Christ in its stark actuality is essential to God’s self-revelation. In Jesus Christ, God’s truth has become actual for us in space and time. Jesus Christ is the truth, the mystery in whom are

23. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 151.

24. Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium theologiae christianae* prol. 1.3, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. J. W. Beardslee (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 30.

25. Christoph Schwöbel, “The Creature of the Word: Recovering the Ecclesiology of the Reformers,” in *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*, ed. Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 122; see also Oswald Bayer, *Autorität und Kritik: Leibliches Wort. Reformation und Neuzeit im Konflikt* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 149: “Because Christians owe their freedom to this word, they never really gain control of that freedom.”

hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and from whose fullness we may all benefit. The astounding thing is that the eternal Word by whom all things were created became a creature without ceasing to be that eternal Word, and therefore his very creatureliness constitutes the act of revelation and is the guarantee that revelation is here within creation and accessible to humans. It is the guarantee that God's revelation is revelation to creaturely humanity within the limitations of time and space. Because the eternal has become temporal, men and women can know the eternal truth in creaturely temporal form, the eternal truth in time.²⁶

The incarnate Son is the true image of God and the faithful last Adam. No one knows the Father but the Son and those to whom the Son reveals him. It is the Son's knowledge—genuine human knowledge—upon which the whole doctrine of revelation pivots.

The internal principle is the pledged Spirit, who illumines the Word and not only enables but also actualizes reception of that Word in the minds of God's people. The prophet recounts: "Thus says the LORD God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. . . . And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD" (Ezek. 37:12–14). The giving of life takes the form of a Spirit coming to indwell and thus to enable knowledge ("then you shall know"). The objective word of the King requires loyal and dependent acceptance in a pliable mind and attentive heart. The Spirit is this agent of interpersonal translation, enabling the hearer to grasp the communicative work of the speaker.²⁷

Inside and outside, then, the principle of our living and our knowing remains the one true God. Across the board revelation comes in Christ alone. Calvin reminds us that the Triune God works in his elect: though this comes in two ways or principles, the Word and Spirit work the mission of the one God.²⁸ Fresh knowledge of God is birthed like creation from the deep: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). This glorious light is not native to sinners, though it was natural in Eden. Indeed, "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the

26. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 185–86. See also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 54.

27. See also 1 Cor. 2:9–16; John 14:26; 15:26–27; 16:8–11, 13–15.

28. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.5.5.

unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). In the “face of Jesus Christ,” however, we see God shine all the way “in our hearts.” Knowledge reborn in the Son’s grace is not merely knowledge *of such* but wisdom *with such*: it is the presence of the Son by his Spirit that makes his blessings known.²⁹

Clarity needs to be sought regarding the nature of this christological context for theological knowledge because it has led to some fairly lush proposals in the name of avoiding speculation and disciplining the human tendency toward idolatry. We confess: God is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

Once God was incomprehensible and inaccessible, invisible and entirely unthinkable. But now he wanted to be seen, he wanted to be understood, he wanted to be known. How was this done, you ask? God lay in a manger and lay on the Virgin’s breast. He preached on a mountain, prayed through the night, and hung on a cross. He lay pale in death, was free among the dead, and was master of hell. He rose on the third day, showed the apostles the signs of victory where nails once were, and ascended before their eyes to the inner recesses of heaven. . . . When I think on any of these things, I am thinking of God, and in all these things he is now my God.³⁰

Bernard is extrapolating the statement of John 1:18: “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” The Word comes to give life, and John 1 describes this beneficent work as involving (among other things) the giving of light (1:4–5). Indeed, the Son was “the true light, which gives light to everyone” (1:9). The prologue of this Gospel according to John then reveals that light is given only with glory that “we have seen” (1:14) and glory is the personal revelation of God’s own character: “glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14).

Karl Barth found this teaching to be both profoundly informative as well as frequently forgotten.³¹ During his days in Germany, he grew appalled at the ways in which the leaders of the National Socialist Movement were able to identify their cause as the ongoing revelation of God’s character and will. Barth led the composition of the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934),

29. On the importance of presence for wisdom, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia.43.5, *ad 2*; IIaIIae.45.2, *resp.*; IIaIIae.97.2, *ad 2*; see also the reflections on this theme in patristic writings in A. N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 179–80, 235–36.

30. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo in nativitate B. Mariae* 11, in *The Analogy of Being*, ed. Thomas Joseph White, trans. Bruce D. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 313.

31. See, e.g., Karl Barth, *Erklärung des Johannesevangeliums (Kapital 1–8). Vorlesung Münster Wintersemester 1925/1926, wiederholt in Bonn, Sommersemester 1933* (Zurich: TVZ, 1999), 113–14.

the clarion call of the Confessing Church movement in Germany to oppose the idolatrous claims of the Nazis. The document's first confession regarding the "evangelical truth" was that "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."³² The text purports to offer explicit exposition of two biblical passages (John 10:1, 9; 14:6). It does not hesitate to offer a negative statement as well: "We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation."³³

The polemical concern of Barth is to rule out natural theology and any speculation that is supported by purported revelations other than that of Jesus Christ. As in the Theological Declaration of Barmen, so in his own theology, Barth reminded us that theology that is not always and everywhere Christology is not Christian at all. In the work of a number of theologians after Barth, this christological lens has become an eschatological and historicist criterion. George Hunsinger has traced the way in which "eternity was historicized and subjected to an eschatological scheme" in the work of Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Eberhard Jüngel.³⁴ Hunsinger argues that each of these theologians—a Reformed thinker and two Lutherans—illustrates a hard version of Rahner's Rule, the trinitarian principle proposed by the twentieth-century Roman Catholic Karl Rahner: "The economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity *is* the economic Trinity."³⁵ Rahner's Rule can be taken simply to mean that the eternal Trinity (the "immanent Trinity") is revealed or manifested to us in the external works of God (the "economic Trinity"). This epistemological reading is a soft version of Rahner's Rule. But Hunsinger argues that these three theologians—and we could add more, for they represent a groundswell of recent theologians—take a harder reading that interprets Rahner's Rule in an ontological fashion: the eternal Trinity is constituted by and coterminous with the Trinity in its external works.³⁶

32. "The Theological Declaration of Barmen," in *Book of Confessions: Study Edition: Part I of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville: Geneva, 1996), 311.

33. *Ibid.*

34. George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Trinity and Some Protestant Doctrines after Barth," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 312.

35. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 22.

36. For astute analysis of two more recent examples, Robert Jenson and Bruce McCormack, each of whom has achieved remarkable prestige in the English-speaking world, see Scott R. Swain, *The God of the Gospel: Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013).

This development fails to honor the biblical principle that God's presence follows from God's perfection. Intrinsic to the gospel are its eternal roots in the life of God, who has all life in himself and only then freely determines to share that life with others. The fundamental provenience of God's life solidifies the freedom and grace that characterize the existence of creatures (in a wider sense) and Christians (in a narrower sense). Eternity does reveal itself in history; hence, the soft reading of Rahner's Rule can prove helpful against speculation about God. Yet eternity does energize God's engagement of history; therefore, the hard reading cannot be accepted without emptying the gospel of its potency.

A still further development involves exegetical narrowing. At times in the work of Barth and still further in the developments of some of his followers, the suggestion is put forward that theology must begin with the canonical Gospels or the apostolic witness in order to be Christocentric. And yet the Word has ruled a domain of divine discourse that predates his incarnate sojourn through the realm of Galilee, Gethsemane, and Golgotha. The external principle is the Son in all his revelatory speech, not merely in its fleshly form from the lips of Jesus of Nazareth. G. C. Berkouwer sees Barth's worry as an aberration that does not disprove the validity of general revelation or of genuine revelation amid Israel before the incarnation: "The basic mistake of this method [of Karl Barth] is that it calls abstract what *may* not be called abstract."³⁷

"God spoke to our fathers in many times and various ways" (Heb. 1:1), so the whole ministry of the Son must be attended to.³⁸ While Hebrews, for example, mentions the "once for all" character of God's revelation and reconciliation in Christ—no doubt more so than any other text—it also portrays this pointed work of grace in terms and categories revealed in the Word's earlier prophetic activity in the divine economy, that is, through the writings of the prophets.³⁹ Not only Hebrews but that other great Christocentric book of the New Testament, the Gospel according to John, also locates the revelation of God in Christ (1:14, 17) amid a wider and prevenient self-revelation of God through this Word's light (1:4–5).⁴⁰ As Hebrews 1 and John 1 make clear, a particular God (the one revealed most fully in Jesus) can be revealed universally. That the fullness of God's identity is not revealed everywhere does not mean that real revelation has not occurred; that it may be skewed and

37. G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 249.

38. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 110.

39. Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, 104.

40. *Ibid.*, 236–50.

misused (whether in the shape of Rom. 1:20 or in the guise of Nazism) does not disprove the giving of the revelation. It proves only that sinful humans thwart God's gifts. (This occurs with special revelation as well; see the history of Israelite religion and the debates with false teachers present in virtually every text of the New Testament itself.)

We are called to be Christocentric, and doing so attentively means being canonical in our thinking. The story of the Son is definitive, and it begins with a genealogy that lays its very groundwork "in the beginning with God" and then through the history of this God's interaction with Israel.⁴¹

All things hold together in the Son. The truth of any reality finds its roots in his very gift. So we can rightly speak of all truth participating in his light; yet there is a more specific sense in which certain truths are his and are given by him. Elsewhere, Kevin Vanhoozer has distinguished between "a general cosmological participation in the Son through whom all things were made (Col. 1:16) and a more particular christological abiding in the Son in whom there is reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17)."⁴² That we may entrust ourselves to the God of the gospel depends on real knowledge not simply of a divine being, but of and with this one. So Calvin says, "Put briefly, the entire authority of the Gospel collapses unless we know that the living Christ speaks to us from the heavens."⁴³ The God who is truth himself will eventually bring us to perfect knowledge.⁴⁴ Completion is not simply a calling given to the individual. The gospel rules our thinking about progress and possibility by fixing our sights first on the actuality pledged by the Triune God. Barth notes, "Because we do not in any sense begin with ourselves, with our own capacity for faith and knowledge, we are secured against having to end with ourselves, i.e., with our own incapacity."⁴⁵ To think with Calvin and Barth, our capacity leaves

41. For further reflections on the biblical order of teaching (*ordo docendi*), see part 2 of Michael Allen and Scott Swain, "The Obedience of the Eternal Son," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15, no. 2 (2013): 117–21.

42. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 281–82. Later Vanhoozer clarifies various aspects of this second union with Christ (what he calls "christodramatic participation"): it is both dialogical and sapiential, which we might translate as communicative and intellectual (291–92).

43. John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 1–13*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. John W. Fraser and W. J. G. McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 24 (on Acts 1:3).

44. It is worth noting that perfection does not mean a return to Edenic knowledge but an escalation to eschatological wisdom. First Cor. 15:44–45 shows that the "last Adam" brings not merely a gracious return to nature but grace that perfects nature. First Cor. 13:8–12 anticipates the escalating nature of perfect knowledge in Christ: now as pilgrims, later as those beholding his glory (13:12); "when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away" (13:10).

45. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 43.

us in danger of collapse; thank God that we are not left with our capacity alone but with a commitment from the God of the gospel. We are promised his prophetic Word and his indwelling Spirit's illumination. From glory to glory, then, the human mind is being illumined to see and be satisfied in the glory of the Triune God.

Thus far we have traced the order of the gospel and sketched its rule over the reason exercised by humans. Truth has been given, truth is being declared, and truth will be cherished. As we survey the story of the gospel, we see the march through falsehood toward the truth's eventual triumph: not a story of upward human progress in ascent to heaven but of divine presence pledged to descend to and accommodate itself to needy creatures. And we appreciate how theologians have formulated various distinctions in each case for the purpose of keeping each moment in the story in play. Even here, in thinking about the knowledge of God, we see that doctrine serves an ostensive role: reminding us to tend to hearing and testifying to the gospel in its fullness.

The Character of Theology

Ethics follows ontology.⁴⁶ That is, thinking about how theology is practiced follows careful reflection on the way in which its nature is disciplined by the gospel of Jesus Christ. It remains to reflect briefly on the way in which theology is practiced in this space described in the previous section. Five points will suffice for our introductory purposes.

First, the knowledge of God remains, strictly speaking, reason's apprehension of truth regarding this particular being, the Father, Son, and Spirit, the one God of the gospel. Yet this one being, the Triune God of glory, is the maker and sustainer of all things and, further, the God of the covenant. Whereas we often speak of someone being a "man of his times," incapable of being understood apart from his own cultural milieu, God is surely a being of his economy: his character in all its perfection and presence is displayed in these outer works. Of course, this is meant in a noetic and not ontic sense: God is not dependent on the economy, but our knowledge of God is dependent on the economy. But this does generate a concrete connection owing to God's gloriously humble commitment to reveal himself among us: while theology is about God, it is also about everything else insofar as it relates to God.

All the doctrines treated in dogmatics—whether they concern the universe, humanity, Christ, and so forth—are but the explication of the one central dogma

46. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:58.

of the knowledge of God. All things are considered in light of God, subsumed under him, traced back to him as the starting point. Dogmatics is always called upon to ponder and describe God and God alone, whose glory is in creation and re-creation, in nature and grace, in the world and in the church. It is the knowledge of him alone that dogmatics must put on display.⁴⁷

Herman Bavinck is well aware that other topics must be addressed, but here he locates any such endeavor as reason's exercise *sub species divinitatis*. Theology must remain theological, or it loses its purpose and energy.⁴⁸

Second, the journey of theology must be one of faith: "Only in receiving can we know."⁴⁹ And this faith is trust expressed in the form of hopeful prayer. Prayer may take the form "Maranatha" or that of a great divine: "I pray, O God, that I may know thee, that I may love thee, so that I may rejoice in thee. And if I cannot do this to the full in this life, at least let me go forward from day to day until that joy comes to fullness."⁵⁰ And prayer is not wistful aspiration; it is rooted in the promise of a God who is light and who sheds his knowledge abroad. Though God is seated in the heavens, still his name and its praise resound across the globe and through the centuries. With Gregory the Great, we are astonished at this mystery of grace: "Though our lips can only stammer, yet we chant the high things of God."⁵¹

The prayerful posture of theology should not, however, be construed in any way that renders its intellectual caliber moot. Theology will be done by divine illumination or not at all. But illumination renders intellectual reason operative, not optional. As Irenaeus put it, "The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God."⁵² Theology is work done by humans. It is done as the vision of the self-presenting God whose glory makes us fully alive: spiritually, relationally, and, yes, intellectually.

Lydia Schumacher has offered a wonderful account of the doctrine of divine illumination as it was classically construed by Augustine as well as its fate throughout the middle ages and into the post-Reformation era. Schumacher

47. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Friend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 29. See also Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* 1.5.4; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a.3.7.

48. John Webster, "Theological Theology," in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 11–32.

49. Hilary of Poitiers, *The Trinity*, in vol. 6 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, ed. W. Sanday, trans. E. W. Watson and L. Pullan (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 2.35.

50. Anselm, "Proslogion," in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. Eugene Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 92.

51. Gregory the Great, *Moralia* (Louisville: Ex Fontibus, 2012), 5.26.29.

52. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, in vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 4.20.6.

argues that divine illumination shapes our “intrinsic intellectual capacity” and thus cannot be construed as a divine action that “undermines the integrity of the intellect.”⁵³ She argues this point convincingly by considering a wider range of Augustine’s writings before turning to his specifically epistemological discussions where he considers divine illumination explicitly.⁵⁴ “With all this in mind, one can conclude that the illumination of Christ does not bear on cognition in any way that undermines the autonomy or integrity of the intellect but in a way that reinstates it, at least for the intellect that stokes rather than extinguishes his light through a decision to work with faith in him.”⁵⁵

In Schumacher’s account Thomas Aquinas becomes the faithful disciple of Augustine, contrary to many standard readings that pit Thomas’s use of Aristotle against Augustine’s reliance on Plato. Thomas does not continue to use the same philosophical apparatus to describe how humans think, but he continues to hold to the fundamental theological framework (regarding God, creation, anthropology, sin, and redemption) present in Augustine’s work. Thomas does introduce Aristotelian psychology into his reflections on illumination, but he allows his reflection on theology and the nature of the divine economy to chasten their function. At the end of the day, because he shares Augustine’s commitment to a participatory epistemology wherein humans really can come to share in God’s own knowledge by the missions of his Son and Spirit, Thomas is compelled to articulate a robust account of how human reason can be operative in theology.⁵⁶ Hence he introduces Aristotle (with all his concern for detail regarding creaturely processing) precisely because he is so committed to Augustine’s vision of participation (drawn from both the canon of Scripture and his retooling of Platonic *methexis*).⁵⁷ One

53. Lydia Schumacher, *Divine Illumination: The History and Future of Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 62–65.

54. Not all of Schumacher’s historical proposals are convincing. Her assessment of Bonaventure is questionable. She suggests that far from following Augustine’s path, Bonaventure identified illumination as the direct implanting of knowledge that does not follow natural pathways of cognition (see Schumacher, *Divine Illumination*, 98, 114, 146; for another account of Bonaventure’s classic text “Reduction of the Arts to Theology,” as well as his “Collations on the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit,” see John Webster, “*Regina atrium*: Theology and the Humanities,” in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* [London: T&T Clark, 2012], 171–92 [esp. 173–87]: “For Bonaventure the arts of intelligence are intrinsically illuminated by the Father of lights” [184]).

55. Schumacher, *Divine Illumination*, 65.

56. *Ibid.*, 160, 178.

57. This link between participation and individuation in Thomas is made to great effect also in Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). For ways in which the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is crucial to understanding his approach to participation as well as his critical appropriation of Aristotle, see Janet Martin Soskice, “Naming God: A Study in Faith and Reason,” in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith* (London: T&T Clark,

must be committed to the proper functioning of the mind (and, as best we can, to understanding it in terms of faculties and functions) if one believes that it really participates in God's own wisdom by grace.

A counterexample could be offered to Thomas: Jonathan Edwards. Edwards also shows concern to describe divine illumination as essential to human knowledge. Edwards will speak of illumination (in the pagan's case, what he calls "common illumination") not only in the believer's knowledge from nature and from Scripture but even in the pagan's grasp of certain truths of God. But Edwards presents an account of reason that is markedly shaped by his occasionalist metaphysics.⁵⁸ As he puts it, "Our perceptions, or ideas that we passively receive by our bodies, are communicated to us immediately by God."⁵⁹ For Edwards, there seems to be a competitive relationship between divine illumination and the mediated use of reason.⁶⁰ As with his teaching on free will and divine sovereignty, so here his account modifies the deep Augustinian tradition and instead posits a relationship whereby divine provision involves some loss of human agency.⁶¹

Reformational thinking about divine illumination would do well to return to its catholic posture wherein the operation of Word and Spirit renders human mental work operative rather than optional.⁶² We dare not oppose naturalism (in an Enlightenment form or a postmodern historicist form) with

2005), 241–54; Reinhard Hütter, "Is There a Cure for Reason's Presumption and Despair?—Why Thomas Matters Today," in *Dust Bound for Heaven: Explorations in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 29–74.

58. For an attempt to argue that Edwards does not hold to an occasionalist metaphysic, see Stephen H. Daniel, "Edwards as Philosopher," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 168. Given the quotations that Daniel provides, however, one wonders what it would take for him to refer to someone as an occasionalist. Daniel's argument does prove that Edwards has a fundamentally relational notion of substance metaphysics (*ibid.*, 169), but he does not disprove its occasionalist basis in the will of God.

59. Jonathan Edwards, "The Mind," in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, Works of Jonathan Edwards 6, ed. Wallace E. Anderson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 339. Edwards does not deny a mind-body connection (see entry 4 on the same page), but he speaks of immediacy in the mind's grasp of illumined truth.

60. On his approach to divine communicativeness and the immediacy of divine illumination, see William M. Schweitzer, *God Is a Communicative Being: Divine Communicativeness and Harmony in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 22–23.

61. For reflection on the ways in which Edwards modifies the Augustinian and Reformed approach to predestination, see Richard A. Muller, "Jonathan Edwards and the Absence of Free Choice: A Parting of Ways in the Reformed Tradition," *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 3–22.

62. For a robust account along these lines, see John Webster, "Illumination," in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 50–64; see also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:226, 333, and esp. 361–62, 566.

supernaturalism: the doctrine of revelation neither leaves us with bare nature nor locates our knowledge elsewhere than in human intellectual reasoning done under the metaphysical (though not overtly psychological) compulsion of grace. We do well to remember the words of Bavinck: “Nature precedes grace; grace perfects nature. Reason is perfected by faith; faith presupposes nature.”⁶³

Third, the knowledge of God and all things in him takes the form of following the economy of God’s works. There is a sequence to Christian theology, and it is not an order drawn from the realm of logic or philosophy outside of the biblical revelation. Theology follows the biblical order itself: God, then all other things as they play out in redemptive history (election, creation, fall, promise of redemption in Israel, incarnation, sending of the Spirit, church, application of salvation, last things). Other topics, when deemed important, can be considered within this canonical structure at various points (whether dropped in somewhere or distributed across the range of topics).

Here our approach to the order of Christian theology cuts across some common claims regarding the supposed distinction between biblical theology and systematic theology. When done according to the discipline of the gospel, systematic theology follows the canon’s own order. It does so with greater resolve than most biblical theology, inasmuch as it realizes that the Bible begins with theology proper (“In the beginning *God . . .*”). Redemptive history must be rooted in God’s own character; its salvific missions flow from the inner divine processions of Son and Spirit. Biblical theology can easily sound like nothing more than ancient history precisely because it lacks a doctrine of God to provide a metaphysical framework for its narrative.⁶⁴

This biblical order fits the discipline of the gospel and follows the guidance of the ecumenical creeds. These rules of faith sketch out the basic contours of the canon’s own teaching. They confess faith in God and chart the broad strokes of a narrative of God’s economy. Regarding the sequence of theology, then, the creeds point us to the deep grammar or logic of the canon. They prompt us to shape the very form of theology according to the self-presentation of God in the Holy Scriptures. While certain doctrines are distributed in various places across the canon and thus may appear in a number of given spots, the broad shape of the gospel guides the course of our reflection.

Fourth, the context of the knowledge of God takes various cultural forms, though it remains within a catholic space. Any theological reflection on

63. *Ibid.*, 1:322.

64. *Ibid.*, 1:104: “the order that is theological and at the same time historical-genetic in character deserves preference. It, too, takes its point of departure in God and views all creatures only in relation to him. But proceeding from God, it descends to his works, in order through them to ascend to and end in him” (112).

theology's context must focus primarily on canon, creed, and clergy prior to any helpful attention given to matters sociological, ethnographic, or political.

So-called postmodern approaches to knowledge focus on the importance of context in shaping our vision and understanding. He thinks as he does because his parents taught him that. She approaches life as she does because she went to that school. They follow that practice because they are emulating some influential figure in the religious sphere or world of entertainment.

The response to such accounts must be a call to be more contextual than the contextualizers. Foucault, Lyotard, and Derrida are correct to highlight the shaping powers of society in its various facets. They are myopic in that they focus only on the economies of this world and miss the most fundamentally defining economy for all humans: the divine economy rooted not in class, race, gender, or education but in God's eternal fullness and his covenantal election.

The Triune God has determined to grace his children with wisdom from on high through various horizontal means of grace. What one finds in reading the Bible—whether the witness of Israel's Scriptures or the writings of the apostles—is that the Holy Scriptures themselves point to an ongoing traditioning process whereby readers and hearers are to be shaped (see Deut. 7:6; 9:4–6; 2 Tim. 1:8–14; 2:2). There is need not only for the Word but also for interpretive helps. The Word dwells richly among a community—specifically, his church—not among individuals (Col. 3:16–17).⁶⁵

In recent years Kevin Vanhoozer has provided an analogy by which the role of the church in the economy of God's wisdom may be better grasped.⁶⁶ Vanhoozer suggests that the economy of God's grace is an epic drama, and doctrine is meant to help us more wisely inhabit our roles, whereby we offer worship to God and witness to the world. The traditions of the church—most especially its creeds and confessions—are Spirit-enabled guides to help the understudies go about their dramatic callings.⁶⁷ They are binding guides:

65. Because there is a churchly and even a catholic context for hearing the Word, the supposed individualistic flaw of the Scripture Principle of Protestantism is shown false. Christian Smith and Brad Gregory have each sought to demonstrate that the Reformation has unintentionally spawned what Smith calls “pervasive interpretive pluralism”; further, each suggests that the only way out of this morass is to ditch Reformational ecclesiology and return to Rome (see Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011]; Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*). But see the arguments in response in Michael Allen and Scott Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

66. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

67. See *ibid.*, chaps. 5–7, for his account of Scripture and tradition.

ecclesial expectations for worship and witness shaped by canonical speech of the Triune God.⁶⁸ Indeed, the role of creeds and confessions helps to shape the very title of this volume: *Christian Dogmatics* rather than merely *Christian Theology* or *Systematic Theology*. Dogmatics involves a churchly engagement of doctrine within the lived reality of the communion of the saints and attention to her ecclesiastical guidance in the form of her creeds and confessions. Paul tells Timothy to “follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me” (2 Tim. 1:13), and the church has seen itself ever since as an apostolic community that passes on that gospel pattern from generation to generation. Like Israel of old, the prophecies of God must be passed along as “one generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts” (Ps. 145:4). Biblical reasoning, by its own demands, calls for credal and confessional reasoning.⁶⁹

Fifth, the calling of theology should be examined. The knowledge of God is summoned for the sake of missional purposes: worship and witness. Psalm 145 locates the work of theology within the context of testimony and praise. The psalm begins and ends with adoring speech about God: “I will extol you . . . and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever” (145:1–2); “My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever” (v. 21). Throughout this psalm, speech about the works of God is a constant refrain (vv. 3–4, 6–7, 10–11). An intergenerational conduit of communication is affirmed: “One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts” (v. 4; see also vv. 6–7). The psalm makes plain that this testimony is not merely among a clique or an ethnic group, for God is creator of all and satisfies “the desire of every living thing” (v. 16).

68. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline and Government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 1:306–7. It is crucial to reiterate the subordinate authority of the creeds and confessions—as well as the clergy—vis-à-vis the fundamental authority of God speaking through his prophets and apostles, i.e., in Holy Scripture. The doctrine of the canon has served well to highlight the breadth of authorities affirmed by Reformed Catholics as well as the hierarchy of authorities (with Scripture alone as the *norma normans*, that is, the norming norm of all faith and practice) contra the reductive account of Reformational Christianity in William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998). Abraham undersells the breadth of authorities genuinely affirmed by Protestants as well as the need for a hierarchy of authority: in so doing *sola Scriptura* becomes *nuda Scriptura* (ibid., 147).

69. On the role of creeds and confessions, see Scott R. Swain, “A Ruled Reading Reformed: The Role of the Church’s Confession in Biblical Interpretation,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 14, no. 2 (2012): 177–93; Henri Blocher, “The ‘Analogy of Faith’ in the Study of Scripture,” in *The Challenge of Evangelical Theology: Essays in Approach and Method*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh: Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology, 1987), 17–38.

So theology is second-order reflection on first-order speech. Christians are called, first, to hear God's Word and respond in kind: to God with praise, to neighbors with proclamation. Christians do this by God's grace. Theology functions like a good critic, simply to help draw together the shape of God's Word and Christian practice and to seek to analyze the ways in which the latter befits the former. It sends Christians back to the Word and on to the task of employing their own words before God and the world. Thus theology is for the sake of exegesis, which is for the sake of life with God and others.

Theology goes terribly awry when it becomes a surrogate for either listening to the Word or speaking the gospel. In so doing, failures of faith and love are evident. We either run into a position whereby we entrust ourselves to the tradition of the church's reflection or the intellectual vitality of the present day rather than fundamentally throwing ourselves on the life-giving Word of God. The dogmatic task is meant to enable the exegetical task to run more faithfully, attentive in fresh and new ways to the life-giving Word of God. Indeed, the work of doctrine is nothing more than a reflective prompt to be mindful of the ways in which God's presence is promised and practiced. But the living is in the presence itself, not the prompting.

To sum up, we have considered an ontology and ethics of the knowledge of God, that is, the nature and practice of theology. In creation and new creation alike, knowledge of God comes by faithful entrusting of oneself, including one's mind and wisdom, to another: the Triune God of light and love. This is good news for humans, finite and fallen as they are, for this God is light himself and love shone forth. Thus we can pray, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer" (Ps. 19:14).