

**Called to Believe, Teach, and Confess**  
*An Introduction to Doctrinal Theology*

***Called by the Gospel***  
**Introductions to Christian History and Thought**  
**From a Distinctly Lutheran Perspective**

Volume 1

*Called to be God's People: An Introduction to the Old Testament*  
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Volume 2

*Called by the Gospel: An Introduction to the New Testament*  
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Volume 3

*Called to Believe, Teach, and Confess:  
An Introduction to Doctrinal Theology*  
Steven P. Mueller, editor

Volume 4

*Called to be Holy in the World: An Introduction to Christian History*  
Timothy H. Maschke, editor

# **Called to Believe, Teach, and Confess**

*An Introduction to Doctrinal Theology*

Steven P. Mueller, editor

*Wipf & Stock*  

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P U B L I S H E R S  

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*Eugene, Oregon*

**CALLED TO BELIEVE, TEACH, AND CONFESS**  
An Introduction to Doctrinal Theology

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This book is gratefully dedicated  
to all who faithfully taught us the truth of God's word:  
our parents, pastors and teachers.



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Steven P. Mueller, editor  
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## Introduction

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6)

Our gracious God has revealed himself to us through Jesus Christ and in his word. He reveals our need for salvation and he reveals our Savior. Since we cannot save ourselves or even come to him by ourselves, he sends his Holy Spirit who calls us to faith, gathers us in the body of Christ, and keeps us in the faith throughout our lives. Through word and sacrament he daily forgives us, strengthens our faith, and blesses us. He helps us in this life, and because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, has promised eternal life and salvation to all who receive him.

This is the truth revealed by God and believed by his children. We hold it in our hearts and minds, teach it to one another, and confess it before all the world. This book examines these truths, providing a detailed examination of the major doctrines of the Christian faith. It seeks to offer an orderly presentation of biblical teaching that is articulated and applied in our twenty-first century context.

The authors of this book are all Lutheran pastors and professors. Together, we believe that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant word of God, and that its chief purpose is to reveal Jesus Christ to us: the world’s true and only redeemer. We believe that God’s word is the only infallible guide for Christian life and teaching. This book reflects these convictions.

We have made several assumptions about our readers. First, this book is written for an adult Christian audience. It aims to assist college students and other Christian adults, providing an aid for understanding and growth in knowledge and faith. It presumes an understanding of the central teachings of Christianity, and an awareness of the biblical text. Readers who lack this background may benefit from a more foundational approach to Christianity before reading this book. Similarly, those of a more advanced level may benefit from this book, but will also note that there are many other resources available for their continued study.

## **Reading Order**

With that understanding, we have followed an outline similar to that of the Ecumenical Creeds. After an initial discussion of theological method, we will address the doctrine of Scripture and its doctrines of Law and Gospel. Next we examine the doctrines of God, his creation, and humanity, and our sinfulness. With this contextual foundation laid, we consider the central doctrines of Christianity: the grace of God, the person and work of Christ, and his work of justification. After examining the work of the Holy Spirit as he brings us to faith and preserves us in that faith, we hear God's eternal plan for our life with him by studying the doctrine of election. Knowing that God has called us to faith, we examine our ongoing life in Christ in sanctification, the means of grace, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. We then examine our life of prayer, God's institution and blessings in the church, his institution of ministry, and the way that he has ordered our human relationships in society. Finally, we examine things which take place at the end of our own lives and at the end of this world. Any ordering of theology may have both advantages and disadvantages, since theology is not a grouping of isolated elements, but an organic whole. This is a serviceable order, but these topics may be placed in different orders as well.

You may, of course, choose to read these chapters in a different order. We recommend that you begin with chapter one, which addresses theological method and presuppositions. From that point, you may find it helpful to rearrange the chapters in your reading. It may be profitable, for example, to begin with the person and work of Jesus Christ and then move outward to other doctrines. You may jump immediately to topics that are of particular interest. Of course, it is helpful to remember that the chapters build on each other. You may need to read some other sections to provide a context for your topic. Thus, in various parts of the book, we have provided footnotes directing you to particularly relevant sections of other chapters.

## **Some Suggestions for Reading**

### *Reading the Bible with this Book*

Whatever order you read in, some basic notes are in order. The authors of this text have included a variety of references to the scriptures as well as references to the Lutheran Confessions and other books. These references,

particularly the biblical ones, are not simply documentary citations, but an integral part of the text. At times, a passage is directly quoted, at other times it is only cited. But we strongly encourage you to look up these verses, read them, and see for yourself. When you read these verses and see the context in which they were written, you will often gain a deeper understanding of the word of God and of its application to the doctrine you are studying. You may find it helpful to mark some of these passages in your Bible or to commit key verses to memory. Ideally, you will continually consult your Bible as you read this book. Unless otherwise noted, we have used the English Standard Version of the Bible for all quotations. You may wish to use this helpful translation or choose another version (or, if you are able, the original Hebrew and Greek), but make sure it is a reliable translation and not a paraphrase.

### *Reading the Lutheran Confessions with this Book*

This book is also linked with the summary of biblical doctrine found in the *Book of Concord*. Some portions of this book directly cite sections of these confessions of the Lutheran Church. Most chapters end with a list of readings from these confessions. (Page numbers listed are for the Kolb and Wengert translation of the *Book of Concord*, though standard references are also given so that you may read from other translations or from the original texts themselves.) If you choose to read these, you will read the entire *Book of Concord* by the time you have finished this text.<sup>1</sup> You should be aware that we have selected these passages in larger blocks, and assigned them to the chapters where they fit best. Thus there are references to additional doctrines in most of the readings. Likewise, this book did not attempt to provide every possible reference to a doctrine in these reading lists, rather it sought to provide significant sections of the confessions that address each teaching. Those who seek more information about the background, origins,

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<sup>1</sup> As you read the confessions, you should be aware that the Augsburg Confession was originally drafted in both German and Latin. While these texts are quite similar, there are some differences between them. Consequently, most editions of the *Book of Concord* translate both versions and include them together. Knowing how your version handles this will simplify your reading.

status, and authority of the confessions will find helpful introductions in the appendix to this book.

### *Additional Resources*

Like any other academic discipline, theology has developed a specific vocabulary. Some of the words will be familiar; others may be new to you and some may have a more precise meaning than you previously knew. Each chapter has identified some key terms, marked in bold in the text and listed at the end of the chapter. These terms are defined in the glossary, though you will likely find it beneficial to first define them yourself in the context of the chapter.

Each chapter also ends with some questions for review and discussion. These are starting points for your further study or for dialog with others. You will likely find ample topics for discussion or further study as you read. To aid in your further exploration, most chapters provide a brief list of additional resources that are good starting points for continued study. Additional works may be found in the bibliography.

### *Studying with Others*

You may be reading this book by yourself as part of your personal study. This can be a helpful method of theological reflection. You may also find it helpful to discuss the book, or topics from it, with other Christians. This may occur in a classroom setting, a Bible study, with a group of fellow believers, or in conversation with your friends or family. Talk to your pastor and to other mature Christians. Discuss theological issues with them (always being anchored in the word of God). As you share your insights together, as you read and apply God's word, you will all be blessed.

### *Reading as a Spiritual Discipline*

You may have picked up this book in order to understand a viewpoint (whether yours or someone else's). It may be the assigned textbook in a course. Perhaps you seek greater understanding. We are thankful for whatever caused you to start reading this book. Whatever your reason, we want you to know our purpose. Near the end of his Gospel, St. John wrote, "these [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of

God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). We do not claim inspiration for this text, but our purpose is the same. Proper theological study always directs us back to Jesus Christ and his salvation. This text may challenge you, but we pray that it will help you grow. We invite you to consider your reading as part of your life of discipleship. Pray that God uses this book to guide you in his truth. Read his word for the source of these teachings. Apply the truth of his word in your life. This is the truth that we believe, teach and confess. God bless you as you join us in exploring his truth.





# 1

## The Task of Theology

What comes to mind when you hear the word “theology”? Some people think theology is simply an academic discipline like biology or history. Others may be suspicious, having encountered different “theologies” that may or may not reflect the truth of the Bible. Some consider it to be a dry, boring, or complicated abstraction that talks about God but may not seem to know him personally. Perhaps you think that it suggests a deep understanding, a wrestling with the riches of God’s word, or a vibrant and thoughtful faith. Any of these reactions may be understandable, but what is theology? How does it go about its work? To answer these questions, this chapter will consider:

1. The Nature of Theology — *What is theology?*
2. The Divisions of Theology — *The major subparts of theological studies*
3. Formal and Material Principles in Theology — *The ultimate source of information and the central teaching assist in understanding a theological position*
4. Common Sources of Theological Information — *How do people try to get information from God and about God?*
5. Systematic Theological Method — *How is the work of theology done?*
6. Ordering Systematic Theology — *Does the order in which we present doctrine affect its meaning?*
7. The Practical Nature of Theology — *Applications of theological work*

## 1. The Nature of Theology

While “theology” can mean different things to different people, its essential meaning is “words about God.” Christian **theology** is the study of God as he reveals himself. It includes all of his actions toward his creation and specifically his purpose, plan, and will for his children. The study of theology includes topics such as who God is, the origin of the universe, the human condition, God’s gracious response in Christ, and the Christian life. It studies how God has been and ever will be involved in our past, present and future. While theology may consider ways in which mankind has responded to God, it is focused on him. Almighty God himself is the subject of true theology.

### *The Purposes of Theology*

#### *Faith and Salvation*

Christian theology seeks to understand the things that God has revealed to us and how this revelation applies in our lives and world. Therefore, its primary goal is to proclaim the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ faithfully. True theology points to the Savior. It is not simply a list of things God has said, a biography of Christ, or a history of the church. It certainly is not merely a record of things that people have done or said in God’s name. Theology serves our Lord and his Gospel. Every teaching relates, in some way, to our salvation in Christ. St. John summarized the purpose of his Gospel, saying he wrote so that, “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). Likewise, this is the purpose of theology: to communicate the saving Gospel to us and to nurture us in faith.

#### *Growth in Knowledge and Understanding of God*

A further application of God’s truth is seen in theology’s second purpose. As we study and seek to understand God’s truth, we grow in our knowledge and understanding of him and his word. We learn to read and better understand the Scriptures. We grow in our understanding of his will and ways. The child of God thirsts for a greater knowledge of our Lord (1 Peter 2:2-3). This is not merely knowledge of facts and information, but a deep, intimate, personal knowing. While we will learn more facts, ideas, and

concepts found in the Bible, we will most importantly learn to know God better.

Part of the way we know him better is by growing in our knowledge and understanding of biblical truth. What would God have us know? What does his word teach about various topics? How are we to apply these things in our world today? All of this is part of the purpose of theology. It proclaims the whole counsel of God — his Law and his Gospel — to humanity.

### *Is This Simple or Difficult?*

Christianity in general, and theology in particular, is sometimes accused of two contradictory things. Some look at the Christian faith and complain that it is too simple. There is an element of truth in this distorted judgment. The Christian faith is simple enough that a young child can proclaim its truth (while he, and even younger infants, may live in a relationship of faith with their God). A toddler may confess her faith that Jesus died and rose for her. This is Christianity. To be sure, there are more things to learn, many topics and themes to study, but at the very heart of it all is the love of God demonstrated in Christ Jesus. Christianity is simple: it is about God's relationship with people. While we never want to lose this childlike faith (Mark 10:15), at the same time we do not want to restrict our growth to this central statement alone. We are called to grow in knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:5). If we avoid opportunities for growth, we should not complain that we find Christianity too simple. The problem lies not with Christianity but with our ignorance of the richness of God's word. Christianity is simplistic only if we limit our study and do not hear the entirety of God's word.

On the other hand, you have probably encountered a challenging biblical passage or a particular Christian teaching and struggled to understand its meaning and application. Some biblical doctrines are challenging. When we discover a difficult teaching, our temptation is to quickly give in and complain, "it can't be this complicated!" There are challenging and complicated teachings in Scripture because God's word addresses people who live in a challenging and complicated world. We are finite human beings with limited understanding and the ways of God are beyond our full comprehension. We are described, after all, as children, and he is our Father. Furthermore, our understanding is affected by our lives of sin. If we were not sinners and if we did not live in a fallen world, we would not find these teachings so hard. But the truth is that, in this earthly life, we will struggle to understand some teachings.

Is Christianity too simple or too complex? Both of these judgments are faulty. The Christian faith is simple enough for a child to articulate, and the

most learned Christian will never forsake that childlike faith and knowledge since it is sufficient for salvation (Luke 18:17). But Christianity is not simplistic. The teachings of God's word help us through even the most challenging and confusing issues of life. God has given us his word for a lifetime of Christian growth and understanding. The child of God who comes to the Scriptures in faith will not exhaust their riches (Romans 11:33). We will not run out of things to study or learn in the word of God. It has all that we need for a lifetime of discipleship in Christ.

### *The Limits of Theology*

#### *Reliance on God's Revelation*

Theology presents the teachings of God to human beings, but we must recognize that theology has limits. Theology is not to invent new doctrines or modify the Scriptures. We are to confess the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) without adding to it or taking away from it. In fact, the final chapter of the book of Revelation sternly warns against this very temptation (Revelation 22:18-19). Changing the word may yield results that are more pleasing to the world, but it soon becomes only our word and not God's word.

The true Christian theologian confesses with St. Paul that as we read the Scriptures, we "know in part" (1 Corinthians 13:9). In his word, God reveals to us everything we need to know for our salvation. He has not, however, told us everything we might want to know about other topics. The Christian may well have questions about items that are not addressed in Scripture. If God's word is silent on an issue, we are free to speculate, to wonder, and to guess what might be, but we are never given license to answer in God's name when God himself has not told us his answer. We dare not put our fallible words in his mouth. When Scripture is truly silent, the theologian needs to have the integrity to admit, "I don't know."

To be sure, there are a number of topics that are not directly addressed in Holy Scripture. It may, however, indirectly address an issue or address elements of a question. A child of God will search the Scriptures to see if it does, in fact, address a topic in these ways. When the Scriptures speak to an issue, whether directly or indirectly, a good theologian will proclaim these truths.

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## 2. The Divisions of Theology

By now you have probably realized that the work of theology may be an enormous task. If we are to understand the revelation of God and how it is to be applied to our human condition, we must master a wide variety of material. Because there are so many things addressed in Christian theology, it is ordinarily divided into four major divisions or disciplines.

The first division is generally known as **exegetical theology** (or exegesis). Exegetical theology is specifically involved with reading and interpreting the word of God. It studies the Scriptures in the original biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and considers principles of translation and interpretation (known as “**hermeneutics**”). The question of **canon** (which books are included and excluded from Scripture and the reasons for this) is a related area of study. Exegetical theology examines the context of the biblical world through history, geography, and archaeology so that the biblical text can be better understood. It researches and provides introductions and background to the biblical books (including issues like authorship, date of composition, and purpose of the book), and seeks to understand the meaning of particular books and passages of Scripture. There is no true theology without careful exegesis. Since this is the starting point for all theological work, every theologian, regardless of other interests or specialties, needs to be involved with exegesis. While some simply call this work “biblical studies” this name can be misleading, for the other divisions of theology are also concerned with the biblical text.

The second division of theology is **systematic theology**. This area of study takes the knowledge gained by exegetical study of the Scriptures (and perhaps other areas of theological study) and organizes it into a “system” or unified whole. While exegesis starts by interpreting individual passages and books, systematics seeks to examine and understand teachings from all of Scripture that apply to a given topic. For example, many different passages of the Bible apply to the topic of baptism. Systematics will consider them all and organize them so that we get an overall view of what Christianity teaches about this topic. Many of the theological questions we ask are systematic questions. We want to know what the Bible teaches about sin, justification, or the Lord’s Supper. These are systematic questions that build on the work of exegetical theology. This book, a topical consideration of Christian teaching, is a work of systematic theology

Systematic theology may be further divided into more focused specialties. **Dogmatics** is the presentation of one’s own doctrine — teachings that a person or church believes to be true. Because of this, much of what is called systematic theology, including this book, is dogmatic theology. In addition to

*Other Ways of Dividing Theology*

These four theological disciplines are the most common ways of organizing the work of theology. There are, however, other divisions that might be identified by further dividing these areas or by expanding the subject to include comparisons with other religions or academic disciplines. Some further divisions include missiology (the study of the global mission of the church), philosophical theology (which studies the interaction of theology with non-revealed theological sources and disciplines), and mystical theology (often termed “spiritual theology” or “spirituality”). While any of these or many other theological subdivisions may be defensible, this book focuses on the most common divisions.

a presentation of what the writer believes to be true, dogmatic theology often includes a refutation of false doctrine. Theology that focuses on the refutation of false teachings is known as **polemical theology**. One may also organize another church’s teaching, or the teaching of another religion, into a systematic presentation. This work (often called “comparative religions”) may simply describe the teachings of others or it may offer a response. Closely related to this is a study known as **symbolics** which examines the formal confessional statements (or “symbols”) of various churches. Another subpart of systematics is **apologetics** a discipline that defends the Christian faith against its critics and shows historic, scientific, and logical evidence supporting the truthfulness of Christianity. Some theologians also include the study of **ethics**

as part of systematics. Ethics studies the way in which theology (and other things) informs and shapes decisions, actions, and behavior. (Ethics may also be placed under practical theology). All of these disciplines are part of the orderly presentation of the Christian faith in systematic theology.

The third major division of theology is **historical theology**. This discipline examines different theological movements, churches, groups and people of the past. In essence, it looks to understand the church of the past as it lived the Christian faith (or as it deviated from orthodox Christianity). It traces the history of God’s people from early times to the present day, and considers controversies and challenges faced by the church.

The fourth theological discipline is **practical theology**. Because the first three disciplines are all meant to be applied in practice, this fourth category is sometimes called pastoral theology or applied theology. This discipline takes the insights of all the other areas and seeks to apply them in the lives of the people of God today. It may focus on preparing and deliver-

ing sermons (**homiletics**), on the theology, content, and conduct of worship (**liturgics**), on the outreach and mission of the church (**missiology**), on Christian education, counseling, nurture, or any number of other applied disciplines.

Note that these four areas of theology do not conduct their work in isolation from each other. Indeed, there is significant overlap between them. An exegete looking at one passage of Scripture will likely consider how it relates to other parts of Scripture, how the Christian church has formulated its doctrine, how other exegetes have understood it in the past and present, and how it might be proclaimed effectively in a sermon. A systematician works with the biblical text, analyzing and organizing it, considering historical uses of that text and doctrine, and seeking to apply its teaching in the life of the church. Every theologian will do work in all of these areas, but may also specialize or focus his work in one particular area.

### **3. Formal and Material Principles in Theology**

There are, of course, many different theologies, movements and denominations in the Christian church. Part of the task of theology is to consider and evaluate these differences and the reason for the differences. Religions are complex systems of thought with many different teachings and practices that might distinguish them from other religions. How might we begin comparing disparate systems? Many things might be compared, but a good place to start is with two foundational topics that are usually called the formal principle and the material principle.

The **formal principle** is concerned with the source of information and the means of making decisions. How can one get authoritative information about a belief system? How are questions to be answered? If there is a debate among believers, how should the issue to be settled? Many religions point to a sacred text as at least part of their formal principle. But, as we will see shortly, there are other sources of information that also may influence theology.

The **material principle** is the core belief or most important teaching. A well-stated material principle summarizes the essence of a belief system in one phrase. The concept sounds simple, but many people have trouble stating their faith so succinctly. And some who can state their material principle clearly find it difficult to define their formal principle. While these are not a complete presentation of a theological position, they provide a quick summary of its core principles.

#### 4. Common Sources of Theological Information

The material principle is derived from the formal principle. In other words, one's source of theological information is going to affect the conclusions that are reached about God, his relationship with humanity, and other issues. So what is the source of theological information? When the theological arguments and method of various groups and religions are analyzed, some patterns start to emerge. Five different sources of religious information are commonly used: Scripture, reason, human authority, tradition, and experience.<sup>1</sup> These sources may be used individually or in combination. We see these used in various Christian theologies. Indeed, if they are interpreted a little more broadly, they may be seen in virtually any religion. The sources of information employed will shape and influence the theological conclusions that are derived from them.

##### *Scripture*

The first major source of religious information is Scripture. Most (but not all) religions have a written, authoritative source of some type, and most of these consider their sacred writings to have some degree of divine authority. For Christians, of course, that source is the Bible. You may be wondering why it has taken so long to make such an obvious point. Ask a Christian how he gets information about God, and the answer that will likely be given is, "from the Bible." It is a common answer, but is it true? Is this really a complete answer? Simply saying that we get our information from the Bible raises other questions: which books belong in the Bible and which ones do not? For example, is the **Apocrypha** to be included? This question of the biblical canon divides some Christians who accept either more or fewer books than we are expecting. Other questions are likewise significant. Is the Bible considered to be a trustworthy source of information or is it read with suspicion? Is it inerrant or does it contain mistakes? Is it entirely the word of God, are only portions of it God's word, or is it simply a human document? Is it authoritative in translation or only in its original languages? How is it to be interpreted? All of these questions must be considered, as they will affect

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<sup>1</sup>The study of how one acquires information in any field is known as **epistemology**. These basic sources of information are recognized by many different theologians. There is some disagreement over which ones should be combined and which distinct. For example, some systems will not list human authority as a separate source, choosing to include it under tradition. These differences, however, are more structural than substantial. The basic sources remain the same.



the use and meaning of Scripture. (We will address these questions in detail in chapter two of this book). Despite these further questions, Scripture is clearly a major source of religious information for many people. Of course, non-Christian religions may also be based on their own scriptures. These religions have to answer the same sort of questions that Christianity does.

### *Reason*

A second major source of religious information is reason. Some theologies welcome and encourage the unrestricted use of reason, others are cautious of its use, and a few seem to reject it. Yet every religion makes some use of reason. Even if a religion has scripture alone as its formal principle, reason is used to read that scripture, interpret, understand, organize, and present its content. Others may give human reason and logic a more decisive role. There are individuals who simply will not believe something to be true if it cannot be “proven” true (though their standards of proof may be quite different for various types of information). Some will reject teachings if they cannot make sense of them. Others will seek a combination of Scripture and reason in their theology.

Because reason can be granted different levels of authority, theologians often distinguish between a “**magisterial**” use of reason and a “**ministerial**” use of reason. This distinction comes into play whenever there appears to be a difference between the content of the Scriptures and the conclusions of reason. A magisterial use of reason places reason above the Scriptures. If there is a conflict, Scripture is generally assumed to be in error and the conclusion of reason is followed. A ministerial use of reason subjects the conclusions of reason to scriptural

The apocrypha includes twelve books:

1&2 Esdras

Tobit

Judith

Additions to Daniel:

The Prayer of Azariah

The Song of the Three  
Youths

Susanna

Bel and the Dragon

Additions to Esther

The Prayer of Manasseh

The Epistle of Jeremiah  
Baruch

Ecclesiasticus

The Wisdom of Solomon

1&2 Maccabees

Martin Luther included these books in his German Bible, saying that they were not on the same level as Scripture but were still useful and good to read (see *Luther's Works* 35:232).

authority. If they are in conflict, Scripture prevails. At issue is the trustworthiness of reason. Can we trust ourselves to make correct decisions and draw logical conclusions from our mental abilities? While some put a great deal of trust in their reason, others note that reason itself is part of our fallen human nature. Our reasonable capabilities have been affected by our human sinfulness and so may not be as trustworthy as some think! Furthermore, unassisted reason may not have access to sufficient data to make theological conclusions if it is not drawing on other sources of information.

### *Human Authority*

A third source of knowledge is human authority. Many people are predisposed to mistrust human authorities, tending to be suspicious of other people telling us what to think or believe. There are good reasons to be cautious, particularly if we rely on the judgment of authorities uncritically without considering their fallibility or the way in which they themselves are acquiring information. In other words, some authorities may be using the same sources that we would use, but without our awareness of the sources. On the other hand, there are times when we must be reliant on the more educated judgment of others. A person cannot be an expert in every area of life and knowledge — even in theological issues. We can learn from others who have studied particular issues more deeply than we have.

Certainly much of our early knowledge comes from human authorities. Our parents and families generally have considerable influence on us, particularly in religious matters. Pastors, teachers, writers and even friends all are used authoritatively by various people. The position of one's church is often an authority that people rely upon. We ought not dismiss these sources because they function authoritatively, but we should be wary of judgments that are made only on authority. What are the sources that lie behind their authoritative position, and is there sufficient reason to trust their authority?

### *Tradition*

A fourth major source of information is tradition. Tradition allows past teachers, practices or experiences to inform and possibly influence the present and future. An awareness of history and tradition allows believers who have gone before us in time to have a voice today. It also reminds us that we are not the first Christians. Others have faced similar issues and questions before us, and they can be a resource to us. The precedent of the past often influences the way we think and act — frequently without our awareness.

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Some Christians are particularly open to tradition as a source of knowledge, others are notably skeptical of tradition. If we feel ourselves bound to do something *only* because it has been done before, we are experiencing **traditionalism**. This position tends to accept actions of the past rather uncritically. In contrast, a healthy attitude towards tradition can ground us in the historic expression and practice of our faith. The collective and corporate experience of the church is remembered, honored, and may make a helpful contribution through tradition. An awareness of history and tradition may allow us to see issues from a perspective that is different than our own—thereby allowing us to see beyond our own “blind spots.”

We may notice the influence of tradition most clearly when it is an unfamiliar tradition or one that we do not appreciate. We may be less than enthusiastic about a previously unknown tradition. Yet we should recognize that we all are influenced by tradition. We may see them in worship, liturgy, and prayer. Their impact may be more obvious in our commemoration of holidays or in the practice of a devotional activity. But, as with authority, we are wise to consider the rationale and justification that undergirds a tradition. Why was this first taught or practiced? What was the original reason for doing this? Is there a good reason this tradition has been preserved? Does this practice still commend itself to us?

### *Experience*

The final source of theological information that is often used is experience. Like it or not, our experiences influence how we think, understand, and feel. We are more likely to believe something that we have seen for ourselves, and we tend to be skeptical of things that we have not personally experienced. As with reason, experience can be used in service to other sources or seek to reign over them. Our theology can help us interpret and understand our experiences, or our experiences may shape and change our theology.

It is easy to let ourselves be affected by our experience. Consider how many people make moral decisions based not on Scripture but on their feelings. If something feels good or seems to have been effective for a friend, we may try to justify it even if our religion teaches otherwise. Our experiences are important to us, but we should remember that they are never complete. We were not present when God created the world, when Christ rose from the grave, or when the Spirit descended at Pentecost. We were not eyewitnesses to many major historical events. If our direct experiences judge these events, we may doubt them. But we do not always let our experience judge other areas of our lives. I have never flown in space, given birth to a child or visited

*Worship and Belief*

In the fifth century, a monk named Prosper of Aquitaine put forth the principle that “the rule of worship becomes the rule of faith” (*lex orandi lex credendi*). In other words, the things we do and say in worship will impact the content and understanding of

our faith. For an example, consider how often Christians quote hymn verses or portions of songs, believing that they are from Scripture. Of course, it is also true that one may examine and adjust their worship practices in light of their belief.

Antarctica, yet I do not doubt that astronauts have gone into space, I know that childbirth can be painful, and I have no doubt that Antarctica exists. Our experience can mislead us if we put too much trust in it. And we must never forget that our experiences are constantly affected by our sinfulness.

Still, experience exerts an influence on our theology. The things we do and say in worship may influence and even move us to modify our theology. Whether we realize it or not, we tend to view all other times through the lens of our own times and experiences. We expect others to have the same experiences that we do. We are skeptical of things that we have not experienced ourselves. Perhaps this is why our Savior teaches us, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

*Evaluation, Priority, and Use of the Sources*

All five of these sources can shape and inform a person’s theology. In fact, each one of us feels the influence of them all, whether we admit it or not. We may realize that some of these are more helpful than others. We may see weaknesses and strengths in different sources, but all are operative in our world and exert an influence on our theology. The question that must be answered is which will make up our formal principle? If different sources provide different information, which one will we trust and follow above all others?

Lutheran theology insists that Holy Scripture must be the source of our theology and the standard by which we evaluate all theology. This is often summarized with the great Reformation principle, *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone). We thank God for our reasonable capabilities, but recognize that our reason is limited and affected by sin. When God’s word and our reason are

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in conflict, we follow the word. God has given us various authorities, but their authority is subject to his word and truth. Tradition and experience likewise must be normed by Scripture. But having said this, we are wise to remember that we will not be free of the influence of these other sources. Our reason, experience and the rest of the sources all clamor for our attention. The question is whether we will allow them to distract us from the truth of the word, or whether we will let God's truth be our final guide.

### *Knowledge of These Sources Helps Explain Divisions*

We want to be aware of these influences and subject all other sources of information to the truth of God's word. At the same time, an awareness of these sources is helpful as we consider the beliefs of other religious groups. Christians are frequently perplexed by divergent beliefs of various denominations. How can these groups believe different things when we all have the same Bible? Much of the reason for such divisions and differing teachings is related to the importance of other sources of information. Not all denominations agree that Scripture is the only source and standard of doctrine. Some give equal or greater status to one or more of the other sources. Knowing this will help us understand the differences.

This does not mean that we should be satisfied with those divisions, but it gives us a starting point for dialog. When we know what others use as a foundation of knowledge we will be better able to understand and discuss their position and our own. This is particularly important when we consider the teachings of non-Christian groups. Understanding their theological presuppositions may enable us to present the Gospel more effectively to them.

Of course the divisions cannot be fully explained by considering the sources of information. False doctrine is not merely a matter of misunderstanding; it involves human sinfulness and rebellion against God. It is not only an intellectual matter but also a spiritual problem that calls for God's solution in Christ.

## **5. Systematic Theological Method**

Knowing one's sources of information is an important principle. The work of theology is only beginning, however, when sources and presuppositions are acknowledged. We believe that the Scriptures are the source of true theology, but how is that theology formulated?

We often simply go about the work of theology without considering our method. This does not mean that we do not have a method, but we may not be consciously considering what steps we are taking in our theological work.

A method of theological work is simply a tool to organize information and assist our understanding. A thoughtful and consistent method can guide us in taking vital steps and examining relevant details in our theology. When we are clear about the method we are following, we demonstrate not only what we believe but also the basis for that doctrine. This allows others to follow our thinking and to better evaluate whether it is biblically grounded. A theological method does not mean that everyone will follow the same steps exactly or say everything in precisely the same way. It does not necessitate a “theological lock-step,” but it does allow us to communicate the work that we are doing, and it helps us to articulate our positions more clearly.

The following is a fairly typical description of a method of systematic theology for one who views Scripture as the formal principle. There may be minor variations in the order of certain items. At times a person using this method may spend significantly more time on one point than another, but in general, this describes how this work might be conducted.

### *Preliminary Steps*

#### *Be Aware of Presuppositions*

First, the theologian will seek to be aware of his own presuppositions. What are we assuming as this work is begun? It is no use pretending that we have no preconceptions or presuppositions. If we try to ignore them, they continue to exert their influence, but without evaluation. Nobody really approaches any question as a “blank slate.” So the theologian evaluates his own preconceptions. At this stage, an orthodox Lutheran theologian would reiterate the belief that the Bible is the inspired word of God and is the only infallible source of doctrine. We remember to use sound principles of biblical interpretation. A Lutheran will particularly want to remember that the main purpose of Scripture is to proclaim Christ as our Redeemer. We know that all of Scripture is organized around two great doctrines, the Law and the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> Depending on the issue being considered, other presuppositions would be recognized as well. This exercise may not be explicitly repeated every time one begins a theological study, but this awareness is vital and ought to be repeated regularly.

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<sup>2</sup> See chapter 2, “Law and Gospel.”

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*Form a Question*

Having considered presuppositions, the next step is to formulate and refine a question to be studied. Theological questions arise from a variety of sources. We may be curious about a topic, a challenge may arise in the church, or a friend may ask us a question. Personal Bible reading may reveal a topic that we had not considered before. Whatever its origins, we now have a question. “What does God teach us about this topic?” Or “how is the Christian to respond to this issue.” This question begins to focus attention on the issue at hand. The more specific the question, the more helpful and focused the answer can be. As we formulate the question to be studied, it may become apparent that it really is several questions combined. The various elements of the question may all need to be considered.

*Actual Method**Search the Scriptures*

Now we are ready to begin the real work of theology. With a clear question in mind we turn our attention to our primary source of information: the Holy Scriptures. We are not truly engaged in the work of theology until we hear the voice of God in his word. What does the Bible teach about this? We could begin to read the word from Genesis to Revelation, but this would be extremely time-consuming and not focused on the main question. Instead, we often use tools like **concordances** which list all the Bible passages that use a particular word. This immediately presents a challenge. Which words should be examined? Will this topic be found listed under one word or is there more than one that applies? For example, if we are studying “Jesus” (a very large topic), we would not only look up that name but also God, Lord, Savior, Son of Man and many other words. Even if we think of every word that might be used by Scripture, there may be other passages that are relevant that do not use the same words. For example, the Bible reveals the Holy Trinity but the word “Trinity” is not to be found in a concordance. All the relevant passages need to be examined, read, and understood in context. We might also find another thing in our examination of the Scriptures. We may discover that the question we were asking is in itself misleading or not in accord with the word of God. Exposure to the biblical text may challenge our questions and our presuppositions while it provides us further information.

*Organize Your Findings*

Having gathered the relevant biblical materials, we next begin to organize the materials into a coherent whole. How do these passages relate to each other? How are they related to justification, the central teaching of the Bible? How can this biblical data best be presented so that we see a clear, consistent, unified presentation of the overall teaching of Scripture? There may be more than one way to organize and present the same biblical doctrine. Depending on the application, different theologians may emphasize different aspects of the doctrine and cite different passages. While we want to include the full biblical teaching, we will likely focus on representative sections of Scripture that teach a particular point, rather than trying to list and discuss every single incidence.

*Compare to Other Trustworthy Studies*

Some may be satisfied to stop their work here. If sound hermeneutical principles have been employed and if we have truly considered the full biblical teaching on our topic, we will have formulated a summary of scriptural teaching. We will likely find it helpful, however, to do a bit more work. These preliminary findings may be compared to other trustworthy theological works. Comparing one's work to other studies may reveal biblical teachings that have been overlooked. It may model a clearer presentation of the same teachings. It may give voice to the theological understandings and formulations of the historic Christian church. This comparison may also show us ways in which this doctrine has been misapplied or taught incorrectly in the past. We certainly want to avoid such errors.

Various sources may be consulted for this comparison. Perhaps they are other doctrinal books. Theologians who subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions will naturally examine the teachings of the Creeds and Confessions. (Before subscribing to them, one will have first compared their teachings with the scriptural teachings.<sup>3</sup>) One may consider the writings of the early church fathers or of other major teachers of the Christian faith. Of course we will not blindly follow the conclusions of other sources without evaluating their teaching and method. We must consider their faithfulness to the Scriptures and their theological biases.

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<sup>3</sup> See the Appendix, "The Lutheran Confessions" for more information on the relationship between Scripture and the Confessions.



It may be tempting to look at these sources and present doctrine as something that is gradually evolving and growing, but this is an inadequate description of true theology. Faithful theologians may find new insights, but they do not add doctrines to the Christian faith. The teachings of Scripture have all been believed, taught, and confessed by generations of Christians before us. Yet the context of the church is constantly changing. We respond to new challenges and apply the word in new situations. So our articulation of the truth may emphasize certain points more clearly than in past generations, while still confessing the same biblical truth.

It is sometimes said that as time passes, the world discovers more questions and situations that make our knowledge less certain. According to this view, there is more “gray area” than there was in years past. Certainly we live in times that can be confusing, but theologically, passing time often brings a greater level of precision to theology. As the church answers heretics, teaches skeptics, and responds to controversies, her articulation of doctrine grows more precise. So in many ways, there is less theological “gray area” than there has been in the past. Our understanding is more focused.

If this comparison with other theological works has revealed areas that need further research or a clearer presentation, we back up to the appropriate place in the method and conduct the necessary work. This is a common occurrence.

### *Contrast with Errors*

A presentation of Christian doctrine seeks to clearly express the truth of God’s word. We must remember, however, that there are often competing teachings that contradict true Christian doctrine. While we do not want to become obsessed with errors and heresies, it is important to identify and refute major positions that are opposed to true doctrine. From the earliest creeds, Christians have both confessed what they believe and rejected false

### *Error or Heresy?*

Errors and heresies are both false teaching, but the distinction is important. A heresy is a persistent error relating to a central Christian doctrine. When confronted with biblical evidence, a heretic refuses correction. Heresies undermine the true Christian faith and, for this reason, place one’s salvation in jeopardy.

teachings. St. Paul taught that an overseer (or pastor) “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9).

This is particularly important when we live in an age of religious **pluralism**. We cannot ignore those who distort God’s word and mislead God’s people. Sometimes these false teachings will be obvious. For example, we may easily recognize the heresy of someone who denies the deity of Christ. However, theological errors are often more subtle. A cultist knows that Christians will recognize overt denials of biblical doctrine, but a modified or twisted teaching might be harder to detect. For this reason, a faithful discussion of Christian doctrine must recognize and refute major errors. It is easier to avoid errors when we are familiar with common mistakes and heresies. Furthermore, knowledge of these errors may better equip us to communicate the truth to those who do not know it.

### *Articulate and Apply the Doctrine*

By this point, a statement of theology is virtually complete, but the work of theology is not done. Theology is not a merely academic discipline. We do not research theological issues simply to answer abstract questions. Christian theology is a practical discipline — it is meant to be applied. We are to use the theological insights that have been found. How does this teaching work out in practice? How will it be preached, proclaimed, or taught? How does it apply to the people of God in Law and Gospel? We

don’t judge the truth of the teaching by “how useful” it is, or by what we can do with it. Nonetheless, theology is meant to be applied and used in the life of the Christian and the church. As we apply teachings, we will doubtlessly encounter more issues and situations that will prompt further questions. Then the process of researching the new question begins again.

This is the overall method of theology. There are many times when shortcuts are taken. We may rely on the trusted judgment of others who have summarized biblical teaching. We may read the doctrinal conclusions of a writer or a church and receive it as our

*Summary:  
Basic Steps of  
Doctrinal Research*

Be aware of  
presuppositions  
Form a question  
Search the Scriptures  
Organize your findings  
Compare to other  
trustworthy studies  
Contrast with errors  
Articulate and apply the  
doctrine

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own. Yet we must continually ask ourselves if these conclusions are valid, if the theology is biblically grounded and true. We need to return again and again to the source of God's word. Each generation must undertake this work of theology for itself, going back not simply to the conclusions of the past, but to the word of God.

### *Some Challenges*

#### *The Silence of Scripture*

There are a number of challenges that may arise in conducting this work. One of them is the silence of Scripture. While the Bible addresses many issues directly, others are addressed implicitly or in part. Additionally, there are issues relating to life in this world that are not addressed by Scripture. If we take our eyes off the word and are more concerned with our emerging doctrinal system, we may be uncomfortable with these "gaps" (often called **lacunae** or "**open questions**") in the biblical account. Christians must resist the temptation to fill in the gaps of Scripture with their own ideas or hypotheses. If Scripture is truly silent, we do not impose our guesses on the text. In such a case, we lack the means to give a definitive answer on that particular subject, and so should not substitute our word for God's word. Of course, we want to be careful not to ignore the teachings of Scripture. If it really does speak, we need to uphold that truth.

#### *Paradox*

A second challenge is the presence of **paradox** in Scripture. The divine teachings are sometimes greater than our limited humanity can grasp. There are times when Scripture proclaims two truths that *appear* to be opposed in our human logic.<sup>4</sup> For example, Scripture teaches that there is one God, yet the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all God. The doctrine of the Trinity is a paradox. Is God three or is God one? Our minds may want to choose, but Scripture teaches both truths. We are not to sit in judgment of the word, but to proclaim both truths. God is three in one, the holy Trinity.<sup>5</sup> When Scrip-

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<sup>4</sup> If two statements are, in fact, mutually exclusive, they are not a paradox but a contradiction. Scripture does not contradict itself, but it does include paradoxes. These paradoxes need to be examined carefully in the light of the Scriptures so that we uphold all that God teaches us without treating it as a contradiction or denying part of the teaching.

<sup>5</sup> For more detail on the Trinity, see chapter 4. Some other examples of paradoxes that the human mind finds challenging include the personal union of a human

ture truly presents a paradox, we maintain the whole teaching of the word without removing any of the truth to fit our logical desires.

### *Descriptive Language*

A third challenge that may arise has to do with the nature of language. Much of the language that we use each day uses descriptions, comparisons, and other figures of speech. Humans communicate, in part, by means of analogy. These ordinary tools of communication can be helpful tools to communicate abstract and difficult topics. We want to be careful, however, that we do not become so attached to human illustrations that we allow the examples to eclipse or alter the true teachings. Illustrations may be helpful, but they have their limits. When we are overly reliant on our own examples (allowing them to replace biblical texts), we risk substituting our own ideas for God's truth. On the other hand, we do not want to dismiss the language that God has chosen as his own description of himself and his truth. The first person of the Trinity is not a human male, but he has chosen to call himself Father. We are not free to discard his own self-description. We should try to illustrate and explain ourselves in language that truly communicates, but we must not remove God's own examples from the word. Finally, we should recognize that Scripture often uses many different images. Perhaps we stress only a few while neglecting others. We should not be critical of those who employ other biblical imagery.

We will also discover that Christians who have gone before us have developed a specialized vocabulary to talk about theological issues. Every academic and professional discipline has its own technical vocabulary that allows it to communicate with more precision. If a person does not know this vocabulary, the language can seem alien and difficult to understand. Because theology presents God's truth, we should be particularly concerned that our language be as accessible as possible. It may be that the same subject can be described without using such difficult vocabulary. When this is possible, this book endeavors to use more ordinary language. However, we still should try to learn and use the more technical language of theology. It has been chosen because it allows us to be more careful, precise, and accurate. These words often carry more information than may appear at first glance.

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and divine nature in Christ (chapter 9), the simultaneous existence of the child of God as sinner and saint (chapter 15), and the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lords Supper in, with, and under the bread and wine (chapter 18). In each one of the examples, some theologians have erred by choosing to overlook or even reject part of the biblical teaching.

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## 6. Ordering Systematic Theology

### *The “Body of Doctrine”*

This method of theology will serve us well, but there is one step remaining. As we study the biblical teaching on a variety of subjects, we will soon amass information on a large number of topics. These are not a random list of teachings. They are all part of the Christian faith. The final step is to begin to see how these doctrines relate to each other. Many theologians spend a great deal of time wrestling with possible outlines and orderings of Christian doctrine. They want to present the doctrines in the best possible order so that they flow from one to another. This can be an important issue, but we should not be overly distracted by it. The truth is, there are different ways to appropriately order a presentation of Christian doctrine, and there are things that commend various outlines. If the doctrine is biblically based, it can be presented in a variety of different orders. The system itself does not validate the doctrine.

Lutherans often speak of Christian doctrine in the singular. Theology is not a collection of doctrines, but a presentation of doctrine. It is not a random assortment of spiritual themes, but part of the whole counsel of God. In fact, we often refer to it as a “body of doctrine.”<sup>6</sup> This is a good analogy for the way doctrine functions. We may tend to think that we are free to keep or ignore various Christian teachings. There are so many, what does it matter if I don’t believe a few doctrines? If doctrine is just a random collection of teachings, this view might make sense. But this is a body of doctrine. Removing one doctrine will have an effect on other teachings. For example, if one denies the doctrine of creation, it will eventually affect our understanding of Scripture, the nature of humanity, the origin of sin and death, and even our need for a Savior. While a person may deny some doctrines that seem to be less important than others and still be a Christian, this alters the body of doctrine. Just as a person may live without certain parts of their body intact, so a Christian may remain a Christian while denying some doctrines — but they will not be whole or healthy. They will not be the people that God created them to be. The body will not function as it was intended to do. The lack of these teachings will begin to impact other beliefs.

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<sup>6</sup> This is frequently cited in Latin as the *corpus doctrinae*.

*Justification is the Central Doctrine*

The principle of a body of doctrine is important, because all true Christian doctrine is related to the central Christian teaching (the material principle). At the heart of all doctrine is the biblical truth that we are justified by grace through faith in Christ alone. All other teachings relate to this one. God has revealed his truth to us so that we will know and receive salvation in Christ Jesus. All other doctrines prepare for this, reveal this, convey the benefits of Christ to us, and respond to his gracious work. His saving work is the very heart of Scripture and of all true theology. This is why we are so concerned that other doctrines are not misunderstood or denied. Such errors may expand and even affect our salvation in Christ.<sup>7</sup>

*The Ordering of Doctrine Can Affect Meaning*

As long as our doctrine is **christocentric** (centered on Christ), we are free to organize the Christian faith in a variety of outlines. One major model follows the basic order of the Creeds. Another model starts with salvation in Christ and expands outward to consider other teachings. Both may be used responsibly and properly. We should note, however, that the placement of certain doctrines may reflect different theological understandings, or shape the way we perceive a doctrine. For example, the doctrine of election may be studied in a context of God's gracious love for us in Christ (where it belongs) or it may be considered as part of his Law and his response to sin, or in other contexts. The doctrine will appear and function quite differently in these places. Likewise, some outlines of doctrine might make it appear as if we were writing a history of everything that God has done (something for which we lack much information) rather than a revelation of his salvation. We don't want to distort the message by forcing God's word into our preconceived categories.

## 7. The Practical Nature of Theology

All of this may sound complicated and difficult, but it really is a fairly straightforward process. The study and articulation of doctrine is something

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<sup>7</sup> The centrality of the doctrine of justification is a distinctive mark of Lutheran theology. Other theological traditions place different doctrines in this central position. One of the main alternatives is to see the sovereignty of God as the central doctrine. This will drastically affect our understanding of Christianity — and of God himself.

that has been done by Christians for generations. We have simply described what you have likely been involved in for much of your life. Theology is not simply an academic exercise. While there are people who study Christianity without any response of faith, good theology is a practical discipline. It helps us understand biblical teaching better and aids us in presenting and communicating it to other people.

*Luther's description of theological work*

Martin Luther once said that prayer, meditation, and suffering make a theologian. (These are frequently stated in Latin: *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*.)

Since theology studies the life-giving word of God, we should not rely on human wisdom and understanding but turn to the word alone. So we begin by praying that the Holy Spirit guides and directs our work. Prayer is followed by a deep and steady immersion in the word of God. Luther urges Christians to meditate on the word, reading and rereading it so that we hear the voice of God in his word where God has promised to speak.

The third element, suffering or struggle, may surprise us. When we are growing in faith and in knowledge of the word of God, Satan may oppose us and seek to distract us from the truth. We are told that those who follow Christ will have crosses

to bear (Luke 9:23). Yet as we face afflictions and trials, we see the strength and comfort of God's word. We are strengthened, encouraged, and blessed by the word of God in our suffering. Indeed, we often do not really see just how a doctrine functions until we see it in the context of a Christian life. For example, the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead may seem like an abstraction for the future — but it is very concrete and comforting when spoken to one who is mourning the loss of a loved one. We might also note that part of the meditation and suffering may be connected to our struggling to understand teachings that seem complex or difficult. As we wrestle with the word of God and seek to understand it correctly in the context of the entire Bible, we will see the depth of God's word and his gracious actions in our lives.

This study can also help us grow in understanding of our own belief. The child of God who studies God's truth is moved to respond in thanksgiving and gratitude to God. We see anew that we are utterly reliant on his grace and mercy. We marvel at his gifts to us in Christ Jesus. We respond in faith, love, and devotion to him, and we are moved to share his truth with others.

### *Some Cautions*

The study of theology is a wonderful thing. It is exciting to see new insights and applications, to understand things that once were confusing, or to discover a new application of God's truth. Lest our excitement distract us from the truth, we would do well to remind ourselves of a few cautions. One danger often experienced by theologians is the temptation to treat this subject only as an academic discipline. It is easy to view theology as just another intellectual pursuit and to treat God as an object to be described, discussed or even manipulated. We dare not usurp the place of God in this way. God is not a thing to be studied — he is the living God. We live in relationship to him and call him Father because he has lovingly adopted us as his children through Christ Jesus. Remembering our place before him, we undertake this study in humility and faith.

Another danger may present itself when we consider other theological views and positions. As we discussed in this chapter, different theological presuppositions and methods lie behind different movements and teachings. We can understand how people reach different theological conclusions but this does not mean that we should agree with false doctrine. God communicates his truth to us, and that truth can be known. We are called to believe, to faithfully teach and declare the word of God. While we want to be respectful of other people, we must not be over-accommodating or pluralistic and thus compromise the truth.

A third problem often manifests itself in theological students. Excited over a new insight, we may expect all others to have that same insight and feel the same zeal. Perhaps they should — but we must remember to be humble, not arrogant. St. Peter once wrote, “in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience...” (1 Peter 3:15-16).

We can be faithful to the truth while still treating other people respectfully and gently. The truth and authority of the doctrine is not to be found in the forcefulness, enthusiasm, or zeal of the person who believes it. It is true if it is based on God's word.



## Getting to work

By now we have said enough about the preliminaries. There are, indeed, more topics that might be discussed, but the above method is meant to be a tool — equipping us for the study of true biblical doctrine. Our method becomes more evident in application and use. It is time to study the doctrine that we believe, teach, and confess.

### Key Terms

|                     |                       |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Apocrypha           | Magisterial use of    |
| Apologetics         | reason                |
| Canon               | Material principle    |
| Christocentric      | Ministerial use of    |
| Concordance         | reason                |
| Dogmatic theology   | Missiology            |
| Dogmatics           | Open questions        |
| Epistemology        | Paradox               |
| Ethics              | Pluralism             |
| Exegesis            | Polemical theology    |
| Exegetical theology | Practical theology    |
| Formal principle    | <i>Sola Scriptura</i> |
| Hermeneutics        | Symbolics             |
| Historical theology | Systematic theology   |
| Homiletics          | Theology              |
| <i>Lacunae</i>      | Traditionalism        |
| Liturgics           |                       |

## For Review and Discussion

1. Christianity is simple but not simplistic. Explore this distinction. Do some of the complex teachings in Christianity take away from its simplicity? What are some ways in which oversimplification can distort Christian teaching?
2. Five basic sources of religious information are commonly used by different people to acquire religious knowledge. Since we may feel the influence of all five of these sources at times, it is vitally important that we know which source is the final

- authority. Explore how understanding of a theological issue is affected by the prioritization of different sources. (For example, consider how belief in the resurrection of the dead would vary if Scripture is the ultimate authority or if reason predominates).
3. What measures can be taken to prevent dogmatics from appearing as blind dogmatism to others?
  4. One of the hallmarks of good theology is the ability to live with the tension of biblical paradoxes. This chapter noted several biblical paradoxes. Explore other biblical paradoxes. How should these be discussed so that they are not seen as contradictions, but as paradoxes?
  5. Theology can be influenced by tradition. Brainstorm at least two benefits of a healthy view of tradition, and two ways in which traditionalism might have negative consequences.

### **For Further Reading**

Formula of Concord: Epitome 1-8 (introduction, pp. 486-487).

Allen, Diogenes. *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985.

Quenstedt, Johann Andreas. *The Nature and Character of Theology: An Introduction to the Thought of J. A. Quenstedt from the Theologia Didactio-Polemica Sive Systema Theologicum*. Abridged, edited, and translated by Luther Poellot. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986.

Thielicke, Helmut. *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.

## Revelation and the Word of God

How does a person come to know God? If there is a God, can humans know him or know what he is like? What does God expect from me? Does he have a plan for my life? Questions like these have been asked by peoples of every culture, in every language throughout human history. But can they be answered? If so, can a person ever be sure that their answer is the right one? These are significant questions that need to be taken seriously, but the answers do not lie in those who ask them. True answers to these questions are found in the true God who reveals himself to us and calls us to believe. God reveals himself to humanity on his own terms. He questions us, judges us, forgives us, encourages us, and reveals himself to us with words and actions that we can understand. This chapter will begin to probe the mystery and certainty of a relationship with God based on his desire to be known and to communicate his love and forgiveness to all people. We will explore his revelation as we consider:

1. Natural Knowledge of God — *What can we know about God from creation?*
2. Revealed Knowledge of God — *What can we know about God from the Scriptures?*
3. Jesus Christ: God Revealed — *Christ is the key to knowledge and a certain relationship with God*
4. Attributes of Scripture — *What the Bible says about itself*
5. External Evidence for Scripture — *Is the biblical text reliable?*
6. Understanding the Biblical Text — *Properly reading and using the Word of God*

When something is revealed it becomes known, uncovered, or brought to light. When people speak of a revelation of God, they often feel that they have “uncovered something” about God. To many, it is as if God is hiding and they have to find him. The biblical idea of **revelation** is exactly the opposite. It does not focus on humanity’s search, but on God’s desire to communicate — to be known personally and certainly by his world. He searches for us (Luke 15:8-10). He takes the initiative. The pertinent question, then, is “How does God make himself known to the world he created?” Scripture answers that God reveals himself in two ways: natural knowledge (or general revelation) and revealed knowledge from God himself (also known as special revelation or supernatural revelation).

## 1. Natural Knowledge of God

What can be known of God if he has not spoken directly to us? When people speak about “knowing God,” they often base their claims on some personal experience or overpowering feeling. They “know God” through the beauty of a sunset, the majesty of the mountain peaks or the incredible order of the universe. They “know God” through the moral order of society or the uniqueness of human reason and love. In Christian theology, this is called the **natural knowledge** of God. It is information that is revealed through God’s “fingerprints” in creation.

### *Scripture’s Appeal to Natural Knowledge*

The Bible identifies this knowledge clearly for what it is and does. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1ff). Failing to see the hand of God behind the beauty, intricacy and order of creation is foolish, for a fool “says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psalm 14:1). One often hears that science, the study of nature, destroys faith. In truth, many Christians have found the opposite to be true. Probing the intricacies and majesty of creation, the heavens and the earth, leaves many in awe and wonder of God. Even as the scientist “unlocks” the power of the atom, there remains more mystery and wonder yet untapped and untamed.

The things that God has made proclaim his power and majesty. Paul says that God’s divine nature and power are demonstrably revealed in his creation. He has shown enough of himself there so that every human being can and should know there is a God, that he is holy, all-powerful and that we are accountable to him for our very lives. In fact, this knowledge leaves people no excuses before God’s righteous judgment (Romans 1:20). Through

this natural knowledge, humans “know God’s righteous decree” (Romans 1: 32), and “by nature do what the Law requires... while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (Romans 2:14, 15). By observing the complexity and order of creation, by witnessing his continued care of creation and even through the conscience, that inner voice that speaks of the reality of right and wrong, all people are confronted with the existence, power, and majesty of God, and humanity’s total reliance upon him.

### *Natural Evidence for the Existence of God*

Natural knowledge, then, is real and very important. There is much to learn by examining what God has created. Some people are so confident in this knowledge that they attempt to use this information to “prove” the existence of God. Such proofs for the existence of God are really an extension of the reality of natural knowledge. It should be noted that the Bible calls this revelation self-evident but does not formulate them into proofs. God’s self-revelation is ultimately not subject to our need for proof on our own terms. Instead, these proofs: the ontological, cosmological, teleological, moral, experiential, and historical arguments, are best seen as classifications of natural knowledge. Examining these arguments in detail may provide helpful insights, but the knowledge they provide about God is always incomplete.

In the **ontological argument**, God’s existence is demonstrated by the very fact that there is the notion of God, a “higher intelligence and power” in our thoughts and existence. It makes logical sense to conclude that there must be a being that is superior to all other beings. If so, this being is God. In its simplest forms, the ontological argument essentially claims that it makes sense to believe that there is a God.

The **cosmological argument** looks to the existence, beauty, and wonder of creation for evidence. How can this world be explained without a creator? The entire natural order suggests that there must be a God. Closely related is the **teleological argument**, which argues for God’s existence from the incredible order and purpose that are observed in nature. These things are not merely random, but exhibit order and interrelated purpose. The intricacies of creation suggest that there must be someone directing and arranging reality in such a form.

The **moral argument**, that there is a “moral conscience” in individuals and communities, views the existence and nearly universal nature of moral obligations in all human societies as something coming from a divine source since it can not be explained by naturalistic causes. If there is a fundamental

law or morality that all humans experience, it stands to reason that this law comes from someone — from God.

Twenty-first century people often speak of “experiencing God,” being confronted by an incredible experience of emotion, enlightenment or even amazing beauty. This is often called the **experiential argument** for God’s existence. Such universal experiences of inner peace, or incredible beauty have persuaded some people that they have been in the presence of God. “Near-death experiences” convince others that they have seen evidence of heaven. They believe that they have felt God directly.

Finally, the **historical argument** attempts to demonstrate God’s existence by events in history. Some argue this by noting the nearly universal awareness of a god in human historical writings. Since most human beings have concluded that there is a divine ruler guiding the affairs of the world, there must be some truth to the idea. Others believe they see evidence for the existence of God is the general triumph of good over evil in historical events. Such claims may appear particularly weak when held up against tyrannical or oppressive periods in human history.

### *Evaluation of Natural Knowledge*

Some knowledge of God may be found through these and other sources, but what does it ultimately explain? There is beauty and order in the world, but there is also nature’s seemingly indiscriminate destructive power. For every blessing in life there seems to be judgment and sorrow. The knowledge of God gained through observation and contemplation of the world

#### *How does natural knowledge affect the mission of the church?*

Natural knowledge gives humanity some indication of the existence of God and his Law. It does not, however, reveal the full identity of God nor does it reveal the Gospel. So the knowledge that it may provide is never sufficient for salvation. Christians need to remember this when

they hear Christ’s commission to make disciples. Natural knowledge is not enough. The Savior sends his people to proclaim the Gospel to the world. Natural knowledge might provide some common ground, but it does not negate the Great Commission.

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and oneself can indicate the existence of a God, but it cannot tell us with any certainty how this God feels about us nor how we stand before him.

By means of natural knowledge, humans might conclude that there is a personal, eternal, omnipotent Divine Being, who has created the universe and still preserves and rules all things. It might be concluded that this God is holy and just, demanding what is good and punishing what is evil. But because of our sinfulness and rebellion before this God (Genesis 3; Romans 3), this knowledge does not and cannot produce a loving relationship with him. In fact, it has the opposite effect, resulting in further alienation. Since it reveals that we have broken God's Law, the Scriptures say that it results in nothing more than a guilty conscience (Romans 1:20; 2:15), a fear of death (Hebrews 2:15), condemnation (Galatians 3:10), and complete hopelessness (Ephesians 2:12). Natural knowledge is the basis for many "religions" that know that the "god(s) of nature" must be appeased, but natural knowledge does not say if or how this can be done.

### *The Theology of Glory*

Unfortunately, the conclusions of natural knowledge are sometimes combined with Christianity. The notion that God can be known in his power and majesty and appeased, even manipulated, to respond favorably to our earthly struggles and sufferings through human religious activity is called a **theology of glory**. It seeks God on human terms. Inherent in this teaching is the notion that human actions such as rituals, prayers, works, or sacrifices can appease God's wrath, and that human beings have the ability to solve the great problems in nature and society. God is reduced to act in ways that make sense to us. Questions such as "Why is there suffering in the world?" or "Why do believers suffer?" lay demands on God from our point of view alone. The answers are sought in human deductions, not in his word.

When this is done, one stumbles on the concept of Jesus the suffering savior. "Christ crucified" is foolishness and a stumbling block to many (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). Instead of this biblical Savior, Christ is often depicted only as a healer, miracle worker, or as someone who gives blessings for life in this world alone. He gives us what we want, on our terms, at our command. Such conclusions fail to grasp the utter majesty of God and the reality of our sinful blindness and deadness before him. When we are overly reliant on natural knowledge, we often see only what we want to see.

## 2. Revealed Knowledge of God

Because human beings are constantly looking in the wrong places and listening to the wrong voices, God must speak clearly if sinners are to hear him, know him and believe. The good news is that God does speak clearly. **Revealed knowledge** is God's direct communication of himself in history and ultimately in the Scriptures. The Bible is not just a "holy" book about God. It tells of his mighty acts and saving words by which he redeems and restores a fallen humanity and creation. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible describes the God who reveals himself in words and actions that people can understand. In the Scriptures one not only finds the "reality" of God, his righteous, holy character, but also his saving work and eternal purposes for sinful and lost humanity.

### *The Need for Divine Self Revelation*

Revealed knowledge is not something extra that is added on to natural knowledge; it is essential. Our understanding of God through natural knowledge leaves us to fill in the blanks of who and what God is. This partial view of God leaves us wanting and uncertain, feeling inadequate, unworthy and inept before the great questions of life. It is not sufficient to fulfill our deepest needs.

The Scriptures further explain the need for special revelation in light of the reality of human rebellion and the fall from our natural relationship with God our creator (Genesis 3). Even at our best we are untrustworthy inquirers of God. Because of sin, the Bible speaks of human blindness and alienation from God. 1 Corinthians 2:14 describes spiritual blindness. We simply cannot see God as he is. Ephesians 2:1 and Colossians 1:21 speak of the root cause of man's enmity and blindness to God: the spiritual death of sin. Because of the depth and pervasiveness of sin's power, God must reveal himself clearly if humanity is to receive life and salvation.

### *The Supremacy of Divine Revelation*

God's mighty acts of salvation existed before there was a written word, but God proclaims his love, his saving actions in words so that we can know him and that salvation. John says that the words of the Gospel, "are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). Just as the voice of a loved one speaking tender words fills our hearts with joy, the writing of those same words in a letter brings that joy to the reader every time it is



read. Because they are God's own words and his proclamation of love, the Scriptures are superior to natural knowledge and all other books.

Additionally, the Scriptures are superior to natural knowledge because they come from the most trustworthy source — God himself. Peter says, “we have something more sure, the prophetic word” (2 Peter 1:19). Jesus tells us that his words are “spirit and life” (John 6:63). He tells the apostles that the Holy Spirit will bring them the words they are to say (Luke 12:11-12). Both 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21, describe the Scriptures as “**inspired** by God,” or “God-breathed:” written by men who were moved by the Holy Spirit. Because it is God's inspired word, it is the only reliable source of knowledge for faith, our relationship with him.

We often evaluate the authority or accuracy of words that are spoken to us by the identity of the speaker. If the speaker is trustworthy and has the knowledge or right to speak on a topic, we can generally be confident in the information they provide. God speaks in special revelation; his words are trustworthy and true. Jesus demonstrates this when he says, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” (John 14:1-2). The unique character of the person and work of Jesus underlies the trustworthiness of his words even as they are written and recorded by the apostles and the prophets (Ephesians 2:19-20; 2 Peter 3:2).

The revelation of God in the words of Scripture is comforting. Reading the Bible, a person can come to know God's will and work with certainty. But this comfort also brings a limitation. Since God chose to reveal himself in this way, we are not free to search for information about God from any source. He limits us to his word. Just as Jesus told Philip that seeing him brought the true revelation of the Father (John 14:9), so the words of God in the Scriptures are our only certain and unfailing guide for questions of life and salvation. This is reflected in warnings not to add to or subtract from the word of God without his authorization. Such warnings are found in both the Old Testament (Joshua 23:6; Deuteronomy 4:2) and the New Testament (Revelation 22:18-19).

### *The Theology of the Cross*

Not only does God limit us to his self-revelation in Scripture, Scripture limits us by virtue of its unique message. Seeking God in the limitations that he establishes is often called the **theology of the cross**. God is not to be sought in displays of almighty and glorious power, nor in miracles and signs. Though he does have this power, and though he has and does reveal himself miraculously at times, God directs us to another place. He reveals himself in

*The theology of the cross and the theology of glory in worship*

In worship, Christians often praise and thank God for a variety of reasons. We may exalt his mighty acts, rejoice in the gifts that he gives, celebrate his creation, or praise his power, greatness, and might. These things may be part of the work or attributes of God, but taken in isolation, such praises may reflect a theology of glory.

Evaluation of worship materials should ask whether

they are true to God's specific revelation in Scripture. Do they present Christ not only in power, but in the weakness that secured humanity's salvation? Do they focus only on our praise and neglect to present his work? Certainly Christians should praise God for the many things that he has done for us, but we should always center our praises in his gracious gifts through Christ Jesus.

the suffering and death of Christ alone. Where God appears most "defeated" is in fact the place of his victory and the place of faith's power and certainty. To look for God's blessing other than in the person and work of the crucified Savior is to look for life and salvation where it is not to be found. In seeking the true revelation of God one must always remember, as the Bible reminds us, that there are things that appear religious and true, but are in fact false and empty (Philippians 2:8; Colossians 2:23).

### **3. Jesus Christ: God Revealed**

Underlying the Christian confidence in the Bible as God's reliable self-revelation is the unique person and work of Jesus Christ. In fact, it is most appropriate to argue for the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures from the certainty of Christ rather than arguing for Christ from the certainty of the Scripture. While the result may be the same, the order is significant. The essence of special revelation centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is displayed in Scripture as the One who has explained the Father (John 1:18). Hebrews 1:3 indicates Christ is the "radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature." Jesus himself declares that both his words (John 6:63) and his works (John 5:36) reveal the Father — and both his words and his works are accurately recorded in Scripture. He is, in fact, the Word made flesh (John 1:14).

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*The Divine Logos and the Divine Scripture*

A unique fact of Christianity, in contrast to the world's other religions, is the declaration that God became a human being. Almighty God himself became incarnate and thus spoke most clearly to all people. The apostle John deepens our understanding of the words of Scripture when he proclaims that the "Word" (in Greek, *Logos*) of God is the ultimate source of revelation. In John 1, God himself is called the Word. In Greek philosophy, the *Logos* was the principle, wisdom, knowledge, or word that holds the world together. John says something so simple, yet so profound that it is almost incomprehensible, "the *Logos* is God" (John 1:1) and that "the *Logos* became flesh" (John 1:14). That Word made flesh is Jesus the Messiah. When Jesus speaks words, they are, "spirit and life" (John 6:63). We speak of the divine character and divine inspiration of the words of the Bible because of Jesus Christ. His person, his character, his work and his view of the Scriptures are the foundations for our confidence in Scripture. God makes his word most certain for us when he comes to speak that word himself. He comes to speak words that we can understand. He speaks words through the apostles and the prophets so that every person can understand.

*Jesus Christ, the Revelation of God*

As God in human flesh, Jesus is uniquely able to reveal God. The prophets spoke the words of Christ as they were revealed to them; Jesus speaks his own divine word directly (Hebrews 1:1, 2). To know Jesus Christ is to know God himself (John 14:9). Christ claims that he is the way to the Father (John 14:6) because he himself is God (see also John 10:30). To know Jesus' words, then, is to know the words of God. To know the words of the apostles and the prophets, words that Christ himself valued and guaranteed (see John 14:26 and John 17:3-20), is to know God's Word. Jesus is the Word of God revealed, made flesh, that reveals and delivers the very presence and blessing of God to all those who receive the words of the Scripture by faith.

*The Scriptures as "Sacramental Words"*

When it is remembered that Jesus Christ himself is the Word made flesh, a deeper understanding of God's revelation emerges. Just as God comes to us in the flesh, his words have always come "enfleshed" for us. The Word became words, so that we can be certain of our redemption and salvation. Lutherans sometimes speak of the "sacramental" character of the words of Scripture. The biblical text is not merely human words; these words are also

spiritual. Christ came in human flesh and still comes “enfleshed” in tangible forms. In fact, God has always come in such a way. In the Old Testament, we read how God wanted to come near to his people. Knowing that sinful humans could not withstand his holy presence, God “covered himself” so that he could reveal himself. He covered himself to meet Israel in the tabernacle and the temple. In the fullness of time, he covered himself in human flesh. Still today, the words of Scripture, the water of baptism, the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper are the very power of God because Christ has enfleshed himself there for us.

Saying that the words of Scripture are “sacramental” in character simply affirms what Jesus says in John 6:63, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” Scripture has a sacramental or incarnate character because these words, although fully human, are also fully divine. Christ has located himself in these words. This is another way that God limits us to his way of doing things so that we might place our complete confidence in him. We know that he is present in these places, because he has promised to be there.<sup>1</sup>

#### **4. Attributes of Scripture**

As the Word of God in human words, the Scripture exhibits its divine character in various ways. An internal testimony reveals its divine character. This evidence includes its inspiration, inerrancy, clarity, coherence, authority and similar characteristics. These attributes are seen as many human writers of the Bible, who come from diverse circumstances and cultures over the span of thousands of years, all proclaim the same message of salvation by God’s grace. Scripture itself points to its own unique attributes.

##### *The Scriptures are Inspired*

The Scriptures claim to be the word of God, not the word of men. The prophets of the Old Testament said their words were the Lord’s words (for example, see Isaiah 52:3-4, Jeremiah 4:3). Similarly, throughout the New Testament, the apostles claim that the words they speak are also the words of God (for example, see Acts 13:46; 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Revelation 1:2). The Scriptures not only tell us *that* they are God’s word, they explain to us *how* this can actually be. They are divine words because these very words were inspired — “breathed” into the writers — by God himself. St.

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<sup>1</sup> The sacramental character of the Scriptures will be considered in more detail in Chapter 16, “The Means of Grace.”

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Paul says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Timothy 3:15-16). As this translation suggests, the word for inspiration (*theopneustos*) literally means “God breathed.” The only other time in the Bible when something is described as “God breathed” is the time when God gave Adam life (Genesis 2:7). This same idea is communicated when 2 Peter 1:21 says, “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” This divine act of inspiration establishes the fact that the Holy Scriptures, though written by men, are the word of God.

But isn't this merely arguing in a circle? Are we not saying that the Bible is divine because it is inspired, and it is inspired because it is divine? No, not really. We are indeed affirming that the divine inspiration of Scripture is self-authenticating.<sup>2</sup> But, this truth does not mean that we are arguing in a circle, it merely means that the Scripture itself will demonstrate its self-proclaimed, divine nature to the person who reads it.<sup>3</sup> To describe Scripture's divinely inspired nature as being beyond human reason is to root it where it belongs: in the certainty of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the self-authenticating nature of the Bible itself.

Even while acknowledging this self-authenticating nature of Scripture, it is important to remember that the Bible is not one book that gives testimony to itself. Instead, it is a collection of sixty-six books. It is not circular reasoning to assert that different books written by different authors can authenticate each other. They proclaim a common message, and jointly testify to their divine origin, but they were not written as a single book. Once it was recognized that these books (written over vast time periods by many writers, in different languages) shared a common message, they were gathered together. To deny inspiration on the basis of so-called circular reasoning is really to deny any argument for inspiration. Such a denial is not a position of logic but of unbelief.

### *Inspiration is Not Equal to Revelation*

“All Scripture is breathed out by God.” In other words, God is its source. Even though it was written in human language by human authors, God controls the content of his word. However, the biblical teaching of inspiration does not mean that God miraculously revealed the entire content of a book to its human writers. Certainly some of the biblical teachings could not be known without supernatural revelation. For example, no human being was

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<sup>2</sup> in Greek, *autopistia*.

<sup>3</sup> In this sense, Scripture possesses a *causative authority* which works confidence in human hearts even as it maintains its unique divine nature.

present for the creation of the world, and no human being has yet seen the second coming of Christ, yet God revealed both of these events in his inspired Word. However, other portions of Scripture involve events that were witnessed by the authors. Peter says that he was an eyewitness to the majesty of Jesus (2 Peter 1:16). The Gospels repeatedly show that the disciples were present for most of Jesus' ministry. They did not need these events revealed to them again. They had seen them with their own eyes. Another example of this is St. Luke who says that he researched his Gospel with the eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-4).

Even though portions of Scripture did not need further revelation from God for the authors to be aware of them, the Scriptures still testify that they are inspired by God. Just after saying that he was an eyewitness, Peter continues to say that the authors did not invent the stories of Scripture. Instead, "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

Likewise, this distinction reminds us that even though God may reveal himself, to a degree, in natural knowledge, we remain bound by the written words of Scripture. He limits us for our own sake. Just as God directs us to the person and work of Christ alone for the confidence and certainty of our relationship with him, so also we are directed to his word to gain authoritative knowledge of him.

### *Inspiration is the Work of Holy Spirit*

While the Holy Trinity works together in all things, and the Bible is the word of the triune God, the inspiration of Scripture is particularly ascribed to the Holy Spirit. Peter says, "no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21). Jesus teaches that the Holy Spirit would bring the apostles, the "remembrance of all I have said to you" (John 14:26). The authors wrote God's words not on their own impulse, but as they were directed by the Holy Spirit. In fact, the biblical writers regularly speak of being "compelled" to write (see 1 Corinthians 9:16 and Jeremiah 26:2. See also Deuteronomy 18:20 where strict restrictions were placed on what a person could "say for the Lord.")

The Holy Spirit, in his work of inspiration, used the unique gifts of each individual writer to convey the words and phrases he deemed necessary. Luke investigates, Paul receives direct revelation, John writes with a Hebraic style, each one's gifts are used in service to the Spirit's work of recording the word of God in human words. Though the gifts and style of each

human writer comes through, the content is given and guided, even down to the words themselves, by the Holy Spirit. This teaching that all the words of Scripture are inspired (and not just the basic ideas) is known as **plenary inspiration** or **verbal inspiration**. 2 Timothy 3:15-16 teaches this clearly when it says that “*All Scripture is breathed out by God.*”

In the same way, it is important to note that we speak of the inspiration of Scripture, not of the authors. Romans is inspired by God, not Paul. The Gospel of Mark is inspired, not Mark himself. The authors may have written other things (and probably did) but we only maintain that the biblical books are inspired. The words of the Scriptures are ultimately the product of the Spirit’s work through the individual prophets and apostles.

To uphold this teaching in the face of skepticism, one needs to take refuge in Christ’s view of the words of Scripture. He affirmed the inspiration of the entire Old Testament. In Matthew 5:17–18 Jesus states that “not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law;” he had come to fulfill it, not ignore it. He taught that the “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35), that there was a continuity between his word and the Old Testament. In Luke 24:44 Jesus reminded the disciples that all the things written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms *must* be fulfilled. He quoted verses from the Hebrew Scriptures in his rebuke of Satan (Matthew 4:4-10). Over and over again, Jesus affirms the authority and divine nature of the Old Testament and the writings of his chosen apostles that were to become the New Testament (John 14:26). Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, is our ultimate confidence then in the divine nature of the words of Scripture.

It is also important to note that Christ himself viewed the whole Scripture as God’s word (John 10:35). There are no degrees or levels of inspiration. All Scripture is inspired, the words that the apostles and prophets wrote were the words compelled in them as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. Their writings are as inspired as the Gospels are. The words of Jesus himself are the inspired word of God, but so are the words written by the evangelists. In the same way the Hebrew Scriptures are just as inspired as the New Testament. A more subtle assault on the doctrine of inspiration is found among some who would restrict inspiration to its Gospel teachings. This limitation is often called **Gospel reductionism**. Certainly, the Gospel is at the heart of God’s revelation, but if this is taken to mean that the Law is not the inspired word of God, one has denied the biblical teaching of inspiration. The full inspiration of Scripture needs to be maintained, because it is the testimony of Scripture itself. All Scripture is inspired by God.

*Original Manuscripts and Later Copies*

For accuracy's sake, it needs to be said that the original manuscripts (usually called the “**autographs**”) of the biblical books are the words that are the inspired, inerrant words of the God. What we have in our hands today are copies of those first books, albeit very ancient copies. If such copies deviate from the original text, they deviate from the inspired character of the word. As these copies remain faithful to the words of the original texts, they too are inspired.

Some Christians are troubled by claims that the copies of biblical texts contain many errors and defects. Here the science of **textual criticism** is very helpful. Careful scholarship reveals many early manuscripts showing the text of the Scriptures. Our ancestors clearly worked with great precision to ensure that a text was faithfully copied (a skill that is largely lost today). Comparison of these manuscripts provides confidence that the texts that we read today are faithful copies of the original manuscripts. They are indeed God's inspired word. There are some textual questions, but it is important to recognize that most Christians, and most Bible translations, openly acknowledge texts that might be in question. This is done so that it is clear that in most passages, there is no question whatsoever. We can be confident in the text of Scripture.<sup>4</sup>

It is also appropriate to note that the claim of inspiration properly refers to the original texts, not to translations of those texts. The authors said that the Scriptures were inspired, but they were not referring to the *King James Version*, *English Standard Version*, *New International Version*, or any other translation. To the extent that a translation accurately reflects the original text, it conveys God's inspired word to its readers. But an incompetent or unfaithful translator can distort the meaning of the biblical text. This is why it is important that Christians read reliable translations of Scripture. We want to present the meaning of the original text accurately. This is also why we encourage individuals to learn the biblical languages. When the student of Scripture has some ability to read Hebrew or Greek, they can go directly to the original text.

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<sup>4</sup>There are many helpful resources to guide Christians in understanding the transmission of biblical texts and their accuracy. For example, one notable writer says, “...there are some five thousand manuscripts that contain texts of the New Testament documents, more than exist for any other ancient literary work.... In short, most New Testament scholars have concluded that we know essentially what the original writers wrote.” James W. Sire, *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 99.



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*Inspired Means Inerrant*

The divine nature of the Scriptures means that it contains and projects divine qualities as well. Just as God is faithful and true, his words are faithful and true. The inspired word of God is **inerrant**, that is, without error in all that it says. Inerrancy does not demand similarity in the style of the writers, nor does it mean that each writer must describe an event the same way. Rather, inerrancy simply means that the Bible is telling us the truth. Jesus says that he is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). That character extends to the words of Scripture. When the Bible says, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17) and the “word of the Lord is upright” (Psalm 33:4), one sees again God’s character manifest in the words of the Bible. Even in the face of alleged discrepancies in the Bible, one can rest assured that when all the facts are known, the divine Scriptures will prove themselves true in everything they teach, whether that teaching has to do with doctrine, history, science, geography, geology, or other disciplines or knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

The word of God clearly teaches that it is inspired and inerrant. The reason this is true is that it is his own words. His character is present in the word that he speaks and reveals. Because of this, we say that the Scriptures are not only inerrant; they are also **infallible**, that is, they are perfect and cannot be in error because God is perfect and cannot err. James 1:17 says that God has no “variation or shadow due to change.” He doesn’t change. He is perfect in all that he says and does, in every circumstance. When the Sadducees tried to trick Jesus with a moral dilemma (Matthew 22:29), Jesus rebuked them saying, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.” Psalm 18:30 says that God’s “way is perfect; the word of the Lord proves true.” His words cannot err; they are perfect as the Lord himself is perfect. Again, we should be careful to note that when we describe the Scriptures as infallible, we are speaking of the original manuscripts and not translations or flawed copies. Any errors that might appear in later versions are not the errors of God but the errors of humans.

The inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture are consequences of its inspiration. Because the Bible comes from him and is inspired by the Holy Spirit, we can be confident in our relationship to God through his word. We can count on God; we can count on his word; we can rely on his promises. Since he is faithful, perfect and true, so are his words.

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<sup>5</sup>For example, there was a time early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century where people doubted that there was a historical Pontius Pilate, Peter and even Jesus himself. Such skepticism has been proven wrong through later archaeological finds in the same century.

*Consequences of Denying Inspiration*

Human reason may have difficulty accepting the biblical teaching that the Bible is God's inspired word. It may seem easier to consider the Bible as just another human book. Some even present the rejection of inspiration as a deeper act of faith, saying that they are not believing the Bible but Christ. But this is a false dichotomy. Christ and his word are not to be separated. When the unique character of Scripture is denied, the word of God is placed on a level with the fallible testimony of human beings. In fact, fallible human writings may be placed above Scripture when we deny the inspiration of God's Word.

When the inspiration of Scripture is rejected, the Bible becomes merely another human book. When this happens, humans are cut off from the sure voice of God. We lose access to the Gospel, which is the power of God to salvation. The certainty of faith that comes from hearing the word of Christ (Romans 10:17) is jeopardized. Our knowledge of the uniqueness of Christ and his saving work is called into question, because this is revealed to us in the Bible. Without this revelation, we lose the certainty of the forgiveness of sin, eternal life, and salvation. Without the witness of Scripture, we lose the certainty and comfort of its many promises including the fact that God will hear our prayers (Luke 11:1-3, 1 Kings 9:3), the promise of the resurrection (John 14:19) and the promise of the comfort and encouragement of the Spirit (John 14:16). Without the Bible, we lose the effects of the word, including unity (John 17:20), freedom (John 8:31-32), confidence (John 15:7) and the reason for mission (Matthew 28:18-20). We are left only with human reason and the limited yet judging knowledge of nature that we receive through our senses alone. God assures us of the inspiration and truthfulness of Scripture to give us confidence. When we deny his word, we lose that confidence. Worst of all, we close our ears to his voice, and so fail to hear the love of our God.

*The Authority of Scripture*

When Jesus spoke among the people, they said, "he was teaching them as one who had authority" (Matthew 7:29). Jesus, of course, was tested on this matter so in another place he asserted divine authority when he claimed the power to forgive sins (Matthew 9:6). In commissioning the disciples in Matthew 28, Jesus claims all authority in heaven and on earth. The inspired word of God speaks with such divine authority. It can only be recognized as it is confronted in our reading and hearing, just as the people who heard Jesus speak knew that Jesus was unique.

This divine authority of Scripture is absolute, just as the divine nature of the person of Christ is absolute. It is not founded on the personal character of the human writers or the testimony of the church, but on the person and work of the Holy Spirit who breathes the words into the hearts, minds, and mouths of the apostles and prophets. Scripture speaks with authority because they are inspired by God.

As such, the prophets demand obedience to their words as God's words (Leviticus 18:4; Deuteronomy 8:19). Jesus and the apostles likewise call for such obedience (John 8:31–32; Galatians 1:8). To reject the words of Scripture is to be placed under the judgment of its divine words as Christ warns, "The word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day" (John 12:48).

The authority of the Bible is seen in the obedience it demands, but it is even more evident in the faith that it creates. The divine authority of Scripture, which calls for faith in the human heart — a faith that trusts the words and teachings of Scripture for life and salvation — demonstrates its authority when people place their faith in these words as the very words of God. Saving faith is a gift (Ephesians 2:8-9), a gift that comes in and through the word (Romans 10:17).

### *The Scriptures as the Formal Principle*

Since the Scriptures are our only reliable source of the true knowledge of God, they "form" our theology. Thus the Scriptures alone, because of their divine source and authority, are the **formal principle** of theology. As the formal principle, the Scriptures are the only source and norm of our theology. What we believe and teach about God, man, redemption, salvation, and all other teachings are drawn from and held accountable to the teachings of Scripture. The words and teachings of the Bible give form to theology. Its words and teachings also "reform" theology when we deviate from it. As the only rule of faith, Scripture alone (*Sola Scriptura*) guides, directs, and corrects true Christian teaching. So 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

### *The Clarity of Scripture*

The **clarity** (often called the **perspicuity**) of Scripture refers to the Bible's clear presentation of its teachings. Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." God's word makes things clear. It speaks clearly about the realities of sin and death, life and salvation. It speaks of the realities of God as the creator and redeemer of the world. It