**Ch. 1:**

**What is Theology?**

**Basic Issues**

*God-Talk: The Impossible Possibility*

Theology is talk about God. It is about what God has done to reveal Godself and to save us. A report on the early spread of the Pentecostal Movement in William J. Seymour’s *Apostolic Faith* paper says this of “Bible salvation”: “The object and end of all precious Scripture is that a definite work may be wrought out in our hearts by the Holy Ghost. God’s design through the ages and through all His work with the children of men has been to implant His own nature—love, in a fallen race.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This understanding of “Bible salvation” at the center of this systematic theology. Christ came in flesh as the bearer of the Spirit so as to redeem us and turn us into recipients of the Spirit, recipients of the love shared in the communion of the Triune God. And so it was on the Day of Pentecost, the people of God were filled to overflowing with divine love as the Holy Spirit was poured out from the crucified and exalted Christ on behalf of the heavenly Father (Acts 2:32-33). In partaking of the Spirit, they partake of the Spirit’s prophetic witness, for the Spirit comes bearing this witness to Christ, the Christ who had himself become flesh and conquered sin and death by the Spirit (Lk. 1:35; 3:16-22; Acts 1:5; 2:32-33).

These tongues declared “the wonders of God” (Acts 2:11). The wonders of God! Human language exceeds its own capacity as it reaches by the Spirit beyond its normal boundaries to bear witness to a transcendent mystery not under their control or at their disposal. In a spreading flame of diverse prophetic communication, these tongues signal a gospel that will reach the ends of the earth. All flesh will partake; social privilege or domination will play no role and is even undermined. Young and old, bond and free, male and female, and Jew and Gentile will partake of this witness within a just communion or “society” redeemed by Christ and sanctified and empowered by the Spirit (Acts 2:17-18; Gal. 3:28). This communion and its witness will mediate the gospel of the kingdom of God to the world. Theology takes its place within this witness to help explain and guide it.

What is theology? Theology is “God-talk” or speech about the God who creates, redeems, and indwells. The term “theology” literally means a word about God (*theo* coming from *theos* [θεός] meaning *God*, and *logy* deriving from *logos* [λόγος] meaning *word*). More expansively, theology represents an effort to think and speak of the ultimate mystery of divine love at the source, sustenance, and horizon of all life. Theology is the faith of the church seeking understanding and expression. The challenge behind God-talk has to do with its possibility. What accounts for it? What informs it? How is it to be authenticated?

Theology has typically answered such questions using some notion of divine *revelation*. At the base of epistemology (what we know) and communication (language) is ontology (the reality of the divine self-communication). Behind the legitimacy of our God-talk is the assumption that God has spoken and still speaks. But where has God spoken? The question is an important one. The reason why revelation is so vital to God-talk is due to the fact that revelation is our only access to God. God’s free and gracious self-disclosure becomes the only way of knowing and speaking authentically of God. Yet, revelation never places God at our disposal or within our grasp, for we cannot grasp God as he grasps us:

You hem me in behind and before,  
    and you lay your hand upon me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
    too lofty for me to attain (Ps 139:4-5).

Indeed, “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). We cannot grasp God in the way that he grasps us, nor should we try, for our grasping is too controlled by our self-serving ends. It is much better to yield and obey. As our model, Christ did not grasp after the divine but emptied himself out on behalf of sinners in obedience to his heavenly Father (Phil. 2:6-8). Philippians 2:6 literally states that Christ did not aggrandize himself as divine as an act of “grasping after” or robbery (ἁρπαγμὸν) like the figure of Prometheus in ancient Greek mythology who defied the gods by stealing the fire of knowledge for the human race. Christ rather “emptied himself” (ἐκένωσεν) into the depth of human shame and suffering in obedience to a loving Father so as to be exalted on behalf of sinners for their salvation. He pours forth the Spirit from the spiritual fullness of his risen life but also in line with his self-emptying in the womb and at the cross. We receive revelation from God in a Christ-like manner, for the Spirit comes bearing witness to him. Ontology (reality of God) precedes epistemology (knowing this reality). We only know God from God and through submission to God. We receive revelation in the midst of Christlike self-emptying in repentance and faith for the sake of God’s purposes in the world. There is no “grasping” this knowledge for *our* purposes, only receiving a mystery with humble and grateful hands that never presume to be able to grasp, grateful for what we do know and always open to learn more and to learn anew.

What we do know and express by the grace of God is only *analogous* to the divine reality, meaning that the truths we learn are like God. No truths expressed in finite language and known by finite minds can fully grasp the infinite divine mystery. The Bible and theology speak of God anthropomorphically or in finite and human-like descriptions so that we could grasp it. What we come to know from God is true but not exhaustively true. We cannot know God in a way that brings the transcendent mystery to which they point fully in our grasp so that we can gaze upon God directly. God remains free and sovereign precisely within the divine self-disclosure. All of this means that God is not known directly but rather through *mediation*. Even one’s “immediate” experience of God is mediated. The Old Testament expressed this truth anthropomorphically by noting that no one can behold God’s face.[[2]](#footnote-2) Even though Exodus 33:11 boldly claims that Moses spoke to God “face to face,” the narrative concludes with considerable “back peddling” by way of qualification, with God stating that no one can see the divine face and Moses having to settle for beholding the “back side” of the divine goodness or glory (33:19-23), not God’s being, only God’s glory! Not God’s being, but only a divine attribute is beheld and only as one follows from behind![[3]](#footnote-3) God leads, we follow after where his goodness points us. And, at best, we only see God’s glory, but no one can see God’s face! Nor can one see God, only that which God reveals through a mediating reality, as, in Moses’ case, God’s goodness or glory, proclaimed in God’s name as God “passes by.” Whatever the idiom “face to face” meant in Exodus 3:11, the larger narrative prevents the reader from taking it literally. The Reformer, Philip Melanchthon, noted that the exalted Christ is known only by grace and only in his benefits. Melanchthon must have had Exodus 33 in mind. Isaiah saw a theophany of the Son of God in the Holy of Holies of the Temple but all Isaiah could do is grasp the hem of his garment (Isaiah 6:1-4; John 12:41). Even John could not see the face of the exalted Christ, for it shown like the sun in full brilliance (Rev. 1:16).

God doesn’t cease being hidden in revelation. God is never revealed exhaustively in a way that places God at our disposal. Revelation reveals God truly but never exhaustively or fully. As we will note, Karl Barth called God’s hiddenness in the midst of revelation “dialectical” which implies a tension, something that is graspable and ungraspable. For now we “know in part” as “in a mirror dimly” but then in the eschaton we shall know Christ “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). But not yet! Mirrors in ancient Corinth were polished metal. Hardly adequate by our standards! The person behind the image on such a surface was as hidden as they were disclosed. This is the dialectic of revelation. God is still hidden even in revelation. We shall see the exalted Christ as he is only when we are like him, meaning conformed through resurrection to his glorious image (1 John 3:2). Even now, we see him more and more as we become more like him. The sanctified life is the path of knowing Christ better. “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8). The Pentecostal pioneer, C. H. Mason wrote that once, as he was filled with the Spirit, he was able in his mind’s eye to behold Christ from the cross “groaning” for suffering humanity on the cross. He suddenly felt himself at one with Christ’s groaning as he spoke in tongues. “It was not my voice but the voice of my Beloved that I heard in me.”[[4]](#footnote-4) His path to knowing Christ and the significance of his death took place in his yielding to the love of Christ for humanity. His deeper reception of the Spirit was a deeper reception of the self-giving of Christ for the world. He didn’t presume to grasp this mystery, only to yield completely to it. The more we increase in knowledge through loving God and others, the more we appreciate God’s freedom and transcendence. He is Lord in revelation. There is profound grace in the very fact that God would grant any genuine measure of knowing the divine life and works and then bless our witness to it by using it as an instrument of the divine self-disclosure to others.

There are two Johannine texts that start with the same phrase: “No one has ever seen God,” John 1:18 and 1 John 4:12. Both texts use the same phrase to state the problem from the beginning, namely, the impossibility of seeing or knowing God directly or fully. But both assume that revelation and witness are still possible. John 1:18 deals with the possibility of *revelation* principally under Christology: “*No one has ever seen God*, but the one and only Son, who is himself God, and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” Only the Son has beheld God the Father directly with limitless intimacy and fullness from all eternity, for the Son shared the Father’s nature and was with the Father from before all things (v. 1). This Word was not only with God the Father but was himself God, or of the same nature as God the Father (v. 1). From this uniquely direct intimacy with the Father, the Son is made flesh to tabernacle among us and to reveal the Father’s glory by revealing his own (v. 14). Jesus is the human face of God. Notice that we do not behold the Father directly; and even our beholding of the eternal Son comes only through the tabernacle of his flesh which reflects his *glory*. “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (v. 14b). The Word becomes flesh to reflect the glory of God by way of the Spirit. Reminds one of Moses, does it not? The difference is that it is not faith in the divine name proclaimed that grants the capacity to see the glory of God’s backside but rather faith in the name of the one and only Son tabernacling in flesh, “to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (Jn. 1:12). So, one requires the Spirit to truly see the glory of the Son behind the flesh of Jesus; one requires *faith*. Not all had the eyes to see. “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (v. 10-11). But even those who saw did not see the eternal Son directly or exhaustively, only through a glimpse of his glory as revealed through his flesh or faithful life, the glory and beauty of his love, his miracles, his teaching. One could indeed look upon the man Jesus but fail to see the glory of the one and only Son. The flesh of Jesus was both a barrier to seeing that glory and a vehicle of seeing it, depending on whether one repents and believes. Note the reaction to Jesus among people of his hometown: “Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. ‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?’ they asked. ‘Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?’” (Matt. 13:54-55). Jesus’ humanity both hid and revealed the eternal Son. To those who refused to believe, Christ flesh only hid who he was. To those who believed, that same flesh revealed him. This is the dialectic of which Barth wrote, the divine hiddenness in precisely in divine self-disclosure. Revelation is mediated and the mediation is dialectical; it hides as it reveals.

Can one see the glory of divine love at the cross, at an event of execution and shame? C. H. Mason did and it profoundly changed him. But he yielded his entire being to it by faith. Can one behold the divine glory at the cross? This is John’s question. For John, Christ shows the Father’s glory throughout his life and he asks the Father just prior to his death to glorify him “now” as he approaches the cross (17:4-5). Of course, people would not be expected to see it until after the fact. But it was there hidden at the cross, beneath the sorrow. Moses saw the backside of God’s glory from behind in the midst of the desert as God led the faltering Israelites to the promised land. The cross allows us to see the “backside” of God’s glory too as Christ was on his way through the cross of shame and sorrow to lead humanity to the promised era of resurrection hope, of the blessings of life in the Spirit. Can one believe that God was with us at the cross, with us in the depths of our despair? Could Moses believe that God was with him and the others in the desert? Could he see the glory even there? Could we see the glory at the cross? To those who have eyes to see! The same cross that is a barrier to some is an open portal to others. Even those who see cannot penetrate the full depths of it all. God remains hidden, even in self-disclosure.

The second use of the Johannine phrase “No one has ever seen God” is found in 1 John 4:12-13: “*No one has ever seen God*; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.” Notice that the problem of seeing God now moves from revelation to *witness*. The people of God in the presence of the Spirit live in God and God in them. Though revelation and witness are different, there is also a path from one to the other, for Jesus Christ’s central role in the self-communication of the Triune God culminates in his pouring out of the Spirit upon all flesh, which gives rise to the church’s witness to the love of God. John the Baptist announced that Christ will baptize all flesh “in the Holy Spirit and fire” (Lk. 3:16). Baptized himself in the Spirit (Lk. 3:22), Christ was also to endure our baptism in fire. He wished that the fire of judgment were already lit upon the earth, for the new creation would then be near at hand. But he had to first endure the baptism in fire himself, the baptism of his death, so as to provide a safe path through the judgment for all others (Lk 12:49-50). He passes through the fire in his atoning death but he was not consumed by it. In joining sinners in their depth of alienation from God at the cross, he does not lose himself. He rises in the fullness of the Spirit in his resurrection so as to make a way to the Spirit for us all, so as to make us worthy of the Spirit. “He redeemed us… so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit” (Gal. 3:14). Upon his exaltation as Messiah and Lord he pours forth the Spirit that he received from the heavenly Father. In Acts 2, the Spirit arrives with flaming tongues that will rest upon the company of disciples so that they may bear ecstatic witness to God’s wonderous deeds that led up to, and were fulfilled by, the crucified and risen Christ. The church born in the outpouring of the Spirit is blessed with the power to communicate God’s love abounding in and through them to others.

And this communion of love should be communicated outwardly more and more through the church in the direction of the maturity of Christ. God shows the divine love on the cross and the Spirit witnesses to this love through those who live the crucified life. “And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” (v. 14). The goal is the completion of love in us as the church is shaped in the image of the crucified and risen Christ. Such is the logic of 1 John 4:9-14. Paul has a similar train of thought in mind in Ephesians 4:15: “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” Theology is not the *only* God-talk in the church! But theology takes its place among all other ways of communicating divine love. Theology’s unique contribution is in its doctrinal reflection by which it seeks to enrich and guide the church’s witness. The fact that revelation precedes witness, however, means that there is at the base of all theological knowing and communication, a state of affairs brought into being by the God who spoke once and for all by the Spirit in the embodied life, death, and resurrection of Christ. *Ontology* (the reality of God revealed in Christ by the Spirit) thus precedes and determines *epistemology* (knowing) *and communication* (expressing) this reality by the Spirit in witness. Theology seeks to be loyal to this reality, this ontology.

The church bears witness to the love of God revealed in Christ through church practices that structure that witness. Through proclamation, sacraments, worship, spiritual gifts, mission, and acts of love and justice, the church bears witness to the gospel of the kingdom of God revealed in Christ. Theology partakes of these practices from within its own concern for the theological authenticity of these different forms of witness. Theology proclaims Christ too but with an eye towards enriching and guiding that proclamation theologically. Theology joins itself to Christ as people do in baptism and remembers him along with the church’s practice of the Lord’s Supper but theology does both in a way that enriches and guides that sacramental life. Theology seeks to glorify God alongside the worship of the church but in a way that enriches and guides that worship theologically. Theology is a spiritual gift along with all other gifts but participates from its concern for the theological depth and meaning of the church’s charismatic structure. Theology is missional too, for it has a dialogical and apologetic edge, but it joins the church’s mission with a theological concern to enrich and guide the church’s missional life.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Theology reminds the church that its witness is not only for itself but for the world. That witness does not merely wish to inform but to transform. But the worldly and liberating direction of its witness does not mean that its gospel is “secular,” as if the church is merely an instrument of social liberation, having no deeper meaning than providing the lens through which to view God’s involvement in secular social transformation. The church is itself to be the liberated society of the kingdom of God because it is redeemed by Christ’s atoning death and resurrection and renewed in the Spirit’s sanctifying and empowering work. The tongues of fire in Acts 2 reach in their symbolism to the very ends of the earth, an eschatological fulfillment that transcends all boundaries of culture and language while involving them all, thus upsetting all social understandings of privilege and dominance (Acts 2:17-18; Gal. 3:28). The reign of the Messiah liberates, bringing into being a mercifully just communion in the Spirit. The church’s witness is “social” meaning first and foremost “ecclesial” or realized in the society of the church. Its witness to the coming kingdom is mediated through its just and compassionate social life together which is governed by the love of Christ. They share the word of God in a way that is backed by the love that they show for each other and for the world. The church’s communicative practices are contextualized by the church’s social (ecclesial) witness to the love of God.

However, all of this does not mean that the church has no secular social concern. Far from it. The church’s social witness on behalf of the poor and the oppressed in the world is a vital element of its role as the sign and instrument of the coming justice and mercy of the kingdom of God, a role that the church discredits if any part of it sides with injustice in the world and turns its back on those in the world who suffer unjustly. Indeed, a number of those who suffer injustice in the world will include many in the churches as well. Will we show the love of Christ for the people of the world if we ignore their suffering and the unjust conditions that cause it? Can we bear witness to the righteousness of the kingdom of God before the world if we behave unrighteously when encountering injustice all around us?

*Theology as a Constructive Discipline:*

Theology is a constructive discipline, meaning that it focuses on points of doctrine in the biblical text and the church’s larger witness and discusses these points in their own right as faith proposals for us today. The Bible is a very large and diverse book. Biblical scholars have produced an ocean of scholarship concerning its many voices set within their own historical and canonical contexts and literary forms. Biblical scholars honor exegesis, which methodically seeks to discover the ancient meaning of a text from within the text itself. This practice is contrasted with eisegesis which is the reading one’s own contemporary ideas into the text, which we should be discouraged from doing. Biblical scholars remind us that the contemporary relevance of the Bible in our world cannot bypass the Bible’s own unique world, both historically and literarily. While exegesis is the practice of biblical interpretation, hermeneutics is the theory that informs the practice. For example, while one exegetes a parable in the light of its historical and narrative context, hermeneutics asks what parables were crafted to do in the first place, or, more broadly, how one is even to understand the entire process involved in the interpretation of texts. Biblical scholars are concerned with theology too but they are concerned with the particular meaning of texts *first* and there are a great many of them with which to be concerned! They tend to deal with theological issues mainly in discerning the theological battles involved in the formation of biblical texts. They focus on the particular and not on the more broadly thematic. Biblical theology is the branch of biblical studies that is most concerned with theology, but, even then, they are tied to the theology that is found within a particular biblical book, author, or tradition. Most biblical scholars are wary of broad and sweeping theological proposals for the unity of the biblical canon. They may venture now and then into how their craft informs theology as a set of proposals today but they know that they are driving into another lane when they do so. The biblical theology movement in the mid-twentieth century and beyond blessed the church with bold statements about the sweeping theological themes of the Old and New Testaments. History was widely viewed in the heyday of this movement as the all-encompassing framework of biblical revelation and the key to its canonical unity. But such boldness is uncommon in biblical studies today.[[6]](#footnote-6) Large statements about the theology of Paul have become especially popular in the past few decades.[[7]](#footnote-7) Though all of this work has informed systematic theology greatly, the latter is uniquely concerned with what theological topics raised implicitly throughout ancient biblical texts mean in their own right as proposals today. This investigation includes a variety of dogmatic issues worthy of note that proceed beyond the strict limits of the ancient texts of the Bible. There is also the question of context or what we can say about these doctrinal truths meaningfully today in our time and place, including how these topics cohere and form a theological vision to inspire and guide the life and mission of the church. Since systematic theology is a creative task, a number of issues have come to uniquely form a part of this field of study that proceed beyond the limits of biblical studies.

Systematic theology relates in a similar manner to the historical scholarship on church history and the diverse history of doctrine and of theology. Church historians can deal with theology too but mainly in the larger effort to understand what caused churches and movements to diversify, grow, and take shape in various times and places. Historical theology deals more directly with theology, but mainly as tied to the developments of creeds, confessions, dogmas, and the theologies of key individuals, churches, and movements. Again, systematic theologians draw valuable insights from this work, but unlike these historical investigations systematicians are uniquely concerned with theological proposals in their own right with all of the issues that have accompanied this unique inquiry, especially in terms of how they can make sense to *us*. Ideas that are attached to bygone texts, battles, individuals, and movements, are pulled together and discussed as objects of study in their own right and as meaningful for the life and mission of the church today.

Systematic theology, the effort of this volume, discusses doctrinal proposals in a way that shows the coherence and unity of truth across the specific topics (loci) of doctrine. The conviction is that these topics are not fragmented and isolated from each other. They have a scope and a unity. This does not mean that theology constructs a system that is closed, as some kind of final statement that is not open to fresh and transformative input. As Barth was fond of saying, theologians must maintain the capacity to return to the scriptures again and again with a fresh ear and even as a result to be willing to begin again at the beginning (*mit dem Anfang anfangen*). Open theological systems should have aesthetic appeal. Like works of art, they are not all the same, though they will have essential points in common. There is room for many of them to bless the church and to guide its communication of the gospel.

Systematic theology is thus doctrinal but it is still not the same as church doctrine. Doctrine is typically done by church bodies that give rise to doctrinal statements to inform and play a regulatory function throughout the church’s communicative practices. Doctrines “are normative statements of Christian beliefs adopted by ecclesiastical authorities and endorsed as the official teaching of the church.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Unlike doctrine, systematic theology is typically done by individuals who participate in the witness of the church but also to some degree in the academy (the academic study of theology and to some extent other academic fields of study), thus being both devoted to the doctrinal faith of the church and yet serving a critical function in relation to it. Doctrine is corporate, regulatory, and official and theology is individual, critical, and unofficial. But the two do overlap. Doctrines are theological through and through and theology is doctrinal in that it deals with the significant areas of theological concern needed to guide the church’s witness, covering the same or similar areas of concern. Doctrinal statements are informed by theological treatises and theologians write with an eye towards affirming, explaining, and perhaps critiquing doctrinal milestones. Individual theologians do belong to the history of doctrine but not on their own terms, for theologians are servants of the church and its faith. Since doctrine is typically the work of the church, however, it should not be simply equated with the history of theology lest we exaggerate “the significance of the idiosyncratic thought of individual theologians at the expense of the common faith of the church.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus doctrine is pervasive throughout the communicative practices of the church and can play a regulative function within them, including the practice of individual theologians! Theologians seek to enhance and guide the church’s communicative practices with attention to their doctrinal integrity but do so individually and critically, with an eye towards appreciatively and critically remarking on the church’s doctrinal heritage and its all-pervasive influence. A number of theologians have written commentaries on church creeds, confessions, and statements of faith.

Vital points of doctrine that attract the most attention by theologians are called “dogmas.” Dogmas are generally discussed as doctrines that are vital to the gospel and its appropriation in the life of the church. Doctrines such as salvation by grace, the true deity and humanity of the Savior in one person, Jesus Christ, the atonement that comes through Christ’s death and resurrection, and the outpouring of the Spirit to give rise to the life of the church have historically constituted the very core of dogma. The Trinity represents its flowering. The word “dogma” has a negative connotation outside of theology, viewed commonly as a term that depicts a close-minded, ideologically-driven, and even politically-imposed approach to an object of inquiry in defiance of scientific or democratic ways of thinking. But the theological use of the term is something else entirely, at least it should be! Even in cases where dogmatic conclusions in the form of ancient creeds were enforced by political authority, such enforcement was alien to the dogmas themselves and not adequate as an explanation for their significance to the life of the church.

Dogmatics is a term that is more often used among European theologians today than elsewhere in the world. This term is not simply to mean a collection of dogmas (though it has been used that way). It is rather an appreciative and critical study of the church’s dogmas or chief doctrinal assertions with an eye toward clarifying and guiding the church’s communication of its gospel. Dogmatics can thus be understood as synonymous with systematic theology. Thus “dogmatics,” in the words of Wolfhart Pannenberg, “has to be systematic theology, namely, a systematic theology of God and nothing else.”[[10]](#footnote-10) These loci (topics) are indeed all about the Triune God and God’s economy or work of salvation in history. They are:

Theology Proper (God’s existence, attributes, God as One and Three)

Christology (Christ)

Pneumatology (Holy Spirit)

Soteriology (Salvation)

Ecclesiology (Church)

Eschatology (Final Purposes)

From early in the history of the church a distinction was also made between ethical and doctrinal instruction, “the ethical part and the precision of dogmas” (Theodore of Mopsuestia), the ethical placed under the commandments of Jesus and the doctrinal under the catechism and preparation for baptism. Neither of them were “acceptable to God without the other” among the church fathers.[[11]](#footnote-11) Theology also has ethical and life implications. Theology will always have an eye towards these implications, especially as it engages the social and cultural contexts of the churches. Theology is not only to aid in understanding the kingdom of God but is to facilitate and guide our liberating and transformative participation in it. Still, theology as a constructive discipline for the sake of better understanding still has a place of honor in the church—*fides quaerans intellectum* (faith seeking understanding)! Doctrine and theology are indeed sometimes rejected by those who wish to stress instead discipleship or social concern. We need deeds rather than creeds! Doctrine and theology, it is sometimes said, are too driven by useless abstractions and human opinions that can only further distract or divide us. It is not that this protest is without merit. Theology can indeed become too detached from the concrete life and social witness of a church. Pentecostal pioneer, William J. Seymour, thus wrote in the preamble of his Mission’s paper: “We are not fighting men or churches but seeking to displace dead forms and creeds and wild fanaticisms with living, practical Christianity. ‘Love, faith, unity’ are our watchwords.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

But discipleship and social concern can *also* lack theological awareness and depth. Even if the protest against doctrine or theology is backed by a genuine ethical concern, it cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged. To begin revealing the one-sidedness of this argument, one need only ask a question like why we follow Christ in our ethical commitments rather than a leader contemporary to our situation. If Christian, the answer is bound to rely on a principle of doctrine or theology. Their answer can then be probed for greater depth. It should soon become apparent that we need deeds *and* creeds. We need our faithful deeds so that creeds are not abstract principles but rather guide a life of divine mercy and justice, and we need creeds to locate our deeds primarily in the divine self-giving. Ontology precedes obedience!

The systematic loci are not abstract principles for another reason. These topics follow the narrative of the divine self-giving. Creeds or doctrinal concerns are never to be cut loose from the narrative of salvation through Christ that gave rise to them. The Father (the first article of the Christian Creed) is the Creator, the ultimate source of all good and perfect gifts (James 1:17).[[13]](#footnote-13) As the eternal Word of the Father (the second article of the Creed), the Son is not only the mediator of creation but also of salvation or new creation. The Spirit (the third article of the Creed) is not only the one who actualizes the creation mediated by the Son but also new creation, both in the flesh of Jesus (to actualize the incarnation and inaugurate the new creation in him) and among all flesh in Christ’s image. The incarnation and redemptive mission of Jesus occurs through the Holy Spirit and the era of the Spirit occurs through the Son as poured out through him.

There is especially to be a mutual cooperation between the Son and the Spirit in fulfilling the redemptive and renewing love of the Father. This was one of the rallying cries of the early Pentecostal tradition: “the Spirit falls in answer to the blood.”[[14]](#footnote-14) What was meant by this was that the redeeming blood of Christ makes us worthy of the Spirit. The atonement and Pentecost were regarded as the two towering dogmas that defined the Christian life. In this theological intuition, they were completely right. This is how the second and third articles of the Creed are to be counterbalanced. The victory of Christ’s taking on flesh so as to conquer sin and death in his life, death, and resurrection, opens the path to Pentecost, the bestowal of the Spirit on all flesh. “He redeemed us… so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit” (Gal. 3:14). There is to be a perichoresis or mutual interpenetration of the two economies of the Son and the Spirit, which requires an adequate counterbalance of the two. In the West, the link between the incarnation and the atonement was commonly used to grant Christology its due weight in relation to pneumatology. Forging this link between Chalcedonian Christology and the atonement was Anselm’s great contribution to the Christology of the West.[[15]](#footnote-15) Christ is not the mere instrument of the Spirit’s presence in the world. He is more than an ideal example of the man of the Spirit or of “new being” in the Spirit. He does not merely exercise in his perfect alignment with God a redemptive influence on us. As we will see, Schleiermacher started his theological method with reflection on religious self-consciousness, looking for the effects of God presence on the soul (on our dependence on God) rather than on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Christ ended up as the ideal man wholly dependent on God and aligned with God’s active love in the world. Christ’s redemption was through the “redemptive influence” of his perfect alignment with God. There was no need for an atonement doctrine; no need for the victory of the resurrection. Pneumatology lacked an adequate Christology. In answer to Schleiermacher, we must follow the New Testament witness in insisting that Christ is the redemptive event of reconciliation in his own right, not only in his exemplary life, but in his atoning death and resurrection. On the other hand, the Spirit’s power of actualizing God’s salvific work in flesh is often used to grant the Spirit adequate weight in counterbalance to Christology. Though the Son takes on flesh, the Spirit may be said to actualize the incarnation of the Son in flesh (Luke 1:35; 3:22). Though the Son obeys the Father in his journey to the cross, the Spirit may be said to empower the Son’s redemptive mission in flesh leading all the way to his resurrection by the Spirit from the dead. Though Christ pours forth the Spirit from his redemptive victory, the Spirit may be said to overflow the Son’s life so as to unite him to others. Though Christ followed the leading of the Spirit in his life the Spirit now bears witness to that life and shapes us in its image. A third article theology today is needed to counterbalance the heavy emphasis in the West on the redemptive work of Christ, which has tended to reduce pneumatology to a witness to that work in the world, not granting the Spirit a role in that work itself. But we dare not proceed in a way that reduces Christ to a mere religious ideal, the chief man of the Spirit.

*Scripture: The Primary Instrument of Salvation*

The church is by the Spirit the sign and instrument of salvation and of the kingdom of God in the world. But it legitimates itself as such in loyalty to the primary instrument of salvation, the holy scriptures. Theology seeks to enrich and to guide the church’s witness in loyalty to scripture and its privileged place as the chief instrument of salvation. Christ mediates salvation, the scriptures are his chief instrument. The church can be called the chief instrument too but in a way that recognizes its subordination to scripture. Christ came to us in flesh, flesh that is conceived and anointed by the Spirit, but flesh that was also wrapped in the clothes of the Jewish scriptures, dedicated to their fulfillment. He still comes to us wrapped in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. But these very same scriptures, Old and New Testaments, were written to bear witness to him (“it is written about me in the scroll,” Heb. 10:5). In a sense, all scripture was born from the Word of the Father made flesh, Jesus Christ. His life, death, and resurrection represent the victory of God over sin and death passed on to us at Pentecost, the fulfillment of the gospel at the heart of the entire biblical canon. “To all who did receive *him*… he gave the right to be children of God” (John 1:12). The tongues of fire at Pentecost seek to glorify the exalted Christ in anticipation of the gospel of his death and resurrection reaching the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8; 2:32-33). The scriptures were inspired of the Spirit to bear witness to him to the very ends of the earth until all things are accomplished (Mt. 5:17-18). Since the scripture’s gospel is embodied in the risen Christ, it cannot be fully grasped by any single community, in any one idiom, in any one context, not even in all of them together. The life promised and called forth by this gospel can only be “grasped” without being fully grasped in yielding obedience and as a mere foretaste in our hearing, and always in ways that carry new and deeper nuances of meaning in the context of this sinful and dying world that we inhabit. This gospel does indeed involve doctrinal propositions that are analogous to the divine action to which they point. But the gospel cannot be reduced to a set of propositions. It is at its core a life that grasps and changes us and that causes us to yield to the divine mystery at the core of it, “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,  things too wonderful for me to know” (Job 42:3).

The Bible bears witness to this life as it bears witness to its truth. In bearing witness, it becomes the authoritative instrument of the living Christ to speak and to heal. The Bible is inspired but it is also human. Its authors, like us, were vessels of clay that were sanctified to carry a treasure of glory (2 Cor. 4:7), except they were set apart from us to speak with unusual depth and eschatological reach. The Bible’s witness is still strength revealed in weakness, as are all finite human authors, even those blessed with special insight and authority. There are places in scripture where the witness to Christ may seem eclipsed and must be carefully discerned. But discerned they must, for all scripture is fulfilled in him (Mt. 5:17). Luther even went so far as to write, “And the scriptures must be understood for Christ, not against him. Therefore a passage of scripture must relate to him or it cannot be regarded as true scripture. If, therefore, our adversaries should use scripture against Christ, we shall use Christ against the scripture.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Luther’s bold rhetoric has shock value that is provocative! This statement cannot be taken to mean, however, that we can simply disregard scriptures that present us with an interpretive challenge. As Athanasius noted, we are urged by the Bible’s own witness to Christ as Lord to interpret all texts in the light of the “scope” of the biblical message that centers on Christ.[[17]](#footnote-17) The location of these texts within the mercy of God shown at the cross, where God overcame wrath to reach out to sinners in grace, will then raise the issue of how these texts are now to be viewed within the light of Christ. *The Bible interprets itself in the light of its own gospel*. The Bible in its own self-interpretation is infallible. It will not deceive or mislead. As 2 Peter notes, “We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it” (1:19). We must rightly divide the word of truth according to its prophetic message which points to Christ. As 2 Peter adds, we must not be guilty of distorting the word out of ignorance of its message (3:16).

Hebrews 1 illustrates this truth of Christ’s role in summing up and clarifying the prophetic (and apostolic) message of the Bible. 1:1-2 notes that God spoke through the prophets “in various times and in various ways” but in these latter days through a Son whom the Father appointed heir of all things. Notice the implication here. The Son sums up, clarifies, and fulfills the various and diverse voices of the Jewish canon of scripture. Christ, especially in his atoning death for sinners, grants readers the hermeneutical key to interpreting the Old Testament aright. In the exalted Son alone do we find “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” But this radiant glory is but the victory of a life poured out for the salvation of sinners: “After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (v. 3). The Spirit is poured out from the victory of this love over sin and death. The ancestors of holy writ pointed in various ways to this victory but only Christ fulfills it. According to Paul, the glory of self-giving love shines through the text “whenever Moses is read.” Of unbelieving Jews, Paul adds, “Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (2 Cor. 3:15-16). That glory shines forth from the text of scripture onto us and through us to one another, which becomes the beauty of a life given over to the love of Christ. We are transformed in the text’s hearing “from glory to glory” from the Spirit (v. 18). In the next chapter, Paul notes that both the text and we are weak vessels of this glory (2 Cor. 4:6-7). But by the Spirit of Christ’s victory we are strong; we endure. “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (vv. 8-9). As for the scripture, not one stroke of a pen will disappear until all things are accomplished (Mt. 5:17-18). All attempts to destroy this scriptural testimony in history have failed and must fail. The church will endure too, for Christ will be with the church always (Mt. 28:20). Only at the resurrection will our glory fully mirror Christ’s; only then will these vessels of our embodied life be fitting bearers of his glory. That fulfillment will be part of what must be accomplished before the sanctified task of scripture is fulfilled.

When we speak of scripture as sanctified of the Spirit for a consecrated task we speak of the scripture’s “inspiration” as the chief instrument of Christ in the divine mission of salvation.[[18]](#footnote-18) Prophets were “carried along by the Holy Spirit” when they wrote, granting their texts insight that would end up proving to be a great deal more significant to the people of God than a mere collection of ancient religious ideas (2 Peter 1:20-21). It is not only the authors who are inspired but also their texts (verbal inspiration). This obviously does not mean that the Spirit dictated these texts. But the Spirit consecrated them for a special purpose. The scriptures in this world are thus “a light shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (v. 19). Like the moon, this light in a dark place reflects the light of the sun, except, in this case, it’s the Son, Christ Jesus. The scripture reflects his light in a dark world. The scripture does this until “the day dawns” or the sun rises to flood the world with his light. This occurs when the Son appears at his return, it will be like the dawn in which the moon is no longer needed. The “morning star” of his light in us will rise as well in our resurrection in his image! Meanwhile, that light is in us and is to shine forth from us, the light of God’s love given and poured out for our salvation.

The Bible is both inspired and being inspired. Christ through the Spirit addresses us through this text, not *only* through this text but *primarily* so. The biblical text in the hands of the Spirit is the light and wisdom of our journey into Christ! How important are the scriptures! Paul had to remind Timothy not to neglect his gift of publicly reading and proclaiming the scriptures. Timothy was not to allow any weakness he may have felt as a young and relatively inexperienced minister to discourage him (1 Tim. 4:11-15; 2 Tim. 1:3-7). We are all vessels of clay! The scriptures are “God-breathed” as a path of wisdom to Christ (and deeper into Christ) for the people of God. Paul reminded Timothy how from early childhood he had “known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). The scriptures are thus “God-breathed” or inspired and “useful” for correcting, nurturing, and teaching the people of God (vv. 16-17). Timothy was to allow the scriptures to be his strong arm in ministry, his competence in weakness; he was to rely on it to guide others as it guided him in his own life.

The inspiration of scriptures receives its authenticity from the risen Christ who fulfills and authenticates them as his primary witness, his instrument of salvation in the world. One cannot start one’s systematic theology by “scientifically” proving biblical inspiration so as to then authenticate Christ! The Father authenticated Christ by raising him from the dead and exalting him as Lord to reign! Further authentication came in the presence of the Spirit (Rom. 8:16; Gal. 3:4-5). I do not believe that the help of our science is required to authenticate any of this. Do not get me wrong. There is a place for showing that rational arguments against Christ or the scriptures need not be barriers to faith. But God and God’s word are fundamentally self-authenticating. “Taste and see that the Lord is good;  blessed is the one who takes refuge in him” (Ps. 34:8). Ontology (the reality of salvation by Christ and in the Spirit) precedes and accounts for human knowing (epistemology). Those who participate in the church’s communicative practices thus assume the self-authenticating witness of the Spirit to Christ through the scriptures when granting these scriptures first place in the witness of the church (“how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,” 2 Tim. 3:15). The scriptures do not just guide the communicative practices of the church from a distance; they pervade these practices, for the reading of scripture is to be prominent within all of our church practices. We will have confidence as Timothy was urged to have that the Spirit will bear strong witness to the crucified and risen Christ through these scriptures.

We are also to embody the scriptural witness through our practices, becoming “living letters” from Christ written on our hearts by the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:3). The challenge of ministry is not just to help people *understand* the biblical canon but be transformed by it, to embody and live it. Leaders in the ministry of the word are to minister to their flock, encouraging, challenging, and nurturing them in this word. The ministry of the word is never to be confined to a pulpit. Pastors of large churches should do this with those who serve directly under them, giving them the charge to do this among those who serve with them as well. We do this prayerfully, knowing that there is a spiritual life, a spiritual discipline, that undergirds this entire process. Scripture is best read from a spiritual life shaped by it and dedicated to living it. There is no proper understanding of the scriptures apart from the path of discipleship that they lay forth before us. The scriptures are after all inspired to be a path of wisdom into Christ (2 Tim. 3:15-16).

Inspired by the Spirit, the scriptures are to speak to the church’s communicative practices and through them. Theology is involved in these practices and seeks to bless and guide them theologically. As Robert Wilken said of the early church, “Christianity enters history not only as a message but also as a communal life, a society or city, whose inner discipline and practices, rituals and creeds, and institutions and traditions were the setting for Christian thinking.”[[19]](#footnote-19) In fact, these practices played a role in the birth of the scriptures. From ancient Israel to the church of Jesus Christ, the proclamation, creeds, doctrines, worship, forms of service, and missional life of the people of God gave birth to the scriptures. Would we have Psalms without Israel’s worship or Philippians 2 without the early worship of Christ as Lord in the church? Would we have texts like 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 without the early church’s creedal life or 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 without the church’s sacramental practice? Would we have the book of Acts or Paul’s letters without the church’s missional life? However, these scriptures in becoming canonized quickly became the ongoing measure by which these practices continued to discern the authenticity of their witness. Why is this? As noted above, the reason is that the scriptures were sanctified (set apart) or inspired by the Spirit and consecrated to bear authoritative witness to the revelation or saving action of God and in this witness become the privileged instrument of God’s saving action in the world. This privileged place belongs to the scriptures alone (*sola scriptura*). It does not belong equally to a church office (the bishop) or to tradition. The church and its tradition are the sign and instrument of salvation in subordination to the voice of God through this text. Sanctified as the primary instrument of salvation in the world, scriptures bear a unique relationship to Christ, for they will remain undiminished and unaltered until their witness to Christ is eschatologically vindicated in the accomplishment of all things divine to which they bear witness (Mt. 5:17-18). “Not the least stroke of the pen will by any means disappear… until everything is accomplished” (v. 18). The people of God as caretakers and the embodiment of this biblical message will endure too, as Christ promised, “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). The people of God did indeed give birth to scripture but in doing so they gave birth to a canon that would stand above them as the chief instrument of Christ. We are surrounded by a host of witnesses within this biblical text who beckon us to join them in their calling to lift up Christ before the world. But where we align ourselves at any point against their witness, they become our judge. Make no mistake about it. The church and its post-canonical tradition stand beneath the judgment of this text. There is to be no neglecting this point in theology not if theology is ever to engage in ongoing renewal. Theology enriches and guides the communicative practices of the church in fundamental loyalty to this text. And the church is called again and again by the Holy Spirit to bracket elements of its tradition on occasion so as to turn to this text once more with a fresh ear to find that which was lost or inadequately emphasized. There is no church renewal in the Spirit without this renewed hearing.

The Bible is thus a canon, or a living *standard*. But its being revealed as such required a process. Historically, the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament) that became the Bible of the earliest Christians was in most cases not the Hebrew Bible of Palestinian Jews but the larger Jewish collection of scripture called the Septuagint, which was the Greek translation of the Old Testament begun at Alexandria, Egypt in the middle of the third century B.C. This collection was the same as the standard Hebrew canon, except it also involved with varying degrees of acceptance the “Apocrypha” which were the books added to the Hebrew scriptures when translated into Greek. The Septuagint became popular among Greek-speaking Jews of the diaspora. The result was that the Jewish scriptures were not firmly fixed in the Jewish world surrounding the rise of Christianity. When the church made the Jewish scriptures their Bible, they inherited this Septuagint. Controversy was thus inevitable. Most citations in the New Testament from the Old Testament are in fact taken from the Septuagint and this certainly would have been the scriptures that Paul used in his missionary travels. In the second and third centuries of the church, the Apocrypha was thus widely accepted, even though Palestinian Judaism had come to reject it. However, Christian leaders who were in touch with Palestinian Judaism in the early centuries of the church began raising doubts about the Apocrypha. By the fourth century, dissent began to grow among Christian leaders especially among some from within the Eastern Christian tradition. Athanasius thought that the Apocrypha can be used in the church but in a way that was subordinate to the canon of the Old Testament in Hebrew. Those from the West (e.g., Augustine) were more favorable. Jerome, however, marginalized the Apocrypha, though he felt that it could still be used for church edification.[[20]](#footnote-20) In the sixteenth century, Luther included the Apocrypha as an appendix, possibly useful for edification, in his translation of the Bible into a popular German tongue. Eventually, Protestants came to join Judaism in rejecting the Apocrypha. But the Catholic church accepted it, which is the only substantial difference between Protestant and Catholic biblical canons.

The New Testament canon came to inscripturate the witness of the original apostles. Their teaching was the doctrinal foundation of the church’s practices after Pentecost (Acts 2:42). The Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles were thus regarded as foundational to the church (Eph. 2:20) though these foundation stones were built on the only foundation there can ever be, Christ Jesus. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). After all, the biblical canon was inspired chiefly as *his* witness, his and the Spirit’s chief instrument of salvation. Paul claimed an apostolic authority equal to that of the twelve. He held unquestioned authority over the Corinthian prophets (1 Cor. 14:36-38). Indeed, Paul regarded his commission and reception of the Gospel as from the risen Christ, which placed him in a position of authority equal to that of the pillars of the Jerusalem church, Peter, James, and John (Gal. 1:11-12; 2:1-10). Later, in 2 Peter 3:15-16, Paul’s letters are referred to as scripture, an inevitable outcome. But Paul’s letters were not sufficient for the New Testament canon. The story and teachings of Jesus from which Paul drew at least implicit inspiration required inclusion as well. Luke takes note of other accounts of the story of Jesus in existence in his day but defends the thoroughness of his own research into the sources, including that of eyewitness testimony (Luke 1:1-4). Mark, however, was most likely written first. The Gospels were understandably the necessary complement to Paul’s proclamation and doctrinal instruction to the churches. Actually, Paul’s letters (excluding the pastorals) and the four Gospels were not disputed in the earliest centuries of the church, forming the backbone of the New Testament canon from the beginning. A notion of a New Testament canon arose relatively early in the history of the church, not in the sense early on of a closed collection but nevertheless as a uniquely authoritative one. With this broader definition of “canon” in mind, we can recognize a canon formation clearly evident throughout the second century, as Michael J. Kruger has convincingly shown. He rejects the idea that the decision as to which Christian books were “scriptural” prior to the fourth century was wide open, with any number of books competing for acceptance. Such was not the case. Added to this unsubstantiated assumption is sometimes the idea that Irenaeus and others imposed their selection of books on the church in the second century in order to ram through their understanding of orthodoxy. Kruger shows that there is rather broad acceptance as early as the second century for the bulk of the New Testament canon as scripture. The formation of the New Testament canon was not provoked by the narrower selection of books favored by the second-century Gnostic sympathizer, Marcion. His narrower selection, consisting of an expunged Gospel of Luke and collection of Paul’s writings, was but a challenge to an already-gathering consensus concerning the New Testament canon which was widespread.[[21]](#footnote-21) The chief criterion for acceptance of writings into the canon by the church was the apostolic nature of the writing, as either coming from an apostle or sanctioned in some way by apostolic authority. The apostolic witness lives on principally in the New Testament canon and not in a church office. I agree with John Webster that the Holy Spirit was at work not only in the writing of scripture but throughout its formation and canonical acceptance in the church. The church does not form the canon as much as receive it as a gift through their ongoing discernment, “a receptive rather than an authorizing act.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

There is no question, however, but that the scriptures are read through the practices and traditions of the church, of one’s particular church family or of the church as a whole. As we read scriptures today, we do so in a way that may be called “traditioned.” A church’s creeds, confessions, worship (and liturgy), charismatic experiences, theological treatises, and missional life all play a role in how a church or an individual reads a text. Such influences are not necessarily to be despised. Different church families are gifted with different insights into the biblical canon. For example, I have learned much from the Wesleyans about holiness or from the Lutherans about justification by faith, or from the Reformed about divine freedom and sovereignty. The Pentecostals taught me about the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Not that all that is said from these sources is biblical. But Oscar Cullmann is right, different church families function like spiritual gifts meant to edify the global church in unique ways.[[23]](#footnote-23) And who can deny the significance of the anti-gnostic polemic of the Apostles Creed, the deity of Christ heralded at Nicea, or the unity of Christ’s person, divine and human, embraced at Chalcedon? These doctrinal milestones are not beyond question by any means, but they’ve gifted the church with a truly helpful framework for understanding the role played by Jesus Christ in the story of salvation as depicted in Bible. Anyone who claims to read the scriptures in ways untouched by tradition will reveal soon enough in their interpretation of this text the historical or ecclesial traditions that have influenced their reading. A theologian who listens to their expositions with an expert ear will catch the connections (a potentially annoying element of their craft). It is best to recognize this influence and be grateful for it, but also critical of it. Theology will play a role in both this appreciative and the critical process. Not that one can rid themselves of their ecclesial lens entirely, nor should they try. Pure biblicism, besides being impossible, tends to be arrogant, not giving credit to whom credit is due for their insights and looking down on all others for doing so. While recognizing the value and limits of our traditioned readings, there is a remarkable amount of unity that theologians from different denominations have found when gathering around a text in ecumenical discussions. This is what I have learned during my years of involvement in the ecumenical movement.[[24]](#footnote-24)

But, again, not all elements of tradition are helpful in one’s reading of the Bible. The Spirit through the scriptures can beckon us to view this text with fresh eyes, which becomes an occasion for church renewal. One can appreciate tradition without being bound to all elements of it. In the early centuries of the church, when appeal was made to the authority of the bishops to secure the proper interpretation of scripture against the Gnostics, tradition as taught by the bishops (especially through the rule of faith taught to catechumens) and preserved in the church’s worship was thought to be faithful to the core message of scripture. Tradition in this role was in those days called part of the church’s “canon” (standard) of truth. By the fourth century, when the Gnostic threat had largely passed, the New Testament canon, which had by this time gained widespread recognition as canonical, was regarded as foundational to the tradition of the church. Over 1000 years later, Luther rightly called upon the church to reassess its confidence that tradition will indeed always align itself with scripture. This challenge is essential to the ongoing renewal of the church and must not be neglected. The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church helpfully notes that the teaching office “is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit” (*Dei Verbum*, #10). What is missing, however, is the important point that the scriptures also serve a corrective function vis-à-vis tradition. The Catholic assumption at Vatican II is that no such correction will be needed. Rather, “Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God” (*Dei Verbum*, #10). One would like to think so! But unfortunately, such is not always the case. There is indeed a unity detectible between scripture and tradition in the gospel of Jesus Christ, but that unity is dependent on the faithfulness of tradition, which in every case is not simply to be assumed. The gospel exposes some elements of tradition to criticism. I am not intending to support the idea that the church as a whole ever defects entirely from Christ. The radical rejection of tradition on that scale is in my view sectarian and untenable. Though I would not defend the infallibility of tradition as a whole, I would hold to its indefectibility. Jesus promised to be with his church to the end of the age (Mt. 28:20).

*Historically Situated:*

The church’s witness is historically situated, and this includes the sacred scriptures. Being historically situated means that all that is said about God is mediated through the finite and socially-conditioned language and experience of the people talking. This insight changed the course of theology in the modern era, exposing the limitation of all God-talk when it comes to capturing the infinite mystery of God. As Wolfhart Pannenberg notes, “The historicity of human experience and reflection forms the most important limit of our human knowledge of God. Solely on account of its historicity all human talk about God unavoidably falls short of full and final knowledge of the truth of God.”[[25]](#footnote-25) It was through historicism or the understanding of the historically-situation nature of theology that theology was able to enter the academic arena in the European universities and beyond as a legitimate academic discipline. Historical criticism was applied to the Bible and to the history of Christian dogma in a way that exposed their historical conditioning and limitation. The point was taken to an extreme. Texts that were heralded as revealed by God were all taken down from their pedestal of absolute and pristine truth and were relativized as belonging to the complex history of religious ideas. Religion became the overarching rubric under which Christian theology was placed. The Bible was viewed as a narrative of Israelite and early Christian religion, an ancient and historically-conditioned effort to understand God and divine salvation. That which seemed irrelevant to modern sensibilities was called into question. Christian dogma was placed under the critical knife as well and pruned so as to become more relevant to current ways of thinking. Though this historicization of theology legitimated the place of theology in the university curriculum, it raised serious problems for the faith of the church.

How can we lay hold of infinite truth if we are trapped and conditioned by history? There are resources that the church has used to answer this question that did not call into question the truthfulness of the Bible. The first is the insight that all forms of human communication and conceptuality can be regarded as true but without simply equating it with God in some literal way. Our finitude and God’s infinity makes this one-to-one equation between our language and God’s infinite glory untenable. So it was argued that what we know and say is *analogous* to God and God’s ways. The term “analogy” means a description of God can be faithful to God but still not adequate to fully capture its fullness. Analogous language is true, but not ultimately true. Karl Barth called the human witness to God dialectical, meaning that God is disclosed through scripture but not in a way that places God at our disposal. The language of scripture is faithful in its witness to God but its language and conceptuality is finite, not adequate to capture God’s infinite glory, beauty, and transcendence. God must stoop down to reveal himself through the weakness of human expressions. Our witness to God in any point in time is also an analogy to God, a “parable” (*Gleichnis*) of God in the world, not simply to be equated with God but nevertheless true, as much as we can express that within our limited capacities. This parabolic nature of our witness should be viewed as a process by which we approximate God’s truth more and more, always calling our formulations and their accommodation to cultural forms of expression into question so as to root out alien and idolatrous elements. The witness of the church is always self-critical, always seeking ways to be more biblical, more articulate, more thorough in our witness.

What makes this self-corrective process possible is the Bible’s faithfulness to its gospel. The Bible reaches beyond its own historical conditioning in its loyalty to the God who acts, centrally and all-determinately in Jesus Christ as the Son of the Father and man of the Spirit. Jesus is the human face of God, the central hub of all biblical revelation. The fact that God occupies history and human language in the person of Jesus and acts through him so as to overcome sin and death and bring us into the fullness of the Spirit of life makes God as visible as we can endure with our limited minds. All that God communicates is mediated by history, meaning by human language and culture. But more needs to be said.

Revelation is not simply mediated by history, language, or culture in general, in the same way that all religion is mediated. The Bible is not just one sub-species of a general religious quest. Barth changed the course of modern theology with his notion of a “strange new world within the Bible.” For Barth, God alters history and language in the service of mighty acts of salvation that affect history and human experience in profound ways, in ways that create a strange and unprecedented “new world” within the biblical canon and within the church that is shaped by it. Though there are larger cultural influences detectible within this strange new world, they are bent and changed in the service to this larger narrative, this larger set of practices. This was no less true of Israel as it was of the church of Jesus Christ. Other religions undoubtedly claim the same for themselves. And I cannot deny that God has been involved on some level in their histories too (we will discuss this issue further under the topic of God). The decisive difference, however, is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If that event occurred, there is no other world of communication within another religion that can make the same claim as that which is made of the Christian canon and witness. There may be gospel light detectible in other religions but atonement takes place solely through Jesus Christ. Barth noted that in the light of that massive event and its centrality to the biblical canon, it would be inaccurate to claim that the Bible’s central subject matter is a general religious quest for God on par with all others. Rather, the Bible presents us with a strange new world in which God turns in grace to sinners, overcoming divine wrath so as to embrace them at the cross, in the resurrection, and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The “religion” of Israel is bound up with mighty deeds in history that foreshadow that event. That event is all defining. The language of the biblical text is shaped more fundamentally by that event than it is by the surrounding culture from which it came. This strange new world within the Bible uniquely shapes a society called the church which bears witness to Christ in numerous communicative practices that are shaped by this strange new world. Any actions that are alien to the grace of God revealed at the cross (to its compassion and merciful justice) are to be rebuked and rejected. Theology helps the church to better understand the narrative that shapes it and to call its practices (including that of the lives of its members) to account in the light of that narrative.

Barth’s strange new world within the Bible advocated what may be termed biblical “realism.” What this means is that the biblical narrative and teaching present divine actions in a way that is analogous to those actions but in a way that is nevertheless “realistic” or understandable on some level. What is to be avoided is the idea that the Bible is simply a collection of “symbols” that can be discarded if no longer relevant or radically reinterpreted so as to make them relevant again. For example, I cannot fully comprehend the reality of the incarnation of the eternal Son in flesh. Even the Chalcedonian “one person two natures” does not help much. Most of that creedal definition tells me what not to say but it is rather meagre conceptually as to what I should say. The Bible does indeed use symbolic language. In John 1:14, the eternal Son is said to “tabernacle” in flesh so that we can see his glory as the Israelites saw the glory of God in the Old Testament tabernacle. Divine glory in the tabernacle becomes a symbol of a mystery at the incarnation that my mind cannot fully fathom. But the symbolic nature of the narrative offers enough realism that I can still image what happened on some level. What is not an option is to equate that narrative with a larger religious mythology of gods becoming human (which on closer analysis is not what the biblical narrative is communicating) and dismiss the whole thing as ancient myth no longer credible to the modern mind. To rescue the tradition from cultural irrelevance, one then reverts to Jesus as aligned with divine love or as the key manifestation of “new Being” in God. The challenge is to use alternative language that is still fully faithful to the original symbolism that is used.

What all of this means is that theology must still be contextual. Though having its home base and foundational loyalty to the strange new world within the Bible and the church’s witness shaped by it, the church still uses socially conditioned language and other means of communication drawn from secular society. We have no choice but to do so. No matter how profoundly shaped we are but the strange new world we are shaped also by a larger use of language and set of experiences. The boundary between the church and the world cannot be so neatly drawn. This fact presents the church and theology in particular with a great challenge. As we will note, postliberalism limits the influence of secular context on theology. This school of thought argues that the language of the biblical narrative as interpreted by the church’s communicative practices so fundamentally shapes us and our experiences that it would be wrong to view the experiences of God in the church as simply a species of a larger cultural or religious phenomenon. Our language does not function with the same meanings as expressed in language in the world and our experiences in the church are not comparable to others in the world. The assumption is that communicative practices (especially but not exclusively language) are so basic to human experience and thinking that experience and thinking are only possible when they are expressed. We experience things as we bring them to expression and we experience them in ways shaped by the language and its community function. So, experience in the church is unique to the church’s communicative practices in interpretation of the biblical narrative, within the narrative’s strange new world. According to postliberalism, it is possible for people to bring into the church “alien” forms of expression and experiences which will then be transformed as they are socialized into the church’s narrative and interpretive practices. Still, this alien intrusion can create anomalies that influence the church’s practices and experiences. Thus, there is according to postliberalism a sense in which theology is contextual but not in a way that is robust and satisfactory to those not sharing its view of language in relation to experience. We will critique this approach to theology in a chapter within this section. Suffice it to say here that being communicative in the context of the world requires a profound understanding of people’s social use of language, cultural orientations, and experiences. Though we are to invite them to be socialized in the text and practices of the church, we also want them to be able to do so in a way that speaks to elements of their conditioning that they will carry with them and that will in some sense remain with them.

All human languages at Pentecost are indeed set ablaze by the risen Christ who died to bear their sin and death and to rescue them alienation. They are set ablaze, made to have a depth and eschatological reach they could never have had otherwise. But none of these languages are dissolved. They are delivered from the idolatry of the tower of Babel that occasioned their rise. And the fire will gradually sanctify those tongues so as to continuously deliver them from the idolatry that they functioned to justify. But the cultural history of those languages and their attendant experiences are not completely eradicated in their socialization in the biblical narrative and the communicative practices of the church. The reason is that God was involved in those histories and the concomitant experiences (Acts 17:26-28). God was involved so as to lead them to the Word of the Father to which the biblical narrative and the church’s practices bear witness.

1. No author, “Bible Salvation,” *The Apostolic Faith*, 1.3 (Nov. 1906), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The term “face” with reference to God is anthropomorphic, which describes a depiction of God in human terms or human form. All texts are anthropomorphic to some extent. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical-Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 582-600. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. C. H. Mason, “Tennessee Evangelist Witnesses,” *The Apostolic Faith*, 1.6 (Feb.-March, 1907), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Apologetics is the defense of the faith against heretics from within and challenges to the gospel from without. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The best account of this movement and its eventual waning is Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For example, Douglas A. Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020); Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012); Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and the Hope of Glory: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020); David B. Capes, Rodney Reeves, and Randolph Richards, *Rediscovering Paul: An Introduction to His World, Letters, and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017); James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997); Udo Schnelle, *The Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001); N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 Vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (100-600) (U. of Chicago Press, 1971), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Seymour, “The Apostolic Faith Movement,” *Apostolic Faith*, 1:1 (Sept., 1906): 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Both the Apostles and Nicene Creeds have God the Father as the first article, God the Son as the second article and God the Spirit as the third article. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. No author, *The Apostolic Faith*, 1.11 (Oct.-Jan. 1908): 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I refer here to Anselm’s classic, *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why the God-Man?). As we will explain under Christology, he explained the unity of the two natures, divine and human, in the one person of Christ heralded at Chalcedon by noting that the Redeemer who atones for us must be both divine (having the ability to pay humanity’s debt of honor to God) and human (having the obligation to do so). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Quoted in Heinrich Ott, “Protestant Reflections on the nature of the Church,” in Evin Valyi Nagy and Heinrich Ott, *Church as Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See John Webster, “The Dogmatic Location of the Canon,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 1.1 (2001): 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 2003), XV. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 52-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Michael J. Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 202–26. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 61–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Cullmann,[*Unity Through Diversity: Its Foundation, and a Contribution to the Discussion Concerning the Possibilities of Its Actualization*](https://www.amazon.com/Unity-Through-Diversity-Possibilities-Actualization/dp/080062047X/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Oscar+cullmann+unity&qid=1631422298&sr=8-1) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. I served for most of the first decade of the 2000’s on the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Christian Churches (USA) and on two bilateral conversations. The term “ecumenical” has to do with the effort to seek through dialogue and better understanding the spiritual and visible unity of the churches. There are different understandings of how that can be eventuated. See the section on the unity of the church in the section on ecclesiology. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)