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THIRD EDITION

MILLARD J. ERICKSON



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To

Bernard Ramm (in memoriam),
my first theology professor;

William E. Hordern,
my doctoral mentor;

and **Wolfgang Pannenberg**,
my postdoctoral mentor.

Contents

Preface xi

Part 1: Studying God

1. What Is Theology? 3
2. The Possibility of Theology 23
3. The Method of Theology 45
4. Contextualizing Theology 68
5. Two Special Issues: *Biblical Criticism and Theological Language* 90

Part 2: Knowing God

6. God's Universal Revelation 121
7. God's Particular Revelation 143
8. The Preservation of the Revelation: *Inspiration* 168
9. The Dependability of God's Word: *Inerrancy* 188
10. The Power of God's Word: *Authority* 210

Part 3: What God Is Like

11. The Greatness of God 233
12. The Goodness of God 254
13. God's Nearness and Distance: *Immanence and Transcendence* 272
14. God's Three-in-Oneness: *The Trinity* 291

Part 4: What God Does

- 15. God's Plan 317
- 16. God's Originating Work: *Creation* 337
- 17. God's Continuing Work: *Providence* 358
- 18. Evil and God's World: *A Special Problem* 383
- 19. God's Special Agents: *Angels* 403

Part 5: Humanity

- 20. Introduction to the Doctrine of Humanity 423
- 21. The Origin of Humanity 438
- 22. The Image of God in the Human 457
- 23. The Constitutional Nature of the Human 475
- 24. The Universality of Humanity 494

Part 6: Sin

- 25. The Nature of Sin 513
- 26. The Source of Sin 531
- 27. The Results of Sin 548
- 28. The Magnitude of Sin 565
- 29. The Social Dimension of Sin 584

Part 7: The Person of Christ

- 30. Contemporary Issues in Christological Method 603
- 31. The Deity of Christ 623
- 32. The Humanity of Christ 643
- 33. The Unity of the Person of Christ 659
- 34. The Virgin Birth 674

Part 8: The Work of Christ

- 35. Introduction to the Work of Christ 695
- 36. Theories of the Atonement 713
- 37. The Central Theme of the Atonement 731
- 38. The Extent of the Atonement 753

Part 9: The Holy Spirit

- 39. The Person of the Holy Spirit 771
- 40. The Work of the Holy Spirit 788
- 41. Recent Issues regarding the Holy Spirit 805

Part 10: Salvation

- 42. Conceptions of Salvation 825
- 43. The Antecedent to Salvation: *Predestination* 841
- 44. The Beginning of Salvation: *Subjective Aspects* 860
- 45. The Beginning of Salvation: *Objective Aspects* 876
- 46. The Continuation of Salvation 896
- 47. The Completion of Salvation 913
- 48. The Means and Extent of Salvation 930

Part 11: The Church

- 49. The Nature of the Church 949
- 50. The Role of the Church 971
- 51. The Government and Unity of the Church 989
- 52. The Initiatory Rite of the Church: *Baptism* 1016
- 53. The Continuing Rite of the Church: *The Lord's Supper* 1033

Part 12: The Last Things

- 54. Introduction to Eschatology 1055
- 55. Individual Eschatology 1070
- 56. The Second Coming and Its Consequents 1087
- 57. Millennial and Tribulational Views 1105
- 58. Final States 1124

- Concluding Thoughts 1141
- Scripture Index 1146
- Author Index 1164
- Subject Index 1173

Preface

A quarter century ago, concerned about the lack of a truly suitable introductory systematic theology textbook, I urged several leading evangelical theologians to write such a book. All agreed regarding the need, but each declined to undertake such a project. Finally, I resolved that I would have to write it myself, and proceeded to do so. The reception that the first edition received confirmed that it was meeting a need of others as well. Soon several other theologians penned similar textbooks, so that we now have more than a dozen fine evangelical introductory systematic theology books, any of which I would be pleased to use in teaching a survey of systematic theology. As the theological scene continued to change, I found it desirable to revise my original textbook in the 1990s. The translation of *Christian Theology* into numerous Asian and European languages was a surprising but gratifying development.

I have become increasingly aware that an updated version of *Christian Theology* is needed. New turns in the discussion of such doctrines as the atonement, justification, and divine foreknowledge deserve treatment in any study of basic doctrines of the Christian faith. In this third edition, I seek to address those discussions. In order to maintain the length of this volume, certain portions of the earlier editions have been condensed or eliminated.

I have sought to take into account feedback from professors and students who have used my textbook. One somewhat common comment was that a significant percentage of students lacked the background to derive maximum benefit from the more technical aspects of the methodological section of the book. Consequently, the material on biblical criticism and on religious language has been reduced, simplified, and combined into a single chapter. The chapter on postmodernism has been replaced by a new chapter dealing more broadly with the possibility of theology. Readers who wish for a more in-depth treatment of postmodernism are

encouraged to consult my volume *Truth or Consequences*.¹ I also recommend as a companion to this volume my *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, which may prove helpful as a quick reference guide to theological terms. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from the 2011 New International Version. Because this version sometimes interprets rather than translates, I have at several points substituted other translations or given my own.

Even with respect to those issues where there have not been significant new developments or major controversies in recent years, there has continued to be new research and writing. I have made major efforts to keep abreast of such writings. In many cases, however, I have chosen to retain documentation from more classical versions of the same position, rather than using more recent instances from sources of less stature. A century or more from now, people will still be consulting Calvin and Barth, but some of today's authors (including myself) will be unknown. It is not necessary to accept recent developments in theology, but responsible scholarship requires being familiar with what is current.

A major phenomenon of the last two or three decades of Christian history is the rapid expansion of Christianity in places other than Western Europe.² Indeed, the term "majority world Christianity" is increasingly being used in place of the expression "third world Christianity."³ This accelerating growth of the church in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia has not yet been matched by scholarly theological publication from those quarters, and relatively little of what has been done has been translated into English. I have tried to include some of the insights and address some of the issues coming from those segments of Christianity. An expansion of the section on the Holy Spirit is a result of this development. In the final analysis, this book has been designed primarily for North American, English-speaking students, and its treatment of theology has been contextualized especially for them. Yet I hope that enough has been done to state the essence of the doctrines to enable others to adapt these statements to their own situation. The translation of earlier editions of this book and its derivative volume, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, into Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Farsi, Chinese, Malaysian, and numerous other languages, and the reception I have experienced to my theological presentations in person in many countries outside the United States, encourage me to believe that the utility of this edition will also not be restricted to my home country.

One of the striking cultural developments in the United States is the increasing political polarization. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s there was considerable

1. Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002).

2. E.g., Philip Jenkins, *The Coming Christendom*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3. Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), xix.

ideological overlap between the members of the two major political parties in the United States Congress, that had virtually disappeared by 2010.⁴ I see certain parallels in evangelical Christianity, as well. One of my friends said of the Evangelical Theological Society, “We have the medievalists and the postmodernists in this society, and nothing in between.” While that may have been a bit of an overstatement, I see the tendency toward polarization that he referred to, and it concerns me. While I have taken definite positions on the issues currently under dispute in evangelicalism, I have attempted to depict the differing parties as fairly as possible. It is my hope that all segments of the theological spectrum, both evangelical and nonevangelical, will continue to engage in careful and respectful dialogue.

In the concluding chapter of this book I address the ongoing need for systematic theology. Postmodernists, including some “postconservative evangelicals,” continue to decry the sort of objectivist thinking that they routinely identify as “modernist” and “Enlightenment.” In so doing, however, they are, I believe, concentrating on the recent past and much of the present, but are failing to notice and respond to the indicators of what the future will bring. A number of cultural trends and even emerging academic methodologies indicate that the successor to postmodernism is becoming more clearly identifiable.⁵ Among these trends can be noted the adoption of more scientific types of methods in the humanities and social sciences,⁶ and the call for American education to develop in students the type of critical thinking with which the educational systems of many nations are already surpassing the United States.⁷ In my judgment, evangelical theologians ignore such markers at their peril, and by so doing, will doom their theologies to early irrelevance.⁸ While this is a time in which such critical and contrarian thinking is little appreciated, it has seldom been more needed than now.

I want to acknowledge again those whose advice, encouragement, and help contributed to the first and second editions of this book. My friend the late Clark Pinnock encouraged me to “make it sing like a hymnbook, rather than read like a telephone book,” an ideal I have striven imperfectly to achieve. Several of my students read portions of the manuscript of the first edition and offered me reactions from a student perspective: Bruce Kallenberg, Randy Russ, and Mark Moulton, and my teaching assistant, Dan Erickson, read the entire manuscript.

4. Major Garrett, “The Center Falls Apart,” *National Journal*, February 25, 2011, http://nationaljournal.com/the-center-falls-apart-20110225?mrefid=site_search.

5. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences*, 319–25.

6. Patricia Cohen, “The New Enlightenment: Digital Keys for Unlocking the Humanities’ Riches,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2010; “Analyzing Literature by Words and Numbers,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2010; “In 500 Billion Words, New Window on Culture,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2010.

7. Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011), 100–108.

8. If God grants me the time and strength, I hope to be able to write a guidebook to critical theological thinking, a subject I have taught once at Baylor University.

Laurie Dirnberger, Lorraine Swanson, Aletta Whittaker, and Pat Krohn typed portions of the manuscript. Three students, David McCullum, Stanley Olson, and Randy Russ, covenanted to support me through the original writing with prayer, without which I would never have been able to complete the mammoth project. Alan Fisher and Jim Weaver, then of Baker, guided the project through the publishing process, and Ray Wiersma did painstaking and excellent editorial work, ably supplemented by Maria denBoer's gracious and careful editing of the second edition. Robert Hand and Bethany Murphy have skillfully guided the third edition through the editorial process. My wife, Ginny, an English teacher, has been a valuable resource, particularly in matters of grammar and form, and she has patiently accepted my investment of many hours in the writing of this book over the years.

I am grateful for Mr. Jim Kinney, editorial director of Baker Academic, who encouraged me to prepare a new edition, solicited comments from professors who have used the earlier editions as a textbook, and provided support in many ways. I am especially indebted to Dr. L. Arnold Hustad, professor of theology and philosophy at Crown College. His research on recent developments and literature was of great help to me, as were his insightful comments on the contemporary theological scene. Once my student and teaching assistant, he has truly become my colleague in this task. I am well aware that this book has many shortcomings, for which I am solely responsible.

Finally, I am immensely grateful to our Lord for the privilege and honor of being able to write this book and for the strength and perseverance he granted me. It is my prayer that it might be the means to the blessing of many and might bring glory to him.

PART 1

STUDYING GOD

1. What Is Theology?
2. The Possibility of Theology
3. The Method of Theology
4. Contextualizing Theology
5. Two Special Issues: *Biblical Criticism and Theological Language*

1

What Is Theology?

Chapter Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Develop an understanding of the concept of religion in history.
2. Compose a brief definition of “theology” that focuses particularly on the understanding of the discipline.
3. Distinguish among biblical, historical, philosophical, and systematic theology.
4. Demonstrate the need for systematic theology in contemporary society.
5. Relate Christian theology to Christian living and Christian ministry in today’s world.

Chapter Summary

Theology in a Christian context is a discipline of study that seeks to understand the God revealed in the Bible and to provide a Christian understanding of reality. It seeks to understand God’s creation, particularly human beings and their condition, and God’s redemptive work in relation to humankind. Biblical, historical, and philosophical theology provide insights and understandings that help lead toward a coherent whole. Theology has practical value in providing guidance for the Christian life and ministry.

Study Questions

- In his philosophical works, to what extent did Immanuel Kant restrict religion?
- State and explain five facets of the definition of theology.

- Define systematic theology and explain how it relates to the three other disciplines of theology: biblical, historical, and philosophical.
- What is natural theology, and which theologian developed a more empirical approach to it?
- Defend the statement “Theology should continue to reign as Queen of the Sciences.”

Outline

The Nature of Religion

The Definition of Theology

Locating (Systematic) Theology on the Theological Map

Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology

Systematic Theology and Historical Theology

Systematic Theology and Philosophical Theology

The Need for Theology

The Starting Point of Theology

Theology as Science

Why the Bible?

The Nature of Religion

Humans are wondrous and complex beings. They are capable of executing intricate physical feats, performing abstract intellectual calculations, and producing incredibly beautiful sights and sounds. Beyond this, human beings are incurably religious. For wherever we find humanity—in widely different cultures geographically dispersed, and at all points from the dimmest moments of recorded history to the present—we also find religion.

Religion is one of those terms that we all assume we understand, but is not easy to define. Disagreements, or at least variety, in definitions or descriptions often means either that there has not been sufficient study of, reflection on, and discussion of the subject, or that the subject matter is too rich and complex to be gathered into a single, comprehensive statement.

Certain common features appear in many descriptions of religion. There is belief in something higher than individual human persons, whether a personal god or supernatural beings, a force within nature, a set of values, or the human race as a whole. Typically there is a distinction between sacred and secular (or profane), whether persons, objects, places, or practices. The degree of force with which a religion is held varies among religions and among the adherents of a given religion.¹

Religion also ordinarily involves a world-and-life view, that is, a perspective or general picture of reality as a whole and a conception of how individuals are to

1. William P. Alston, “Religion,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 7:141–42.

relate to the world in light of this perspective. A set of practices, of either ritual or ethical behavior or both, attaches to a religion. Certain attitudes or feelings, such as awe, guilt, and a sense of mystery, are found in religion. There is some sort of relationship or response to the higher object, such as commitment, worship, or prayer.² Finally, there are often, but not always, certain social dimensions. Groups are frequently formed on the basis of a common religious stance or commitment.³

Attempts have been made to find one common essence in all religion. For example, during much of the Middle Ages, particularly in the West, religion was thought of as belief or dogma. These beliefs distinguished Christianity from other religions and distinguished various branches of Christianity from one another. It was natural that doctrinal teachings should have been seen as primary during the period from the beginning of the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century. Since philosophy was a strong, well-established discipline, the character of religion as a worldview would naturally be emphasized. And since the behavioral sciences were still in their infancies, relatively little was said about religion as a social institution or about the psychological phenomena of religion.

With the start of the nineteenth century, however, the understanding of the locus of religion shifted. Friedrich Schleiermacher, in his *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, rejected the idea of either dogma or ethics as the locus of religion. Rather, he said, religion is a matter of feeling, either of feeling in general or of the feeling of absolute dependence.⁴ This view has been developed by the phenomenological analysis of thinkers such as Rudolf Otto, who spoke of the numinous, the awareness of the holy.⁵ This was continued in much of twentieth-century religious thought, with its reaction against logical categories and “rationalism.” Popular contemporary Christian worship shows a strong emphasis on feeling.

Schleiermacher’s formulation was in large part a reaction to the work of Immanuel Kant. Although Kant was a philosopher rather than a theologian, his three famous critiques—*The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *The Critique of Judgment* (1790)—had an immense impact on the philosophy of religion.⁶ In the first of these, he refuted the idea that it is possible to have theoretical knowledge of objects that transcend sense experience. This of course disposed of the possibility of any real knowledge of or cognitive basis for religion as traditionally understood.⁷ Rather, Kant determined that religion is an

2. Ibid.

3. “Religion, Social Aspects of,” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., *Macropaedia*, 15:604–13.

4. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

5. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

6. A. C. McGiffert, in *Protestant Thought before Kant* (New York: Harper, 1961), obviously thinks of Kant as a watershed in the development of Protestant thought even though Kant was a philosopher, not a theologian.

7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, “Transcendental Analytic,” 1.2.2.

object of the practical reason. He deemed that God, norms, and immortal life are necessary as postulates without which morality cannot function.⁸ Thus religion became a matter of ethics. This view of religion was applied to Christian theology by Albrecht Ritschl, who said that religion is a matter of moral judgments.⁹

How, then, shall we regard religion? Religion is actually all of these—belief or doctrine, feeling or attitudes, and a way of life or manner of behaving. Christianity fits all these criteria of religion. It is a way of life, a kind of behavior, a style of living. And it is this not in the sense of merely isolated individual experience, but in giving birth to social groups. Christianity also involves certain feelings, such as dependence, love, and fulfillment. And Christianity most certainly involves a set of teachings, a way of viewing reality and oneself, and a perspective from which all of experience makes sense.

To be a worthy member of a group named after a particular leader, one must adhere to the teachings of that leader. For example, a Platonist is one who in some sense holds to the conceptions taught by Plato; a Marxist is one who accepts the teachings of Karl Marx. Insofar as the leader also advocated a way of life inseparable from the message he taught, it is essential that the follower also emulate these practices. We usually distinguish, however, between inherent (or essential) practices and accidental (or incidental) practices. To be a Platonist, one need not live in Athens and speak classical Greek. To be a Marxist, one need not be a Jew, study in the British Museum, or ride a bicycle.

In the same fashion, a Christian need not wear sandals, have a beard, or live in Palestine. But those who claim to be Christians will believe what Jesus taught and practice what he commanded, such as, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (e.g., Matt. 22:39). For accepting Jesus as Lord means making him the authority by which we conduct our lives. What, then, is involved in being a Christian? James Orr put it well: “He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of Redemption, to a view of the purpose of God in creation and history, to a view of human destiny found only in Christianity.”¹⁰

It seems reasonable, then, to say that holding the beliefs that Jesus held and taught is part of what it means to be a Christian or a follower of Christ. The study of these beliefs is the particular concern of Christian theology. Belief is not the whole of Christianity.¹¹ An experience or set of experiences is involved, including love, humility, adoration, and worship. There are practices, both ethical in nature

8. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1.2.2.5.

9. Albrecht Ritschl, “Theology and Metaphysics,” in *Three Essays*, trans. Philip Hefner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 149–215.

10. James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 4.

11. Note that Stanley Grenz’s statement that “card-carrying” evangelicals “reduce[d] essential Christianity to adherence to basic doctrines” is inaccurate (Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006], 91–92).

and ritualistic or devotional. Christianity entails social dimensions, involving relationships both with other Christians in what is usually termed the church and with non-Christians in the world as a whole. Other disciplines of inquiry and knowledge investigate these dimensions of Christianity. But the central task of examining, interpreting, and organizing the teachings of the one from whom this religion takes its name belongs to Christian theology.

The actual living-out and personal practice of religion, including holding doctrinal beliefs, occur on the level of primary experience. There is also a level of reflection on what is occurring on the primary level. The discipline that concerns itself with describing, analyzing, criticizing, and organizing the doctrines is theology. Thus theology is a second-level activity as contrasted with religion. It is to religion what psychology is to human emotions, what aesthetics is to works of art, what political science is to political behavior.

Some other conceptions of theology than the one presented here need to be noted. They stem from the basic view of religion and of doctrine. To Gustavo Gutiérrez and liberation theologians, religion is clearly pragmatic, concerned with alleviating the injustices within the human race. Thus the role of doctrine is to speak to those inequities. Theology, then, becomes critical reflection on praxis.¹²

There are also those who take primarily a subjective view of religion. According to some, such as John Hick, the essence of religion is an experience of the one great reality, which he terms the “Eternal One.”¹³ This places him squarely in the Schleiermacherian tradition regarding the nature of religion. Doctrines, then, whether of different religions or of varying denominations within a given religion, are the differing interpretations various groups of people place on this generic experience as they interpret it through the grid of their own culture.¹⁴

Finally, my approach also differs from the approach of George Lindbeck and postliberals. Rejecting both the idea that religion consists primarily of its doctrinal teachings in propositional form and that it is primarily an expression of emotional experience, he proposes the cultural-linguistic view. This is the idea that religion is a set of categories or teachings that each culture constructs to interpret life and on the basis of which its members function. It does not grow out of experience so much as it shapes it. It is a story, told by its adherents, on the basis of which they make sense of life.¹⁵ Doctrine, on this view, is a second-level activity that serves a regulative function. Rather than giving us ontological knowledge about God, doctrines are rules governing the community, much the same way grammar is related to a language.¹⁶

12. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973), 6–15.

13. John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 42.

14. *Ibid.*, 50–51.

15. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 32–41.

16. *Ibid.*, 79–84.

Our contention is that doctrines do indeed consist of genuine knowledge about God, and that religion involves the whole person: intellect, emotions, and will. This view of doctrine and theology has two major advantages not possessed by any of the other views. It enables us to account for the full richness and complexity of human religions. Further, it fits more closely the actual understanding of religion and doctrine with which the early church and the authors of Scripture worked. And, to the extent that a Christian community today regards the Bible as valid, binding, and its primary authority, this view also fits the average Christian's understanding and practice of the Christian life. The other dimensions of Christian experience, such as the ethical application of Christian teachings and the wholehearted praise of God involved in worship, are intimately tied to our doctrinal understanding. But they are complementary, not alternatives to it.

The Definition of Theology

A good preliminary or basic definition of theology is *the study or science of God*. The God of Christianity is an active being, however, and so this initial definition must be expanded to include God's works and his relationship with them. Thus theology will also seek to understand God's creation, particularly human beings and their condition, and God's redemptive working in relation to humankind.

Yet more needs to be said to indicate what this science does. So we propose a more complete definition of theology: *the discipline that strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily on the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life*. This definition identifies five key aspects of the task of theology.

1. Theology is biblical. It takes as the primary source of its content the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. This is not to say that it simply draws uncritically on surface meanings of the Scriptures. It utilizes the tools and methods of biblical research. It also employs the insights of other areas of truth, which it regards as God's general revelation.

2. Theology is systematic. That is, it draws on the entire Bible. Rather than utilizing individual texts in isolation from others, it attempts to relate the various portions to one another to coalesce the varied teachings into some type of harmonious or coherent whole.

3. Theology also relates to the issues of general culture and learning. For example, it attempts to relate its view of origins to the concepts advanced by science (or, more correctly, such disciplines as cosmology), its view of human nature to psychology's understanding of personality, its conception of providence to the work of philosophy of history, and so on.

4. Theology must also be contemporary. While it treats timeless issues, it must use language, concepts, and thought forms that make some sense in the context

of the present time. There is danger here. Some theologies, in attempting to deal with modern issues, have restated the biblical materials in a way that has distorted them. Thus we hear of the very real “peril of modernizing Jesus.”¹⁷ In attempting to avoid making Jesus just another twentieth- or twenty-first-century liberal, however, theologians sometimes state the message in such a fashion as to require the present-day person to become a first-century person in order to understand it. As a result, one finds oneself able to deal only with problems that no longer exist. Thus, the opposite peril, “the peril of archaizing ourselves,”¹⁸ must similarly be avoided.

This is not merely a matter of using today’s thought forms to express the message. The Christian message should address the questions and the challenges encountered today, even while challenging the validity of some of those questions. Yet even here there needs to be caution about too strong a commitment to a given set of issues. If the present represents a change from the past, then presumably the future will also be different from the present. A theology that identifies too closely with the immediate present (i.e., the “today” and nothing but) will expose itself to premature obsolescence.

5. Finally, theology is to be practical. By this we do not mean practical theology in the technical sense (i.e., how to preach, counsel, evangelize, etc.), but the idea that theology relates to living rather than merely to belief. The Christian faith gives us help with our practical concerns. Paul, for instance, gave assurances about the second coming and then said, “Encourage each other with these words” (1 Thess. 4:18). It should be noted, however, that theology must not be concerned primarily with the practical dimensions. The practical effect or application of a doctrine is a consequence of the truth of the doctrine, not the reverse.

Locating (Systematic) Theology on the Theological Map

“Theology” is a widely used term. It is therefore necessary to identify more closely the sense in which we are using it here. In the broadest usage, the word encompasses all subjects treated in a theological or divinity school. In this sense, it includes such

17. Henry J. Cadbury, *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1937). An example of modernizing Jesus can be found in the nineteenth-century reconstructions of the life of Jesus. George Tyrrell said of Adolf von Harnack’s construction of Jesus that “the Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well” (*Christianity at the Cross-Roads* [London: Longmans, Green, 1910], 44).

18. Henry J. Cadbury, “The Peril of Archaizing Ourselves,” *Interpretation* 3 (1949): 331–37. Examples of people who archaize themselves are those who try to form communities after the pattern of the early Christian church as it is described especially in Acts 4–5, or those who try to settle the question of the validity of drinking alcoholic beverages on the basis of New Testament practice, without asking in either case whether societal changes from biblical times to the present have altered the significance of the practices in question.

diverse subjects as Old Testament, New Testament, church history, evangelism, missions, systematic theology, philosophy of religion, Christian ethics, preaching, Christian education, pastoral ministry and leadership, and counseling. A narrower sense of the word refers to those endeavors that treat the specifically *doctrinal* character of the Christian faith. Here are found such disciplines as biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and philosophical theology. This is theology as contrasted with the history of the church as an institution, the interpretation of the biblical text, or the theory and practice of ministry. Within this collection of theological subjects (biblical theology, historical theology, etc., defined below), we may isolate systematic theology in particular. It is in this sense that the word “theology” will hereafter be used in this work (unless there is specific indication to the contrary). Finally, within systematic theology, there are various doctrines, such as bibliology, anthropology, Christology, and theology proper (or the doctrine of God). To avoid confusion, when the last-mentioned doctrine is in view, the expression “doctrine of God” will be used. Figure 1 may be helpful in visualizing these relationships.

FIGURE 1
Senses of “Theology”



Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology

When we inquire regarding the relationship of systematic theology to other doctrinal endeavors, we find a particularly close relationship between systematic theology and biblical theology. The systematic theologian is dependent on the work and insights of the laborers in the exegetical vineyard.

We need to distinguish three senses of the expression “biblical theology.” Biblical theology may be thought of as the movement by that name that arose in the 1940s, flourished in the 1950s, and declined in the 1960s.¹⁹ This movement had many affinities with neo-orthodox theology. Many of its basic concepts, such as the “distinctive biblical mentality,” were severely criticized, particularly by James Barr in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*.²⁰ The decline of the biblical-theology

19. James Smart, in *The Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 10, rejects this idea that biblical theology was a movement, accepting instead only our second meaning of biblical theology. He is therefore more optimistic about the future of biblical theology than is Brevard Childs.

20. James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

movement has been documented by Brevard Childs in his *Biblical Theology in Crisis*.²¹ It now appears that, despite its name, the movement was not always especially biblical. In fact, it was at times quite *unbiblical*.²²

A second meaning of biblical theology is the theological content of the Old and New Testaments, or the theology found within individual biblical books. There are two approaches to biblical theology thus defined. One is the purely descriptive approach advocated by Krister Stendahl.²³ This is simply a presentation of the theological teachings of Paul, John, and the other New Testament writers. To the extent that it systematically describes the religious beliefs of the first century, it could be considered a systematic theology of the New Testament. (Those who see greater diversity would speak of “theologies of the New Testament.”) This is basically what Johann Philipp Gabler called biblical theology in the broader sense, or “true” biblical theology. Gabler also spoke of another approach, namely, “pure” biblical theology, which is the isolation and presentation of the unchanging biblical teachings that are valid for all times. In this approach, these teachings are purified of the contingent concepts in which they were expressed in the Bible.²⁴ We might today call this the distinction between descriptive biblical theology and normative biblical theology. Note, however, that neither of these approaches is dogmatics or systematic theology, since no attempt is made to contemporize or to state these unchanging concepts in a form suitable for our day’s understanding. Brevard Childs has suggested that this is the direction in which biblical theology needs to move in the future.²⁵ It is this second meaning of biblical theology, in either the “true” or the “pure” sense, that will ordinarily be in view when the term “biblical theology” appears in this volume.

A final meaning of the expression “biblical theology” is simply theology that is biblical, that is, based on and faithful to the teachings of the Bible. In this sense,

21. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

22. An example is W. D. Davies’s conception of “the resurrection body” of 2 Cor. 5 (*Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* [London: SPCK, 1955], 310–18). Cadbury comments regarding neo-orthodoxy, “It is not much different from modernization since the current theology often is simply read into the older documents and then out again. It is the old sequence of eisegesis and exegesis. I do not mean merely that modern words are used to describe the teaching of the Bible like ‘demonic’ or ‘encounter’ and the more philosophical vocabulary affected by modern thinkers. Even when the language is accurately biblical, it does not mean as used today what it first meant” (“The Peril of Archaizing Ourselves,” 333).

23. Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 1:418–32.

24. Johann Philipp Gabler, “Von der richtigen Unterscheidung der biblischen und der dogmatischen Theologie und der rechten Bestimmung ihrer beider Zeile,” in Otto Merk, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments in ihrer Anfangszeit; ihre methodischen Probleme bei Johann Philipp Gabler und Georg Lorenz Bauer und deren Nachwirkungen* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1972), 272–84; John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, “J. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980): 133–58.

25. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 99–122.

systematic theology of the right kind will be biblical theology. It is not simply based on biblical theology; it *is* theology that is biblical. Our goal is systematic biblical theology, or “pure” biblical theology (in the second sense) contemporized. The systematic theologian draws on the product of the biblical theologian’s work. Biblical theology is the raw material, as it were, with which systematic theology works.

Systematic Theology and Historical Theology

If New Testament theology is the systematic theology of the first century, then historical theology studies the systematic theologies held and taught by various theologians throughout the history of the church. There are two major ways to organize historical theology. It may be approached through studying the theology of a given time or a given theologian or school of theology with respect to several key areas of doctrine. Thus, the theology of each successive century or major period of time would be examined sequentially.²⁶ This might be termed the synchronic approach. The other approach is to trace the history of thought regarding a given doctrine (or a series of them) down through the periods of the church’s life.²⁷ This could be called a diachronic approach. For instance, the history of the doctrine of the atonement from biblical times to the present might be examined. Then the doctrine of the church might similarly be surveyed. This latter method of organizing the study of historical theology is often referred to as the history of doctrines, whereas the former approach is generally termed the history of Christian thought.

Systematic theologians find significant value in the study of historical theology. First, it makes us more self-conscious and self-critical, more aware of our own presuppositions. We all bring to the study of the Bible (or of any other material) a particular perspective, which is very much affected by the historical and cultural situation in which we are rooted. Without being aware of it, we screen all that we consider through the filter of our own understanding (or “preunderstanding”). An interpretation already enters at the level of perception. The question is, How can we control and channel this preunderstanding to prevent it from distorting the material being worked with? If we are aware of our own presuppositions, we can make a conscious compensation for these biases. But how do we recognize that our preunderstanding is our way of perceiving the truth, and not the way things are? One way to do this is to study the varying interpretations held and statements made at different times in the church’s life. This shows us that there are alternative ways of viewing the matter. It also makes us sensitive to the manner in which culture affects one’s thinking. It is possible to study the christological formulations of the fourth and fifth centuries and recognize the influence that Greek metaphysics had on the development of the categories. One may do so, however, without realizing that one’s own interpretation of the biblical materials about the person of Christ

26. E.g., Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971–89).

27. E.g., Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949).

(and one's own interpretation of fourth-century Christology) is similarly affected by the intellectual milieu of the present. Failure to realize this must surely be a case of intellectual presbyopia.²⁸ Observing how culture influenced theological thinking in the past should call our attention to what is happening to us.

A second value of historical theology is that we can learn to do theology by studying how others have done it before us. Thomas Aquinas's adaptation of Aristotelian metaphysics to state the Christian faith can be instructive as to how we might employ contemporary ideologies in expressing theological concepts today. The study of the theologizing work of a John Calvin, a Karl Barth, or an Augustine will give us a good model and should inspire us in our own activity.

A third value of historical theology is that it may provide a means of evaluating a particular idea. It is often difficult to see the implications that a given concept involves. Yet frequently the ideas that seem so novel today have actually had precursors at earlier periods in the life of the church. In attempting to evaluate the implications of the Jehovah's Witnesses' view of the person of Christ, one might examine the view taught by Arius in the fourth century and see where it actually led in that case. History is theology's laboratory, in which it can assess the ideas that it espouses or considers espousing.²⁹ As George Santayana reminded us, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."³⁰ If we closely examine some of our "new" ideas in the light of the history of the church, we will find that they are actually new forms of old conceptions. One need not be committed to a cyclical view of history³¹ to hold with the author of Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun (Eccles. 1:9).

Systematic Theology and Philosophical Theology

Systematic theology also utilizes philosophical theology.³² Basically, there are three contributions different theologians believe philosophy or philosophy of

28. Some of the theologians who discuss topics like the "Hebrew mind," "functional Christology," and the "unity of human nature" fail to recognize the presuppositions they bring to their analyses (existentialist, functionalist, and behaviorist, respectively). Another case in point is Jack Rogers's analysis that the principles of biblical inspiration propounded by the "Old Princeton" theologians were based on Scottish commonsense realism ("The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority," in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack Rogers [Waco, TX: Word, 1977], 39). In the same volume, there is no equally specific analysis of Rogers's own position. He characterizes it merely as Platonic/Augustinian as opposed to Aristotelian, a misleading oversimplification.

29. Millard J. Erickson, "The Church and Stable Motion," *Christianity Today*, October 12, 1973, 7.

30. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason, or the Phases of Human Progress*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Reason in Common Sense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), 284.

31. Cyclical views of history hold that instead of making progress toward a goal in a more or less straight-line fashion, history is simply repeating the same patterns. Cyclical views are often pessimistic. A religious example is Hinduism, with its belief in repeated reincarnations of the soul.

32. Philosophical theology is theologizing that draws on the input of philosophy rather than using merely biblical materials. Traditionally, such philosophical theology utilized metaphysics

religion may make to theology: philosophy may (1) supply content for theology, (2) defend theology or establish its truth, and (3) scrutinize its concepts and arguments. In the twentieth century, Karl Barth reacted vigorously against the first of these three views, and to a considerable extent against the second. His reaction was aimed at a type of theology that had become virtually a philosophy of religion or natural theology. At the same time, the influential school of analytical philosophy restricted its work to the third type of activity. Here lies a major value of philosophy for the theologian: scrutiny of the meaning of terms and ideas employed in the theological task, the criticizing of its arguments, and the sharpening of the message for clarity. In my judgment, philosophy, within somewhat restricted scope, also performs the second function, weighing the truth-claims advanced by theology and giving part of the basis for accepting the message. Thus philosophy may serve to justify in part the endeavor in which theology is engaged.³³ While philosophy, along with other disciplines of knowledge, may also contribute something from general revelation to the understanding of theological conceptions, this contribution is minor, serving to illuminate the special revelation we have in the Bible.

The Need for Theology

But is there really a need for theology? If I love Jesus, is that not sufficient? Indeed, theology seems to have certain disadvantages. It complicates the Christian message, making it confusing and difficult for the layperson to understand. It thus seems to hinder, rather than help, communication of the Christian truth. Does not theology divide rather than unite the church, the body of Christ? Note the number of denominational divisions that have taken place because of a difference of understanding and belief in some minute area. Is theology, then, really desirable, and is it helpful? Several considerations suggest that the answer to this question is yes.

1. Theology is important because correct doctrinal beliefs are essential to the relationship between the believer and God. One of these beliefs deals with God's existence and character. The writer to the Hebrews, in describing those who, like Abel and Enoch, pleased God, states: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (11:6). Without these two items of belief one would not even attempt to approach God.

very heavily. In the twentieth century, it tended to utilize logic (in the broadest sense of that word), thus becoming more analytical than speculative or constructive.

33. Although philosophy cannot prove the truth of Christian theology, it can evaluate the cogency of the evidence advanced, the logical validity of theology's arguments, and the meaningfulness or ambiguity of the concepts. On this basis philosophy offers evidence for the truth of Christianity, without claiming to prove it in some conclusive fashion. There are philosophical and historical evidences that can be advanced, but not in such a way as to offer an extremely probable induction.

Belief in the deity of Jesus Christ also seems essential to the relationship. After Jesus had asked his disciples what people thought of him, he also asked, “Who do you say I am?” Peter’s response, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” met with Jesus’s resounding approval (Matt. 16:13–19). It is not sufficient to have a warm, positive, affirming feeling toward Jesus. One must have correct understanding and belief. Similarly, Jesus’s humanity is important. First John was written to combat the teachings of some who said that Jesus had not really become human. These “docetists” maintained that Jesus’s humanity was merely an appearance. John pointed out the importance of belief in the humanity of Jesus when he wrote, “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God” (1 John 4:2–3). Finally, in Romans 10:9–10, Paul ties belief in Christ’s resurrection (both a historical event and a doctrine) directly into the salvation experience: “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” These are but a few examples of the importance of correct belief. Theology, which concerns itself with defining and establishing correct belief, is consequently important.

2. Theology is necessary because truth and experience are related. While some would deny or at least question this connection, in the long run the truth will affect our experience. A person who falls from the tenth story of a building may shout while passing each window on the way down, “I’m still doing fine,” and may mean it sincerely, but eventually the facts of the matter will catch up with the person’s experience. We may continue to live on happily for hours and even days after a close loved one has, unknown to us, passed away, but again the truth will come with crushing effect on our experience. Since the meaning and truth of the Christian faith will eventually have ultimate bearing on our experience, we must come to grips with them.

3. Theology is needful because of the large number of alternatives and challenges abroad at the present time. Secular alternatives abound, including the humanism that makes the human being the highest object of value, and the scientific method that seeks truth without recourse to revelation from a divine being. Other religions now compete with Christianity, even in once supposedly secure Western civilization. Not merely automobiles, electronic devices, and cameras are exported to the United States from the East. Eastern religion is now also challenging the once virtually exclusive domain of Christianity. Islam is growing rapidly in the United States, especially among African American males. Numerous quasi-religions also make their appeal. Countless psychological self-help systems are advocated. Cults are not restricted to the big-name varieties (e.g., Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormonism): numerous groups, some of which practice virtual brainwashing and mind control, now attract individuals who desire an alternative to conventional Christianity. Finally, many varieties of teaching, some mutually contradictory, exist within Christianity.

The solution to this confusion is not merely to determine which are false views and attempt to refute them. Authentic merchandise is studied in order to recognize counterfeits. Similarly, correctly understanding the doctrinal teachings of Christianity is the solution to the confusion created by the myriad of claimants to belief.

The Starting Point of Theology

The theologian attempting to develop a systematic treatment of Christian theology encounters a dilemma early on regarding the question of where to start. Should theology begin with the idea of God, or with the nature and means of our knowledge of him? In terms of our task here, should the doctrine of God be treated first, or the doctrine of Scripture? If, on the one hand, one begins with God, the question arises, How can anything meaningful be said about him without our having examined the nature of the revelation about him? On the other hand, beginning with the Bible or some other source of revelation seems to assume the existence of God, undermining its right to be considered a revelation at all. The dilemma theology faces here is similar to philosophy's problem of the priority of metaphysics or epistemology. On the one hand, an object cannot be investigated without a decision about the method of knowing. On the other hand, however, the method of knowing will depend, to a large extent, on the nature of the object to be known.

The former alternative, beginning with a discussion of God before considering the nature of Scripture, has been followed by a number of traditional theologies. While some simply begin using Scripture to study God without formulating a doctrine of Scripture, the problem with this is quite evident. A more common approach is to seek to establish the existence of God on some extrabiblical basis. A classic example is Augustus Hopkins Strong's systematic theology.³⁴ Strong begins his theology with the existence of God, but does not offer a proof of it. Rather, he maintains that the idea of God is a first truth, a rational intuition. It is not a piece of knowledge written on the soul, but a conception that is so basic that all other knowledge depends on it. It comes to consciousness as a result of sense experience, but is not derived from that sense experience. It is held by everyone, is impossible to deny, and cannot be resolved into or proved by any other ideas. Another form of this approach utilizes a more empirical type of natural theology. Thomas Aquinas maintained that the existence of God could be proved by pure reason, without relying on any external authority. On the basis of his observations he formulated five proofs (or a fivefold proof) for the existence of God (e.g., the proof from movement or change, the proof from order in the universe). These proofs were formulated independently of and prior to drawing on the biblical revelation.³⁵

34. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1907), 52–70.

35. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*. For a more recent example of this approach, see Norman Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974).

The usual development of the argument of both varieties of this approach, the rational and the empirical, proceeds somewhat as follows:

1. God exists (this point is assumed as a first truth or established by an empirical proof).
2. God has specially revealed himself in the Bible.
3. This special revelation must be investigated in order to determine what God has revealed.

Certain problems attach to this approach, however. One is that the second statement does not necessarily follow from the first. Must we believe that God, of whose existence we are now convinced, has revealed himself? The deists did not think so. The argument, if it is to be an argument, must establish not only that God exists, but also that he is of such a character that we may reasonably expect a revelation from him, that he has actually done so, and that the record of this revelation is found in the Bible.

The other problem concerns the identity of this god whose existence has been established. It is assumed that this is the same God revealed in Scripture. But is this so? Many other religions claim that the god whose existence is thus established is the god revealed in their sacred writings. Who is right? Is the god of Thomas's fivefold proof the same as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? The latter seems to have numerous qualities and characteristics that the former does not necessarily possess. Is not a further proof necessary, namely, that the god whose existence has been established and the God of the Bible are the same being? And, for that matter, is the god whose existence is proven by various arguments really just one being? Perhaps Thomas did not propound a fivefold proof for the existence of one god, but rather single proofs for the existence of five different gods—a creator, designer, mover, and so on. So while the usual procedure is to establish the existence of God and then present proofs for the supernatural character and origin of the Bible, it appears that a logical gap exists.

The alternative approach is to begin with the special revelation, the Bible. Those who take this approach are often skeptical about the possibility of any knowledge of God outside the Bible or the Christ-event; without special revelation, humans have no knowledge *that* God exists or of *what* he is like. Thus, Karl Barth rejected any type of natural theology. He begins his *Church Dogmatics*, following an introduction, with the doctrine of the Word of God, not the doctrine of God. His concern is with what the Word of God is, and then with what God is known to be in the light of this revelation. He does not begin with what God is and then move to what revelation must be in the light of his nature.³⁶

The problem with this approach is the difficulty of deciding what revelation is like without some prior idea of what God is like. The type of revelation a very

36. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), I/1.

transcendent God would give might well be very different from that given by a God immanent within the world and working through “natural” processes. If God is an all-controlling, sovereign God, his work of inspiring the Scriptures will be quite different from what it will be if he in fact allows a great deal of human freedom. In the former case, one might treat every word of Scripture as God’s own message, while taking it somewhat less literally in the latter case. To put it another way, how we interpret Scripture will be affected by how we conceive of God.

A further problem for this approach is, how can Scripture be regarded as a revelation at all? If we have not already established God, have we any grounds for treating the Bible as more than simply religious literature? Unless we somehow prove that the Bible must have had a supernatural origin, it may simply be a report of the religious opinions of a variety of authors. It is possible to develop a science of fictional worlds or persons. One can develop a detailed study of Wonderland, based on Lewis Carroll’s writings. Are there such places and persons, however? One could also presumably develop an extensive study of unicorns, based on the literature that refers to them. The question, however, is whether there are any such beings. The same issue attaches to a theology that, without first establishing God’s existence, begins with what the Bible has to say about him and the other topics of theology. These topics may have no objective status, no reality independent of the literature (the Bible) in which they are discussed. Our systematic theology would then be no better than a systematic unicornology.

Is there some solution to this impasse? It appears to me that there is. Instead of beginning either with God, the object of knowledge, or the Bible, the means of knowledge, we may begin with both. Rather than attempting to prove one or the other, we may presuppose both as part of a basic thesis, then proceed to develop the knowledge that flows from this thesis and assess the evidence for its truth.

On this basis, both God and his self-revelation are presupposed together, or perhaps we might think of the self-revealing God as a single presupposition. This approach has been followed by a number of conservatives who desire to hold to a propositional or informational revelation of God without first constructing a natural-theology proof for his existence. Thus the starting point would be something of this type: “There exists one Triune, loving, all-powerful, holy, all-knowing God who has revealed himself in nature, history, and human personality, and in those acts and words that are now preserved in the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.”³⁷ From this basic postulate we may proceed to elaborate an entire theological system by unfolding the contents of the Scriptures. And this system in turn will function as a worldview that, like others, can be tested for truth. While no specific part is proved antecedently to the rest, the system as a whole can be verified or validated.

37. Cf. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody, 1953), 33; Edward J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 89.

Theology as Science

Is theology entitled to be referred to as a science, and if so, of what is it a science? Another way of putting this question is to ask whether theology deals with knowledge, and if so, in what sense.

Until the thirteenth century, the term *science* was not applied to theology. Augustine preferred the term *sapientia* (wisdom) to *scientia* (knowledge). Sciences dealt with temporal things; wisdom related to eternal matters, specifically to God as the highest good. Science and knowledge could lead to wisdom. For this to happen, however, the truths acquired by the specific sciences would have to be ordered in relation to the highest good. Thus wisdom, including philosophy and theology, can serve as an organizing principle for knowledge.³⁸

Thomas Aquinas thought of theology as the queen of the sciences. He maintained that it is a derived science, because it proceeds from the principles revealed by God.³⁹ It is nobler than other sciences. Science is partly speculative and partly practical. Theology surpasses other speculative sciences by its greater certitude, being based on the light of divine knowledge, which cannot be misled, while other sciences derive from the natural light of human reason, which can err. Its subject matter—those things that transcend human reason—is superior to that of other speculative sciences, which deal with things within human grasp. It is also superior to the practical sciences, since it is ordained to eternal bliss, which is the ultimate end to which science can be directed.⁴⁰

As what we call natural science began to come into its own, the conception of science was gradually limited; a discipline had to meet more-rigid criteria in order to be designated as a science. In particular, science now is restricted to the objects of sense experience, which must be verified by the “scientific method,” which employs observation and experimentation, following strict procedures of inductive logic. On this basis, theology is rather obviously not a science, since it deals with supersensible objects.⁴¹ So, for that matter, are many of the other intellectual disciplines. Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of personality is unscientific, since no one can see or measure or test such entities as the id, the ego, and the superego. In an attempt to be regarded as scientific, disciplines dealing with humanity have tended to become behavioristic, basing their method, objects, and conclusions on what is observable, measurable, and testable, rather than on what can be known introspectively.

Theology is then in a dilemma. Either it must so redefine itself as to fulfill the criteria of science, or it must claim a uniqueness not answering to science’s norms—and thus surrender the claim to being a science and also virtually surrender

38. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 14.3.

39. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.4.4.

40. *Ibid.*, art. 5.

41. Rudolf Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (New York: AMS, 1979), chap. 1, “The Rejection of Metaphysics.”

the claim to being knowledge in the sense of involving true propositions about objective realities (i.e., realities existing independently of the knower).

Karl Barth has argued vigorously for the autonomy of theology. He notes Heinrich Scholz's six criteria that theology must meet if it is to be accepted as *Wissenschaft*:⁴² (1) theology must be free from internal contradiction; (2) there must be a unity or coherence in its propositions; (3) its statements must be susceptible to testing; (4) it must make no assertion that is physically and biologically impossible; (5) it must be free from prejudice; (6) its propositions should be capable of being broken up into axioms and theorems and demonstrated on that basis. Barth accepts the first criterion only partially, and rejects the others. "Not an iota can be yielded here without betraying theology," he writes. It nonetheless is to be called a "science," because like all other sciences (1) it is a human effort after a definite object of knowledge; (2) it follows a definite, self-consistent path to knowledge; and (3) it is accountable to itself and to everyone capable of effort after this object and hence of following this path.⁴³

What shall we say, then, about theology as a science? It must first be noted that the definition that virtually restricts science to natural science, and then tends to restrict knowledge to science, is too narrow.

Second, if we accept the traditional criteria for knowledge, theology must be regarded as scientific. (1) Theology has a definite subject matter to investigate, primarily that which God has revealed about himself. (2) Theology deals with objective matters. It does not merely give expression to the subjective feelings of the theologian or of the Christian. (3) It has a definite methodology for investigating its subject matter. (4) It has a method for verifying its propositions. (5) There is coherence among the propositions of its subject matter.

Third, to some extent, theology occupies common ground with other sciences. (1) Theology is subject to certain basic principles or axioms. In particular, it is answerable to the same canons of logic as are other disciplines. (2) It involves communicability. What one theologian refers to can be understood, observed, and investigated by others as well. (3) Theology employs, to some extent at least, methods employed by other specific disciplines. It shows a particular affinity for the methodology of history, since it makes claims regarding historical occurrences, and for the methodology of philosophy, since it advances metaphysical claims. (4) It shares some subject matter with other disciplines. Thus it is possible that some of its propositions may be confirmed or refuted by natural science, behavioral science, or history.

At the same time, theology has its own unique status. It deals with unique objects or with common objects in a unique way. It shares with numerous other

42. A German term meaning, derivatively, "knowledge." It is usually rendered "science," but in a broader sense than that English word ordinarily conveys. There are *Naturwissenschaften* (sciences of nature) and *Geisteswissenschaften* (sciences of spirit). The word usually denotes an organized discipline of knowledge.

43. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 7–8.

sciences humanity as an object, yet considers it in a different light than do any of these others. It considers what God has revealed about humankind; thus it has data of its own. And it considers humans in relationship to God; thus it treats the human within a frame of reference not examined by any of the other disciplines.

Why the Bible?

The question, however, may and should be raised as to why the Bible should be considered the primary source and criterion for building our understanding of Christian theology or even of Christianity. This calls for a closer analysis of the nature of Christianity.

Every organization or institution has some goals, objectives, or defining basis. These are usually formalized in something like a constitution or charter that governs the form and functions of the organization, and determines the qualifications for membership. Especially where this is a legally incorporated body, these standards are in effect unless replaced or modified by persons having authority to alter them.

Christianity is not an institution as such. While it may take institutional form, the movement known as Christianity is just that—a movement rather than an organization per se. Thus, while local churches may set up requirements for membership in their body, the universal church must look elsewhere.

From the name itself it should be apparent that Christianity is a movement that follows Jesus Christ. We would then logically look to him to state what is to be believed and what is to be done—in short, what constitutes being a Christian. Yet we have very little information outside the Bible regarding what Jesus taught and did. On the assumption that the Gospels are reliable sources of historical information (an assumption that we will test at a later point), we must turn to them for reports of Jesus’s life and teaching. Those books that Jesus endorsed (i.e., the books that we now refer to as the Old Testament) must be regarded as further sources for our Christianity. If Jesus taught that additional truth was to be revealed, that also is to be examined. If Jesus claimed to be God himself and if his claim is true, then of course no human has the authority either to abrogate or to modify what he has taught. The position that Jesus himself proposed in founding the movement is determinative, not what may be said and taught by others who at some later point may call themselves Christians.

This is true in other areas as well. While there may be some reinterpretation and reapplication of the concepts of the founder of a school of thought, there are limits beyond which changes cannot be made without forfeiting the right to bear that person’s name. Thus, Thomists are those who hold substantially to the teachings of Thomas Aquinas. When too much adaptation is done, the view has to be called *Neo-Thomism*. Usually these “neo-” movements fall within the broad stream and spirit of the founder but have made significant modifications. At some point the differences may become so great that a movement cannot even

be considered a “neo-” version of the original. Note the arguments that went on among Marxists as to who were the true Marxists and who were the “revisionists.” Following the Reformation there were divisions within Lutheranism between the genuine Lutherans and the Philippists, the followers of Philipp Melancthon.

This is not to say that the doctrines will be maintained in precisely the same form of expression that was held to in biblical times. To be truly biblical does not ordinarily mean repeating the words of Scripture precisely as they were written. Indeed, to repeat the exact words of Scripture may be to make the message quite *unbiblical*. A biblical sermon does not consist exclusively of biblical quotations strung together. Rather, it involves interpreting, paraphrasing, analyzing, and resynthesizing the materials, applying them to a given situation. To give a biblical message is to say what Jesus (or Paul, etc.) would say today to this situation. Indeed, Paul and Jesus did not always give the same message in precisely the same way. They adapted what they had to say to their hearers, using slightly different nuances of meaning for different settings. An example is found in Paul’s epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians, which deal with basically the same subject, but with slight differences.

In making the Bible the primary or supreme source of our understanding, we are not completely excluding all other sources. In particular, if God has also revealed himself in general ways in such areas as nature and history (as the Bible itself seems to teach), then we may also fruitfully examine these for additional clues to understanding the principal revelation. But these will be secondary to the Bible.

2

The Possibility of Theology

Chapter Objectives

Following your study of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Identify the emphases and characteristics of modernism.
2. Compare and contrast modern themes with those of postmodernism.
3. Identify and assess several proposals regarding the nature and purpose of doctrine.
4. Recognize the effects of perspective on doing theology, and how they might be overcome.
5. Describe the three levels of activity identified as faith, doctrine, and theology.

Chapter Summary

Modernism, the view that dominated thinking from the eighteenth through the late twentieth centuries, emphasized rationality and certainty. As modernism fell out of favor, postmodernism rejected modern foundationalism as a test for truth, asserting that all knowledge is conditioned. This has affected many intellectual endeavors, including theology. Although the question regarding the purpose of doctrine has been answered in a variety of ways, the most acceptable is that doctrine is cognitive. Admitting that even doctrinal views are biased, we have several ways by which to reduce the effects of this conditioning upon theology. Theology is an activity of the church in which believers may be engaged at three levels: the practicing believer, those who teach other believers, and the theoreticians.

Study Questions

- In what ways did modernism affect theology, especially apologetics, in the twentieth century?
- How would you summarize the postmodern response to modernism?
- What are some useful insights of the postmodern analysis?
- Describe the importance of doctrine being cognitive.
- How would you explain the difficulties faced by perspectivists in maintaining their own view?
- In what ways does classical foundationalism differ from neofoundationalism as proposed in this chapter?

Outline

The Changing Context of Theologizing

Modernism

Postmodernism

The Nature of Doctrine

Perspectivism and Ideology

Theology beyond Postmodernism

Postperspectivism

Correspondence View of Truth

Neofoundationalism

Common Logic

Faith, Doctrine, Theology

In every period of time, the church faces the question of the very possibility of theology. Can we develop a theology, and if so, what is required in order to do this? Upon the successful answer to this inquiry rests the possibility of the remainder of our endeavor.

The Changing Context of Theologizing

Modernism

The issues involved in this question vary with the era under consideration. In the modern period, from approximately the eighteenth through the late twentieth centuries, there was a belief in human rationality and the rationality of the universe. As in the premodern period, there was belief that the events of history constituted an order and pattern, but whereas premoderns looked for this in a realm external to nature, whether in supersensible Platonic forms or in the plan and working of a wise and powerful God, in the modern period such explanation or scheme was believed to be found within the realm of nature rather than beyond it. Events are explained in terms of the social realities that cause them, rather than in terms of

the purpose of a transcendent God. Similarly, causation was thought of as efficient rather than final. There are no purposes for the sake of which something exists or happens. There are only causes leading to its occurrence.¹

There is in modern thought a strong emphasis on rationality and certainty. This shows itself clearly in the thought of the man whom many consider the founder of modernism, René Descartes. A mathematician, Descartes sought for the same certainty in philosophy that can be found in mathematics. He resolved to doubt everything he could. This is classical foundationalism, a common characteristic of modern thought: the basing of one's thinking on some indubitable or obvious principles, from which reasoning can then proceed.

Another philosopher who contributed heavily to the modern view was Immanuel Kant. Inquiring into the nature of knowledge and how we acquire it, Kant concluded that there are two necessary elements in any theoretical knowledge. Sense experience supplies the data from which knowledge is made up. The logical or rational structure of the mind gives organization to those data, supplying wholes for the complex of data and such connecting elements as sequence and cause. Because we have no sensory experience of God, he cannot be the object of theoretical reason (or "pure reason," as Kant termed it). Yet he must be introduced as a practical necessity for morality. Practical reason requires God, but as an object of faith, not proven by reason. Thus, an epistemological dualism was introduced, between reason (in science, history, and other intellectual disciplines) and faith (in religion).

A third development was the rise of modern science, as related to the thought of Bacon and exemplified most fully in the thought of Newton. This involved the idea that real knowledge came from the process of empirical observation and testing that science developed to the fullest. Part of the vindication for the scientific method came through technology, which is the application of the pure sciences to practical issues. The accomplishments here have been truly astounding. Communications, transportation, and medicine made huge leaps of progress.

One of the most insightful descriptions of the rise of the modern period is John Herman Randall's *Making of the Modern Mind*. We may draw from this book a number of characteristics of modernity.²

1. Modernism has been essentially humanistic. The human being is the center of reality, and in a sense everything exists for the sake of the human. Humans are now able to control nature through the use of science, and they are the ones who determine what happens in history.

2. Together with humanism is naturalism. Paralleling the shift from God to humanity is the shift from anything heavenly or ethereal to the earth. In practice, the tendency increasingly has been to restrict reality to the observable universe, and to understand even humans in light of this system of nature.

1. William Dean, *History Making History: The New Historicism in American Religious Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 4.

2. John Herman Randall Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind: A Survey of the Intellectual Background of the Present Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), chaps. 11–15.

3. The scientific method, regarded as the best means for gaining knowledge, has increasingly come to be considered virtually the only means of investigating truth. Thus other disciplines increasingly have attempted to model themselves after the methods of natural science.

4. Nature, rather than being thought of as passive and an object of human activity, is considered dynamic, and the sole and sufficient cause and explanation of all that occurs. Humans are not as uniquely different from other living beings as was formerly thought.

5. Determinism is a strong element in modernism. Science is possible because there are certain regularities within reality, which can be discovered and formulated into laws. This enables humans both to predict and to control what happened.

6. This scientific method also tends to be practiced in a reductionistic fashion. Objects of study are regarded as “nothing but” something more basic. Thus, psychology tends to be reduced to biology, biology to chemistry, and chemistry to physics.

7. There is a strong tendency toward foundationalism. This, as we noted earlier, is the attempt to ground knowledge on some sure first principles. For Descartes, this was clear and distinct ideas, while for David Hume, an empiricist, sense experience was the basis. The logical positivists followed basically the empiricist route, seeking to get back to certain sentences based directly on sense experience. This means that knowledge is thought to be absolute and unqualified, whereas religion must base itself on faith.

8. There is a commitment to metaphysical realism. The objects of scientific inquiry are external to the consciousness of the knower, existing independently of any perception of them.

9. There is a representative view of language. In other words, language refers to real objects that are extralinguistic.

10. There is a correspondence theory of truth. Truth is a measure of propositions and is present in those propositions, which correctly correspond to the states of affairs that they claim to present.

In general, modernism has sought for an explanation that would cover all things. So the great systems of the modern period were omni-explanatory. Darwinism accounted for everything in terms of biological evolution. Freudian psychology explained all human behavior in light of sexual energy, repression, and unconscious forces. Marxism interpreted all events of history in economic categories, with the forces of dialectical materialism moving history toward the inevitable classless society. These ideologies offered universal diagnoses as well as universal cures.

We can consequently see why the battles of theology in the early part of the twentieth century were over such issues as miracles and evolution. Theology had to battle to establish its respectability, that is, its status as knowledge, in a world that tended to exalt science and reduce knowledge to the scientific. Apologetics sought to establish by natural reason the existence of God, and Christian evidences were adduced to certify the accuracy of the Scriptures.

There was also a broader or more offensive version of apologetics. Rather than simply conceding the modern conception of knowledge and attempting to make theology fit its standards, this approach challenged the modern idea of the firmness and objectivity of scientific thinking. It sought to show that even science had its own unproven assumptions, which it justified largely on pragmatic grounds.³ One of Carl Henry's earliest writings took this approach, something that critics who simplistically label him "modern" overlook. His approach, more Augustinian than Thomistic, in some ways anticipated some of the critiques postmodernism directed at modernism.⁴

Postmodernism

Gradually the modern view has tended to fall from favor, particularly outside of scientific circles. Instead, a movement generally labeled "postmodernism" has been growing in ascendancy. In some ways, it represents an extension of some of the directions of modernism, but with a gradual decline of belief in the efficacy of these efforts. In some other ways, postmodernism represents a rejection of modernism's approach, and thus is its successor. By its very nature, postmodernism denies the possibility of systematic descriptions of things, so that an attempt to describe and analyze it is an impossibility. It should be noted, however, that just as there are varying degrees of detail and precision of maps, so there can be sketches of a view, even if detailed and precise description of it is impossible. Thus, we may note several themes that recur, in varying form, in different varieties of postmodernism.⁵

1. The conditioned nature of knowledge. Whereas modernism thought that it saw things just as they were, most postmodernists insist that all knowledge is conditioned, that is, affected by one's situation geographically and culturally. We really do not know the object of knowledge directly or as it is, but through the filter of our own experience and setting. The objectivity that the modernist sought is an illusion. Knowledge is relative to the knower. In theory, this could result in the conclusion that there are as many versions of truth as there are knowers, but postmodernism generally introduces the community as the check upon such unbridled variety.

2. The locus of meaning. With respect to texts, meaning does not reside exclusively within the text, in the sense of what the author intended to say thereby. Rather, the meaning of the text is the meaning as interpreted, that is, the meaning

3. While for our purposes theological criticism is of greater interest, it is notable that similar critiques were arising from the broader intellectual community. See, for example, Anthony Standen, *Science Is a Sacred Cow* (New York: Dutton, 1950).

4. Carl Henry, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946).

5. For a popular but more extensive sketch of postmodernism, see my *Postmodern World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002). For a more technical examination and evaluation of postmodernism, see my *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

that it has to the reader. There is a “fusion of horizons,” in which the meaning intended by the author and the meaning understood by the reader interact.

3. Skepticism toward all-inclusive theories. Modernists were seeking one explanation that would account for everything, examples being those mentioned earlier or even current physicists’ superstring theory, popularly referred to as the “theory of everything.” Postmodernists reject these “metanarratives,” as they term them. Indeed, Jean-François Lyotard made incredulity toward metanarratives the defining feature of postmodernism.⁶ Many reasons are given for this hesitation. Some object that no such theory can be constructed by finite humans, who cannot know everything. Others claim that such views have historically been used to justify oppression, as for instance social Darwinism argued that some persons are inherently superior to others. Sometimes the perspectival character of knowledge, mentioned in the previous paragraph, has been invoked, showing that therefore there is no truth that is the same truth for everyone. Some insist that metanarratives are only constructed by ignoring certain considerations, and so must be “deconstructed” by calling attention to these contradictory elements. For any or all of these reasons, any claim to a universal theory must be regarded with a hermeneutic of suspicion.⁷

4. Distrust of the efficacy of reason as the sole source of knowledge. There is a real place for intuition, imagination, and other means to truth. Part of this is the result of realization of the function of power. Whereas the usual approach had been that knowledge is objective and enables us to gain understanding of reality, and to predict and even control it, postmodernists take a quite different stance. Truth is itself the product, not the producer, of power. Those who have the ability to do so decide what shall be the truth, through means such as the teacher deciding what the students shall be required to read.

5. Diminution of the value of propositions. The modern way of conveying truth was through the use of propositions, sentences purporting to accurately describe reality. These were to be made as precise as possible, in the hope of achieving the much-sought-after objectivity. Given its view of truth, however, postmodernism prefers a narrative approach. Just as Jesus often used parables, so the truth can often be better conveyed in story form, or telling one’s personal experiences. This in turn highlights a preference for personal experience over experiment or investigation.

6. Rejection of foundationalism. Especially prevalent in recent postmodern work has been skepticism toward foundationalism as a test for truth. This refers

6. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii–xxv.

7. To the extent that third world Christians have become familiar with postmodernism, some of them have seen some elements of postmodernism, such as its rejection of reason as the sole source of knowledge, as valid and usable in their theology. They have, however, been wary of its tendency toward pluralism, and thus toward syncretism. Wonsuk Ma, “Biblical Studies in the Pentecostal Tradition: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel*, ed. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1999), 63–68.

to the structural scheme of knowledge. Foundationalism argues that propositions are justified by a demonstration of their relationship to certain basic propositions considered to be true, which form the basis or foundation on which all the others rest. In classical foundationalism, these basic propositions were considered unquestionable, whether they were self-evident, indubitable, or otherwise certain. For example, a sense experience may seem obviously true. Instead of justifying its propositions by appeal to such foundations, postmodernists prefer either coherentism or pragmatism. Coherentism is the theory that the truth of propositions is demonstrated by their coherence with other (and perhaps, all other) propositions believed true. Pragmatism is the theory that the truth of propositions is demonstrated by their practical effects.

7. Lessened optimism about the benefits of knowledge. In modernism, knowledge was considered inherently good, and as the means to the solution of human problems. This has proven to be the case in such areas as medicine, where whole diseases, such as smallpox and poliomyelitis, have been eradicated. Other areas, however, such as human conflict leading even to war, have not proven similarly susceptible to human control.

It should be apparent that the challenges presented to theology in this period are quite different from those of the modern period. Here the issue is not so much whether Christian theology is true, but whether anything is “true,” in the traditional sense, and if so, whether we can know with any certainty that it is true.

There are, however, some reasons to question postmodernism itself. There is much that is correctly insightful in the postmodern analysis. This is particularly true of perspectivalism, according to which each of us is affected by our situation, such as time and place, culture, gender, and race. Modernism, particularly in the form of scientism and reductionism, restricted reality to what fit a particular framework. Yet, this being said, there are points of weakness in postmodernism that should make us hesitant about too easy and complete an acceptance of it.

One of the central problems of deconstruction in literature, or of Richard Rorty’s contention that linguistic terms do not represent any nonlinguistic entities, is the difficulty of maintaining it with any consistency. Deconstruction has been used by various groups to advance their specific agenda. Thus, feminists have deconstructed what they considered paternalistic texts, and Marxists have done the same with texts of oppression; but as James Sire points out, “the ‘deconstruction’ touted by Derrida and DeMan is in the last analysis universal. Depending on how it is interpreted, nihilism is either the legitimate father or legitimate child of ‘deconstruction.’ . . . In any case, neither feminism nor Marxism can withstand its acids. If no text is privileged, no story more ‘true’ than any other, then every ideology fails to be grounded.”⁸ Therefore, if deconstruction is correct, then it

8. James W. Sire, “On Being a Fool for Christ and an Idiot for Nobody: Logocentricity and Postmodernity,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 106.

must also be deconstructed. If meaning does not reside within the text but is created by the interpreter, if history is created by the historian, if truth is what proves good for one's community, then this must be applied to deconstruction, neopragmatism, and the new historicism as well.

It is very difficult to be a deconstructionist and advocate deconstruction. It may very well be possible to be a consistent deconstructionist and keep that to oneself. As soon as one attempts to communicate deconstruction to others and argue that they should accept it as true, one has denied in practice what one is professing in theory. This is because that act seems to assume that the meaning of what one is saying is the meaning the speaker or writer intends, and that there is some common point of reference to which another person can also give attention.

This was brought out rather dramatically in the case of Derrida. John Searle wrote a response to an article of Derrida, challenging and criticizing several of his conceptions.⁹ Searle's article was eleven pages in length. In his ninety-three-page reply, Derrida objected that Searle had been unfair to him and had at several points misunderstood and misstated his position. He even asserted at one point that what he had meant should have been clear and obvious to Searle.¹⁰ John Ellis observes that some of Derrida's followers were embarrassed by this inconsistency between Derrida's profession and his actual practice in this article. Yet he maintains that those same disciples "generally have also done exactly what embarrassed them when they saw Derrida doing it (i.e., they also routinely accuse Searle of misunderstanding, missing the point of, and misstating Derrida's position)."¹¹ Similarly, Frank Lentricchia accuses the "Yale group" of misconstruing Derrida's writing by "ignoring . . . an important part of the author's intention."¹² If, however, the position of deconstruction is that the author's intention does not control the meaning of his or her text, then this would seem to be an inconsistent position.

The response, of course, to this criticism can be that it assumes a logic that deconstruction does not adopt. Therefore, the objection is not legitimate. But the question that must be asked is, What kind of logic is employed when we discuss kinds of logic? In other words, does the very response assume a kind of logic that it seems to reject? It would appear that for the response to make any sort of sense, or to have the right to be taken seriously, requires the assumption of some sort of logic at least resembling in some way the logic here assumed, that is, that *a* cannot both mean *x* and not-*x* at the same time and in the same respect.¹³

9. John Searle, "Reiterating the Differences: Reply to Derrida," *Glyph* 1 (1977): 198–208.

10. Jacques Derrida, "Limited Inc abc . . .," *Glyph* 2 (1977): 162–254.

11. John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 14n10.

12. Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 170.

13. Derrida admitted as much (*Writing and Difference* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], 280–81).

In practice, postmodernists do not really follow their theory. If all thought is conditioned, and therefore relative, then that applies to postmodernism as well. One would expect to find postmodernists couching their ideas in rather tentative fashion. Such is not ordinarily the case. Rather than saying, “This is my opinion,” or “This is how I see it,” they state their cases as if what they are advancing is really something that others should see, understand, and accept.

Another way to put it is this. The postmodern rejection of the rationalism of the modern period is both legitimate and desirable. But this does not mean that all rationality must also necessarily be rejected. Indeed, it is impossible to do so and still engage in meaningful thought and communication. Many postmodernists reject any sort of objective rational cognitive approach, dismissing it as modernism, by which is often meant the extremism of the Enlightenment. In reality, however, what they are rejecting is not just modernism, but the whole Western tradition, as one can see on closer examination of such thinkers as Augustine and Aquinas. Further, Paul Griffiths has argued that the type of logic we usually identify as Western is not restricted to Westerners.¹⁴

One insight that a postmodern theology certainly must accept and utilize is the fact that we do our investigation and our thinking from a particular perspective, imposing certain limitations on our understanding. This distinction between the truth and our knowledge of the truth has frequently been neglected, with unfortunate results. Some, of a basically premodern and precritical mind, have assumed, because of their commitment to the objectivity of revealed truth, that their knowledge of that truth could be equated with the truth and therefore must also be absolute. On the other hand, some, holding a late modern or postmodern orientation, have concluded that if our knowledge is relative, then truth must be relative as well. This, however, eventually leads to some form of subjectivism.

The Nature of Doctrine

One important question is, what is the nature and purpose of doctrine? Over the years, a number of different answers to this question have been given.

1. Doctrine as conveyor of truth. This understanding, sometimes called the cognitive view of doctrine, has probably been the dominant one during the history of the church. According to this understanding, doctrines make statements that have truth value, that is, they are capable of being either true or false. They tell us what God is like, what he does, what his creatures are like and his relationship to them, as well as what his intentions are in the universe. They have a primarily descriptive character. This corresponded to the idea of religion as cognitive, or as involving belief.

2. Doctrine as interpretation of experience. Friedrich Schleiermacher concluded that the nature of religion, including the Christian religion, did not consist of

14. Paul J. Griffiths, “Philosophizing across Cultures, or How to Argue with a Buddhist,” *Criterion* 26, no. 1 (1987): 10–14.

either beliefs or actions but in feeling. In this scheme of things, doctrines are an expression of those feelings. To be a Christian is to feel oneself utterly dependent upon God. For Schleiermacher, doctrines were the result of reflection on those feelings. While they “are not necessary for religion itself, . . . reflection requires and creates them.”¹⁵ While for Schleiermacher this experience and reflection were individual matters, for the postconservative evangelical Stanley Grenz, it was rather a matter of the community. Defining evangelical Christianity as an experience (specifically the experience of new birth), Grenz classifies doctrine as a product of a second-level activity, reflection on that experience, insisting that theology is the believing community’s reflection on its faith.¹⁶

3. Doctrine as practical action. There were two theological reactions to Immanuel Kant’s contention that there could be no theoretical knowledge of supersensible objects, and thus of God. Schleiermacher, as we noted, shifted the locus of religion to feeling, but Albrecht Ritschl made it a matter of value judgments and thus of practical activity. From this came the ethical emphasis of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberalism. Increasingly this meant that doctrine would find its locus in such practice. One can see this in the thought of William Hamilton, a theologian in the “Death of God” movement, who suggested that theology would no longer be done in the study, but rather hammered out in involvement in the civil rights movement.¹⁷ Various forms of liberation theology emphasize this in various ways, with Gustavo Gutiérrez insisting that theology should be understood as reflection on praxis, and black and feminist theologians also making the plight of oppressed peoples the object of their thought.¹⁸

4. Doctrine as linguistic rules. Some postliberals, particularly George Lindbeck, have proposed that doctrines are neither truth claims nor expressions of experiences, but rather operating rules of Christian communities. Doctrines resemble the rules of grammar. Just as the rules of grammar do not give us any information about the truth or falsity of what the sentences refer to, but only how those sentences are to be constructed and are to function, so doctrines do not inform us or convey information about any state of affairs. Rather, they are rules for the functioning of the community that adopts them.¹⁹

15. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 87.

16. Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 80–85.

17. William Hamilton, “The Death of God Theologies Today,” in Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 46–50.

18. E.g., Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973); James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lipincott, 1970); Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

19. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 17–19.

5. Doctrine as the story of God's working. On this view, rather than being expressed in a collection of propositions, doctrines should be thought of as a narrative of God's activity. Some have even said that we should not limit ourselves to the Scriptures, as the record of a particular period of God's working. Rather, we should remember that the Bible is a narrative account of God's past working, but he continues to work among those who are his believers through the history of the church. So, for example, James McClendon distinguishes between Jesus, who lived on earth for a period of about thirty years in the country of Palestine, in the first century, and Christ, who continues to work in his "body" (the church) throughout all ages.²⁰ Thus, in the formulation of our theology, we should include the lives and experiences of those who have lived since biblical times.

Each of these views contains an important insight and expresses an important part of what doctrine is and does. Certainly the biblical writers, the prophets and apostles, believed that the statements they were making about God, Christ, and the reality of salvation were describing something that really is that way. Further, they often were conscious that they were giving utterance to a profound experience of God. Think for example of Moses's description of his experience at the burning bush, or of Paul's recounting of his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. Much practical action was motivated by the truths that had been revealed. Paul appealed to believers on the basis of the incarnation, in Philippians 2. Similarly, the prohibition of murder in Genesis 9:6 is an implication of the teaching that all humans are made in the image of God. It was also evident that the teachings about God and his actions were the basis of the church's operation. This can be seen in passages such as Galatians 1, where the great teaching of justification by faith is to govern the church, or in James 2, where the equal value of humans, all of whom have been created by God, is to affect church practice. Certainly the Bible describes God's working in dramatic terms, and indicates that the church is a continuation of that working, in passages such as John 15 and Galatians 2.

The question, however, is which of these can best serve as the primary understanding of doctrine, and does the best job of incorporating the other aspects of the doctrine. It appears to me that the first, the idea of doctrine as cognitive, is the best candidate for this role. Doctrines certainly express an experience of the believer, but it is an experience that would not occur without the doctrinal framework within which it is embodied. If not, then, as John Hick has shown, the similarity of experiences among different religions might mean that each is equally valid,²¹ something Scripture seems emphatically to reject (Exod. 20:2–3). Doctrines definitely have practical implications, but in the biblical pattern (as with Paul in Phil. 2:3–11 for example), the practice follows from the doctrine, rather than the reverse. Doctrines certainly do serve as guidelines for the functioning of

20. James McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974).

21. John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 62–67.

the community that adopts them, but without some objective grounding in a reality that transcends the community, one is faced with the problem of which community to identify with, and why. Further, much of Scripture is narrative in nature, but major portions are not, and although God's working within the community was part of his ongoing revelation within biblical times, not all instances were treated equally positively, and criteria for evaluating these were applied. The description of the drama was incomplete without the didactic interpretation thereof. The church also made the judgment that there was a qualitative difference between the biblical community and that which followed. All in all, then, the first of these views, when sufficiently broad to include the other insights, appears to have been the dominant view held by the church throughout its history.

Perspectivism and Ideology

It is now widely recognized that because all thought proceeds from a specific point within history and culture, that situation influences what is seen, thought, and understood. It is generally something of which each person is unaware, so its influence is more subtle. It is believed to be universal. There is no absolute and unlimited perspective, no neutral standing point from which one can view reality as it is, pure and uncontaminated by some particularity. While this has been most extensively and vigorously contended by postmodernists, the insight is not unique to that philosophy, nor were postmodernists the first to assert it.

At this point, most perspectivists rest their case. They are content to use this as a means of relativizing or even refuting their opponents' position. Unfortunately, however, the insight is not usually carried over in application to that person's own view. One would expect that the view would be articulated with lavish expressions of its recognized tentativeness and fallibility. Ordinarily, however, such admissions are absent. Opinions are presented as if they are not merely another culturally bound perspective; they carry the tone of being the way things really are.

Why is this seeming blindness so common? It takes different forms. Sometimes it is a simple case of what I have labeled "chronocentrism." This is the idea that one's present time is not only superior to preceding periods; it is unique. It is superior to any that might follow, or it even is of such a quality of truth that it will not be supplanted by anything that follows.²² This would be an acknowledgment that one is indeed conditioned, but that is not a bad thing, for the influences conditioning one's view are salutary in nature. So one may find criticism of a given

22. I made the point on one occasion that all views are conditioned and transitory and that postmodernism would be supplanted and that the process was perhaps already underway. A postmodern evangelical theologian present asked how I could be sure that postmodernism would someday become passé. I replied that I was not sure, but that since every other view had sooner or later been supplanted, the burden of proof was on him to argue that the process would not continue. The discussion immediately shifted to other issues.

theology on the basis that it is “modern” in character, while presumably being of a postmodern orientation is a good thing. Similarly, open theists have criticized the traditional view of divine foreknowledge on the basis that it is based on “Greek” philosophy, which presumably is a bad thing.²³ Some of them have acknowledged their own debt to process philosophy, without apparently considering that this has any bearing on the validity of their own view.²⁴ This is one form of saying that their view draws upon the correct (or at least a more correct) philosophy, while the other theology is based on a false or inadequate philosophy.

Probably a more common explanation is that one is simply so unable to escape one’s own perspective as to be incapable of recognizing that it is just that, a perspective. In other words, one’s own conditioning is so complete that it shields one from the recognition that one is not working from a neutral viewpoint. It may be an unrecognized and unacknowledged belief that the conditioning process has limitations.²⁵

A third possibility, in the case of some postmodernists who follow the approach of Michel Foucault, is that one may hold the view that power makes truth, so if one is able to assert one’s view and have that assertion go unchallenged, that person should simply go ahead and do so.

It is not merely theologians and philosophers who suffer from this ideological blind spot. The sociology of knowledge contends that beliefs and ideas grow out of the social setting in which they are held, and in more extreme forms of this sociology, they are thought of as having been determined by that social setting. This, however, raises the question of whether the sociology of knowledge does not also apply to the theory known as the sociology of knowledge, thus having the effect of relativizing it as well as other theories. Berger and Luckmann, however, respond that raising such a question is like trying to push a bus in which one is riding, which of course is argument by appeal to an analogy that is debatable at best. Since this is not part of the substantive content of sociology but rather part of the methodology of the social sciences, they decline to discuss the issue.²⁶ Bierstadt sees the implications of his position and is more forthright: “We

23. John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 59–60.

24. Clark Pinnock, “Between Classical and Process Theism,” in *Process Theology*, ed. Ronald Nash (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 316–17; Richard Rice, “Process Theism and the Open View of God: The Crucial Difference,” in *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists*, ed. John B. Cobb Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 165–66; William Hasker, “An Adequate God,” in Cobb and Pinnock, *Searching for an Adequate God*, 216–17.

25. In a panel discussing the differences and relative merits of the modern and postmodern views, I raised the question of the status of our discussion itself, asking whether our discourse was a modern or postmodern one, or what. One panelist, an avowed postmodernist, responded, “I don’t understand the question.”

26. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1966), 12–13.

unhappily confront a situation in which knowledge has lost its truth and so also have all propositions in the sociology of knowledge. The ultimate and unresolvable paradox . . . is that the sociology of knowledge destroys the possibility of a sociology of knowledge.” He says that this is an unresolvable paradox, and he can only throw up his hands and quote Kant’s statement that reason has the ability to raise questions to which it cannot give answers.²⁷

Theology beyond Postmodernism

I would contend that we must go beyond any of these positions. In a sense, what I am advocating here is a post-postmodernism, although for me personally, this belief chronologically preceded the advent of postmodernism. If postmodernism holds that all beliefs are historically and culturally conditioned but does not apply this insight to its own position, without either arguing that its view is a valid exception or offering any exempting conditions, then the view I am advocating does not stop short but pushes further. It asserts that all views are conditioned and therefore biased, but then proposes that this is not the conclusion of the matter, but rather a transitional point. We must go beyond this to actively attempt to reduce the effect of this conditioning on our own outlook. This is to say that although perfect objectivity is not attainable, it is desirable, and as close an approximation as possible should be pursued.

If, however, doctrine is to be considered as at least in major part cognitive in nature, what should be the character of a theology built on this conception in the current environment? Several characteristics are especially prominent for this period, but are applicable to doing theology at other times as well.

Postperspectivism

Theology must recognize and give full weight to the fact that all of our knowledge is limited and is affected by the unique circumstances and experiences of an individual or a group. This, however, is not the answer; it is the question: namely, what shall we do about this? If we simply stop at this point, we are left with a relativism that ultimately must say something like, “That is how you see it, but I see it differently.” Any attempt to establish one view as superior to another must either assume some standpoint of neutral perspective, or will ultimately reduce to the postmodern view that power establishes truth, which is either force or manipulation. Our theology must take full account of the fact of conditioning and perspectivism, as enunciated so forcefully by postmodernism.²⁸ Then, however,

27. Robert Bierstadt, introduction to *The Social Determination of Meaning*, by Judith Willer (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 3.

28. We should note again that this is not an original insight of postmodernism. It can be found at many points in the history of human thought, although not with the recent refinement. It goes back at least as far as the discussion in Plato’s *Theaetetus*.

we will aim to decontextualize ourselves and our knowledge of things, to the maximum degree practical. This is postperspectivism, taking seriously the reality of perspectivism, but going beyond it. Several activities may help improve the situation, although we cannot hope to eliminate the subjectivity entirely.

One step in this process is to write one's intellectual autobiography. The purpose of this is to attempt to identify factors that affect how one perceives things. This ideally would make one identify one's possible biases, whether one was experientially aware of these or not. What could be done then is to compensate for the influence of such an unconscious bias. This is the type of thing that a hunter does without thinking, when he aims for a spot where his target is not currently located, but where he knows that target will be when the projectile arrives. The types of factors that would enter into these biases would be the geographical and ideological context of one's endeavor. A North American, for example, or a middle-class person, a white person, or a male might perceive matters in a particular way. In general, the more detailed such a self-examination is, the better. When we have prepared this intellectual self-examination, we will want to submit it to others, who often can see things that we ourselves have overlooked.

A second major step is interaction with different perspectives. This has two values. If the interaction is with a currently living person, that person may be able to point out to us the presence of biases of which we are unaware, simply because they are so familiar to us. In addition, simply becoming aware of other viewpoints and their cogency is important. Frequently, we have become so familiar with our way of viewing things that we assume that this is simply the way things are, that there is no alternative. While in theory we should be able to see these differing approaches on our own, in practice that is not so easy. What is helpful is to try to place ourselves in the perspective of the other person, so that we really can see things as the other sees them. The dialogue partner should preferably be someone from another culture or time. Just as there is the problem of ethnocentrism, so, as we have indicated, there is also a problem with chronocentrism.

This means we must suspend the approach of examining the other viewpoint with the conviction that it is wrong, looking for ways to criticize the other. Instead, we will try to ask honestly, "Why does this look so persuasive to this other person or group?" It will mean attempting to critique our own position, to play the proverbial devil's advocate with ourselves. The value of debates is that they enable each side to display the best argument they can for their own viewpoint. We will therefore seek out the best and most persuasive advocates of different viewpoints. We will ask ourselves, "If I were assigned the task of refuting the position I currently hold, what would I say?" This is a procedure recommended by the noted economist Milton Friedman, who said, "You cannot be sure that you are right, unless you know the arguments against your view better than your opponents do."²⁹

29. Mary Ruth Yoe, "Market Force," *University of Chicago Magazine* 99, no. 3 (January–February 2007): 30.

We should not expect that attaining the ability to be more objective will be a quick, easy, or complete process. What probably is the best we can hope for is to gradually approach the ideal in a sort of spiral maneuver, progressively approximating the final ideal. All of this will be very difficult intellectual work, but one must consider that the alternative is some sort of fixed or dogmatic position, which in other contexts would be labeled prejudice.

If we are fully aware of the reality of conditioning and of perspectivism, then we will want to consciously remind ourselves of our own fallibility and limitation, and hold our convictions with a degree of humility, so that we can correct ourselves as the process goes on.

Correspondence View of Truth

Much of the dispute has been in terms of the nature of truth. Traditionally, there have been three views of the nature of truth. The *correspondence* view says that propositions are true if they correctly describe things as they are. The *coherence* view of truth is that propositions are true if they agree with, or cohere with, other propositions. The *pragmatic* theory is that propositions are true if they work out in practice.

In reality, these tend to be more a question of the tests or measures of truth than of the nature of truth. I would argue that in practice, in everyday living, every sane person proceeds with what I term a prereflective or primitive correspondence view. Alan White, in the article “Coherence Theory of Truth,” says that “what the coherence theory really does is give the criteria for the truth and falsity of a priori, or analytic, statements.”³⁰ He is referring to statements such as those of mathematics. This, he claims, means that, so far as the meaning of truth is concerned, the coherence theory actually says that truth means correspondence of a certain kind of proposition with the analytic facts—in other words, those that are not the objects of sense experience. Similarly, William James, one of the founders of pragmatism, says, “Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their ‘agreement,’ as falsity means their disagreement, with ‘reality.’”³¹ He contends that those he terms pragmatists and intellectualists agree on this definition, and only disagree on the meaning of “agreement” and “reality.”³²

Postmodernists have generally adopted either coherence or pragmatism as their view of truth. Taken as tests, rather than definitions, of truth, each has strengths but also serious points of weakness. Coherence is a necessary but not a sufficient test of truth. Incoherence is an indication of falsity, but coherence is not necessarily of truth. A work of fiction may be completely coherent, but still

30. Alan R. White, “Coherence Theory of Truth,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 2:132.

31. William James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” in *Pragmatism, and Four Essays from “The Meaning of Truth”* (New York: Meridian, 1955), 132.

32. *Ibid.*

be fiction. Indeed, the basis for distinction between fiction and nonfiction in literature is something more than coherence. Similarly, a particular proposition or belief may work out very well in the short term, but one that does not agree with reality will not work well in the long term. In the realm of economics, in the late 1990s, those who believed that technology stocks, especially the internet stocks, would continue to rise indefinitely found that this view worked out very well for quite some time, but that action on the basis of that belief proved disastrous in 2000–2002. Similarly, those who organized their personal finances on the belief that housing prices would always rise and that therefore they could buy a large house using a no-money-down or an adjustable-rate mortgage because they could refinance in the future, found in the bursting of the housing bubble in 2007 and following that their theory did not work out well. While a view must be coherent to be true, and true views will work out in the long run, more comprehensive tests for truth are needed.

Neofoundationalism

One question that bears strongly on this wider question is the structure or architecture of knowledge. A widely held view in times past was foundationalism, the view that there are certain basic propositions that were regarded as true, and that other propositions were justified by their relationship to these. Thus, the theory resembled a building, with a foundation and a superstructure built upon it. In recent years it has been very popular to reject foundationalism. This has become almost a hallmark of recent philosophy. Among postmodernists, foundationalism is considered one of the major marks of modernism, and therefore to be avoided at all costs.

It is important to understand what we are referring to here. Virtually without exception, the foundationalism being rejected is classical foundationalism, or the idea that the foundational or basic beliefs are indubitable or incorrigible, and it is this very certitude that is most objectionable in the present time. This rejection is related to the belief in the conditioned nature of knowledge, and skepticism about objectivity. Indeed, when one examines the references of postfoundationalists or nonfoundationalists, it is clear that this is what they have in mind.

This, however, is a rather dated view of foundationalism, with the result that the criticism is actually of a straw man. Tim Triplett has given a more informed statement of the nature of foundationalism.

EF1: There are basic propositions.

EF2: Any justified empirical proposition either is basic or derives its justification, at least in part, from the fact that it stands in an appropriate relationship to propositions which are basic. In short, there are propositions that are starting points, and others that follow from them. There is a hierarchical structure to knowledge.³³

33. Timm Triplett, "Recent Work on Foundationalism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1990): 96. While Triplett uses the term "empirical," one could broaden the conception

The idea of the absolute certainty of these starting points is not inherent in foundationalism, being found only in classical foundationalism. This feature has been the primary object of attack by postmodernists and others. Among their criticisms is the epistemic regress problem. This is the problem that, having justified something by a justifier, one then must also justify the justifier. For example, if I assert that there is a yellow table in the room and am asked why I believe that, I may respond that I do because I am having a sensory perception of it. Then, however, I may be asked how I know that my sensory perception is accurate, and for whatever answer I give, I may be asked why I believe that to be persuasive. The second common objection is that foundationalism does not fulfill its own criteria, that to be rational a belief must be either foundational or derived from foundational beliefs. Further, Alvin Plantinga has argued, many of our common beliefs of ordinary life, on which we base our lives, such as that there are stable external objects and that there are other persons, distinct from myself, while clearly justified beliefs, do not fit the criteria of foundationalism. It should be noted that these criticisms only apply to classical foundationalism, however, and the first of these only applies to what William Alston has labeled “iterative foundationalism.” Indeed, Plantinga and others in the circle of Reformed epistemology have developed a type of foundationalism that does not require the foundations to be indubitable or incorrigible. Triplett comments about the present state of foundationalism: “It is not clear that the standard arguments against foundationalism will work against these newer, more modest theories. Indeed, these theories were by and large designed with the purpose of overcoming standard objections.”³⁴

What this means is that reasoning must start with something. As Triplett describes the numerous types of foundationalism, it appears that, despite all denials, beginning points can be found in various views, including even the thought of Richard Rorty, the arch antifoundationalist, whose view Triplett classifies as a variety of what he terms “contextual foundationalism.”³⁵ Here the argument is not simply that contemporary foundationalism is not vulnerable to the standard criticisms of classical foundationalism, but that it has values not possessed by competitive theories.

The nature or locus of the foundational propositions may be varied. Frequently in the discussions, the foundations are sensory perceptions. Theologically, they may be biblical propositions, or even the starting point, “everything asserted in Scripture is true.” The point is that there are some propositions that have precedence over others.

Foundationalism does not necessarily exclude the use of coherence, however. Robert Audi points out that at a number of points there are varieties of each that

of correspondence by substituting the term “synthetic,” referring to any proposition in which the predicate adds something not implicit in the subject.

34. *Ibid.*, 93.

35. *Ibid.*, 101.

are mutually compatible.³⁶ One philosopher even went so far as to coin the term “foundherentism.”³⁷ In recent years, it is coherentists that have tended to reject any place for the other approach.

Common Logic

One of the charges sometimes brought against theology as well as more traditional philosophies is that they rely on a conventional logic, whereas Derrida, some other postmodernists, and some of their followers do not. In my experience, this has often been simply an unwillingness to accept the implications of the position adopted.

The problem with this call for an alternative logic is that seldom is any real content given to it. This makes it difficult or even impossible to evaluate. At times the view seems to resemble in some ways a sort of dialectic, not greatly unlike that of Hegel. In this, the tension and antithesis between propositions may be emphasized, but it should be noted that even the recognition of the antithesis requires the logic of opposition. Beyond this, however, is the problem that thinkers like Derrida have in trying to reject a traditional logic of opposition: that in order to do so, they have to assume the very thing that they are trying to refute, something that Derrida was willing to admit.³⁸ Indeed, to say that traditional logic of opposition is wrong and the alternative is correct assumes that they cannot both be correct, which is the very issue in dispute.

This can be seen on a more practical level, such as the liar’s paradox, illustrated by an American Philosophical Society T-shirt. On the front are the words, “The sentence on the back of this shirt is false.” The reverse side carries the message, “The sentence on the front of this shirt is true.” Another is the statement I sometimes direct to a postmodernist, and then become silent, waiting for a reaction: “I agree with you completely—and you’re totally wrong.” No one really can mentally assimilate such conceptions. I would contend that an objective logic is, in the long run, essential not only to individual, but also to societal, functioning. This means that logic can be trusted and employed in doing theology.

What I am advocating here is what I would term a *classical objectivism*. This should not simply be dismissed as “unrepentant modernism.” Such a comment reflects lack of awareness of the elements of continuity between the modern and premodern periods. This orientation can be found well beyond the period of the Enlightenment. It is not an absolutism that believes that one has perfect understanding of reality, but rather a belief that such knowledge is possible and desirable,

36. Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 136.

37. Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: A Pragmatist Reconstruction of Epistemology*, 2nd exp. ed. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2009).

38. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 280–81.

and endeavors to approximate it ever more closely. It will utilize imagination and creativity in formulating its models and hypotheses. It is unfortunate that in our time such imagination has suffered considerable decline. While this has been depicted by some as a result of an overemphasis on science versus the arts, it appears that on a popular level, broader cultural changes have contributed to this. Television presents viewers with images, which in a time of radio had to be supplied by listeners themselves. Video games make imaginary matters as vivid as actual objects. Preformed opinions are readily available, in great quantity and often questionable quality, on the internet and on radio talk shows. Critical thinking and sanctified imagination both are needed to formulate new ways of conceiving of spiritual and theological truths and models of doctrines. In the final analysis, however, the products of imagination and intuition must be tested by other methods as well. To adapt Ronald Reagan's dictum: "Trust, but verify."

Faith, Doctrine, and Theology

It may be helpful to identify more specifically what we mean by the terms "faith," "doctrine," and "theology" and by the activities that accompany them. Several years ago, the ethicist Bernard Mayo developed what he called a "three-tiered model" to describe different aspects of ethics and morality. On the first tier are the actors, those engaged in the practice of a given activity. On the second level are the critics, who evaluate the actions of those on the first level. Finally, there are the philosophers, who debate the criteria of criticism employed by the critics. A problem, he acknowledges, is the impression the model gives of the separation of the levels.³⁹ Nonetheless, it is useful for us in understanding what are sometimes confused issues.

In any area of human activity, there are those who are engaged in that activity. In music, for example, there are those who actually play the piano. They may not know consciously a great deal about the theory of music, but on a prereflective level, they incorporate and utilize it. There are then the teachers of music, who, on the basis of having studied music more deeply, are able to instruct students of piano. There are also, in some cases, music critics on this level. Finally, there is a more abstract and reflective level. Here are to be found more advanced critics and music theorists. They reflect on and discuss the very criteria and appropriateness of criteria of quality in music. Similarly, there are artists who create works of art, art critics, and aestheticians. In the realm of the military, there are soldiers who actually engage in the battle, the commanding officer who decides on the tactics and in some cases on the strategy, and finally, the military theorists and planners who work on a broad scale, looking ahead and devising plans that may not have been used before. Some of them may actually be civilians, whose specialty is military

39. Bernard Mayo, *Ethics and the Moral Life* (London: Macmillan, 1958), 9–14.

planning. In sports, there are the athletes, who execute on the playing field, the coaches who instruct them and decide what plays will be run, and then the few “supercoaches” who devise new and creative offenses and defenses.

In our case, the model unfolds somewhat as follows. On the bottom level are believing and practicing Christians. Their faith is in God, through Jesus Christ, and they are engaged in living the Christian life. Doctrines, or beliefs about the nature of God and his relationship to the world, are embedded in their experience and activity, whether they can enunciate these consciously or not. In this respect, they are like the pianist who knows a great deal about music, whether she can explain it or not, or the athlete, who can execute well, but may not do so with that knowledge functioning on a conscious level. Much of life is lived on this level. The person typing at a keyboard does not consciously say to himself: “s.’ That means push down with the fourth finger of my left hand, on the second row from the bottom of the keyboard,” but he nonetheless has learned that and incorporated it into his behavior. Typically, this first-level activity cannot be done effectively until the knowledge becomes incorporated into the person’s very nature. The coach or teacher will offer suggestions as to how to improve that behavior, such as “curl your fingers more.” The very fact that this knowledge or belief is not consciously reflected on may cause some people not to recognize that it is there, but it is. So conceptions about who Jesus is are implicit within the believer’s relationship to Christ. In the preceding chapter, we quoted James Orr’s statement that belief in Jesus implicitly involves a number of beliefs.⁴⁰ So doctrine is present at the most basic level, even though it may be implicit. Here is where all Christians must live.

On the second level is the conscious reflection on doctrine that we may term theology. It is engaged in by those who teach other believers, such as pastors, Sunday school teachers, and others. It also involves a more sophisticated version of Christian faith, in which practicing believers seek to understand the meaning of Christian faith and life more fully. It is an attempt to think through more precisely just what is meant by these doctrinal beliefs, and to interrelate them in a more intentional fashion. It also is directed to examining the doctrines in light of the sources of doctrine, to make certain that the former relate as correctly as possible to the latter. At the same time, those who function on this level must also be engaged in the practice of Christianity. They are not merely detached, objective students of religious phenomena, a point that Helmut Thielicke makes quite eloquently.⁴¹

The third level consists of those who are the theoreticians of theology, who think through the meaning and possibilities of theology, seeking to refine it and relate it to new developments, cultural and otherwise. They also need to be practicing

40. James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World as Centring in the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 4. For those who maintain that faith in Jesus can be present without something as elaborate as belief that he was the Son of God, a rereading of Matt. 16:13–20 may be instructive.

41. Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

believers and have some experience in mentoring others.⁴² The danger of the ivory tower is a very real one for theologians.⁴³ More recently, the problem has taken the opposite form. With many megachurches launching their own programs of training for practical Christian service, theologizing tends to be done by practitioners, using criteria of short-term pragmatic success, to the neglect of more long-term reflection.

Theology, as an activity of the church, is a necessity if the church is to function well. It is also, we have argued in this chapter, a possibility.

42. I have a strong conviction that those who speak and write about the life of the church must be able to practice at least some of the skills they are seeking to inculcate in their students. For this reason I personally continued to engage in local church ministry throughout my seminary teaching and administrative career, and as a dean, with the strong approval of the school's board, instituted a requirement that in order to receive tenure, full-time faculty members whose own educational preparation did not include all of the areas their students were required to study would have to acquire such competencies themselves, and that those who had never engaged in full-time ministry must obtain ministry experience, on a concurrent basis. As difficult as it was, I am grateful that my entire graduate education was done while serving as a full-time pastor of local congregations.

43. For many years, the Association of Theological Schools had an Issues Research Advisory Committee. When funding finally came to an end, the committee held a final summary conference. The chairman, in summarizing the findings of the several years of research, began by observing that the number one problem in theological education was lack of integration between the theoretical and the practical disciplines.