

The Fear of the Lord

Essays on Theological Method

MICHAEL ALLEN

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

Essays on Theological Method

Michael Allen

t&tclark

LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

T&T CLARK
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, T&T CLARK and the T&T Clark logo are trademarks
of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2022

Copyright © Michael Allen, 2022

Michael Allen has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and
Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

For legal purposes the Acknowledgments on p. 201 constitute
an extension of this copyright page.

Cover image: Vlad Georgescu/Getty

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,
recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior
permission in writing from the publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc does not have any control over, or responsibility for,
any third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given
in this book were correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher
regret any inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have
ceased to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Allen, Michael, 1981- author.

Title: The fear of the Lord : essays on theological method / Michael Allen.

Description: London ; New York : T&T Clark, 2022. | Includes index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2021029027 (print) | LCCN 2021029028 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780567699275 (hb) | ISBN 9780567699688 (paperback) |

ISBN 9780567699282 (epdf) | ISBN 9780567699305 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Theology--Methodology. | God (Christianity) | LCGFT: Essays.

Classification: LCC BR118 .A4345 2022 (print) | LCC BR118 (ebook) | DDC 231--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021029027>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021029028>

ISBN: HB: 978-0-5676-9927-5

ePDF: 978-0-5676-9928-2

ePUB: 978-0-5676-9930-5

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters.

CONTENTS

Preface: “The Fear of the Lord Is the Beginning of Wisdom”	vi
Chapter 1 “IN YOUR LIGHT DO WE SEE LIGHT”: THE FUTURE AND THE PROMISE OF THEOLOGY	1
Chapter 2 LIVING AND ACTIVE: THE EXALTED PROPHET IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS	15
Chapter 3 THE CREATURE OF THE WORD	29
Chapter 4 DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE AND THE READING OF SCRIPTURE	49
Chapter 5 SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY	73
Chapter 6 ON APOCALYPTIC THEOLOGY	103
Chapter 7 DISPUTATION <i>FOR</i> SCHOLASTIC THEOLOGY: ENGAGING LUTHER’S 97 THESES	117
Chapter 8 DOGMATICS AS ASCETICS	135
Chapter 9 THE CONTEMPLATIVE AND THE ACTIVE LIFE	155
Chapter 10 REFORMED RETRIEVAL	171
Chapter 11 RETRIEVAL AND THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION	185
Acknowledgments	201
Index	202

PREFACE: “THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM”

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111.10). Proverbs 2.5 goes further to suggest that this fear—a reverential fixation upon the one true God—comes by accepting and storing, turning and applying, calling out and crying, looking for and searching after the very Word of God. Such actions deserve our effort, because that “fear of the Lord” is the very foundation of all wisdom. “Beginning” speaks not only of wisdom’s inception but of its perpetual foundational bedrock. That watchword of theological practice and of all Christian existence serves also as an intellectual axiom. In recent years, theology has been tempted by many other things, manifesting fear of much else beside the Lord. Yet theocentrism cannot be left behind as if it were merely an initial posture or an inception point. Christian theology, if it is to be true to its name, must always manifest fear of the one living and true God.

These chapters seek to reflect on the task of theology and to do so in a way that maintains that Godward focus and seek to practice that fear. Five areas in particular have garnered my attention at greater length in recent years: the implications of Trinitarian and Christological doctrine for the promise of theological practice, the scholastic or systematic shape of Christian doctrine, the ascetical or spiritual character of Christian doctrine, theological exegesis or theological interpretation of Scripture and its relationship to both biblical and systematic theology, and the promise of retrieval or *ressourcement* for Christian doctrine. Each chapter in this book addresses one or more of those areas of methodological concern. I should say a word about how each of those themes appears here and relates to my other writings.

First, theological practice needs to be described primarily in light of the work of the living and true God. While we will need to say much more about human agency and the like, we must begin and remain ever vigilant to keep our eye upon the presence and works of the triune God. My textbook on *Reformed Theology* begins with that as a hallmark of my own particular theological tradition, and my more recent work on future prospects for Reformed theology further addresses that concern.¹ In touching on various other doctrines (i.e., sanctification), I have regularly tried to maintain that Godward glance at all times, most recently by exploring the loss and need for theocentrism in Christian eschatology and ethics

1. *Reformed Theology* (Doing Theology; London: T&T Clark, 2010); and “Future Prospects for Reformed Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology* (ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 623–30.

in my small book, *Grounded in Heaven: Re-centering Christian Hope and Life in God*.² Here several chapters focus more specifically on why that’s of methodological significance. “In Your Light We See Light’: The Future and Promise of Theology,” “Living and Active,” and “The Creature of the Word” each tend to those fundamental principles that are rooted in a catholic heritage and methodologically developed in some powerful ways in the Reformed tradition.

Second, scholastic and systematic theology has been much maligned in recent decades, often for putting God in a box and distorting the dramatic character of more occasional or narrational modes of thought. Yet the best historical studies of scholastic theology in its medieval and post-Reformation settings (both Roman Catholic and Reformed) show that concern for narrative and history doesn’t wane with the turn toward more school-oriented genres of writing. Indeed, I have tried to argue constructively that systematic thought serves a unique role precisely in keeping our eyes upon the whole counsel of God and its interconnections (many of which, though not all, are narrational). I’ve argued elsewhere that our post-Christian moment in the contemporary West uniquely calls for the missionary importance of systematic theology, when we can no longer assume a Christian sense of many biblical loan words (i.e., love, freedom, power). Only systematic reflection will enable us to examine the overlapping and distinctive ways that Christians use such common language in Christian ways.³ Here I tend to the importance of such scholastic and systematic work in “Disputation for Scholastic Theology,” “On Apocalyptic Theology,” and “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology.” (Essays in the companion collection, *The Knowledge of God: Essays on God, Christ, and Church*, will also take up this task overtly and at length: i.e., “Into the Family of God” and “Sources of the Self.”)

Third, theology is hard intellectual work, but it cannot be any less spiritual and moral for so being. Theology directs itself to the importance of communion with the triune God and therefore occurs always within the economy of God’s grace. Further, it demands not only intellectual but also moral and theological virtues for good execution. Therefore, the modern theological encyclopedia and the setting of theological study (mentally if not geographically) within the walls of the modern research university push against a more integrative approach to doctrine. I have been compelled to rethink the systematic or doctrinal task along older, classical lines whereby doctrine serves not only the spiritual life but specifically to mortify and vivify the intellectual commitments of the theologian. Theology involves self-denial, countermands idolatry, and thus needs wholehearted spiritual commitment. *Grounded in Heaven* explored the reintegration of an evangelical asceticism into Christian theology this side of the Reformation and the Neo-Calvinist movement. There is further need to explore the ways in which theology itself involves ascetical discipline by God’s grace. “Dogmatics as Ascetics” and “The Contemplative and the

2. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018.

3. See *Sanctification* (New Studies in Dogmatics; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2017), 44.

Active Life” serve to examine the way in which systematic theology or Christian dogmatics relates to that broader task of Christian intellectual discipleship by considering recent and medieval visions of that spiritual or moral component of theology.

Fourth, thinking theologically must be yoked to reading Holy Scripture, and any appropriate reading of Holy Scripture will have to read it for what it is: the living Word of God. The nature of scriptural hermeneutics and the connection between biblical exegesis and the task of Christian dogmatics both warrant attention. My first book (originally a dissertation) was a dogmatic treatise in Christology. It engaged in a wide-angle dogmatic analysis of varied topics of Christian theology and also narrow-angle theological interpretation of particular passages of Holy Scripture.⁴ I’ve since edited a festschrift focused on *Theological Commentary* and coedited a reexamination of *Reformation Readings of Paul*.⁵ Scott Swain and I have served as general editors of the T&T Clark International Theological Commentary series that has sought to advance theological interpretation of Scripture (often termed “TIS”) in its disciplinary development by offering longer, more slowly fermenting commentaries on the whole Bible. I’ve turned recently to writing a biblical commentary: *Ephesians*.⁶ “Divine Transcendence and the Reading of Scripture” and “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology” each examine the character of theological reading of Scripture, pondering the relationship of divine revelation and human reading (in the former) or the disciplinary relationships of systematic theology and exegesis to biblical theology and TIS (in the latter).

Fifth, many theologians have observed that contemporary theology has suffered where it has failed to remain in deep and vibrant touch with its spiritual and intellectual heritage. Too often “the new” has dominated and “revision” has been the watchword. There have been decades when engagement of the tradition appears only for the sake of “doctrinal criticism.” Sometimes that contemporary self-fascination with the present has traded under the supposed support of the Protestant and Reformed maxim, *sola Scriptura*. Scott Swain and I have published a manifesto, *Reformed Catholicity*, to commend the promise of retrieval or *ressourcement* for the sake of renewing recent theology.⁷ Our *Christian Dogmatics* textbook has also gathered a range of compelling contributors whose various theological arguments each involve productive engagement upon that catholic

4. *The Christ’s Faith: A Dogmatic Account* (T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology; London: T&T Clark, 2009).

5. *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives* (ed. Michael Allen; London: T&T Clark, 2012); and *Reformation Readings of Paul: Explorations in History and Doctrine* (ed. Michael Allen and Jonathan A. Linebaugh; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

6. *Ephesians* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2020).

7. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

heritage.⁸ With my colleague Jonathan Linebaugh, I coedited a volume, *Reformation Readings of Paul*, that sought to challenge the so-called new readings of Paul that would suggest the Protestant Reformers were bad examples of exegetical care. Acknowledging fresh light that yet breaks out of God’s Word in no way demands falsely rebuking ancestors for misreadings (not least when they being misread in such accusations); I’ve also tried to further that argument in portions of my books, *Justification and the Gospel* and *Sanctification*, addressing places where many luminaries in recent Pauline studies have castigated Luther and Calvin without actually engaging their own claims.⁹ Here “Reformed Retrieval” commends the theological beliefs that make such *ressourcement* theologically and ecclesiastically productive (rather than simply parroting the principles of sociological or hermeneutical theory), while “Retrieval and the Prophetic Imagination” explores how retrieval theology actually helps keep the church more alert to the failures of the status quo.

Other topics deserve attention in a broad, systematic consideration of theological method. My future writing will tend not only to matters named here or addressed in other publications but also to those remaining matters of importance as yet unexplored by me. It remains my hope, however, that gathering these texts will satisfy demands of readers who regularly request various essays or articles scattered among many publications or journals. These are exploratory essays on the way toward that larger, later project, hopefully eliciting critical response that will benefit author as much as reader. More importantly, I hope that this volume manifests a consistent concern to practice the fear of the LORD, which is and ever remains the beginning of wisdom, whenever addressing one of these five categories of methodological concern. In that sense, I publish it as a book with a singular concern, unfolded in various movements.

* * *

This collection of essays and its sibling (*The Knowledge of God: Essays on God, Christ, and Church*) gather studies prepared over the course of the last fifteen years. I have resisted the urge to rewrite and refashion, modifying only by updating bibliographic references and correcting formatting or typos. My teaching assistant, Angel Roman-Diaz, helped with preparing the essays for production. My colleague, John Muether, prepared the index. I thank a host of publications for permission to publish here: *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, *Journal of Reformed Theology*, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, *Reformed Faith & Practice*, *Themelios*, Blackwell Publishing, and Zondervan Academic. Various friends and colleagues read chapters on different occasions, and I have noted them

8. *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* (ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

9. *Justification and the Gospel: Understanding the Contexts and Controversies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013); and *Sanctification*.

where I can. I should especially highlight three people in particular: Wesley Hill, Jonathan Linebaugh, and Scott Swain, who contribute to my ongoing research and writing in all manner of ways. It remains a pleasure to work with Anna Turton and the Bloomsbury team and an honor to publish again with T&T Clark, now in their 200th year of publishing Christian theology.

Ascension Day 2021

Oviedo

Chapter 1

“IN YOUR LIGHT DO WE SEE LIGHT”: THE FUTURE AND THE PROMISE OF THEOLOGY

Theology and the Future

The future is uncertain for so many things. Pundits and predictions fail left and right. The Scriptures should have prepared us for such: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (Jas. 4.13-14). The mist appears; then like vapor (the very “vanity of vanities” in Ecclesiastes) it vanishes. No, the future is not certain.

Yet the future is bright for theology. By theology I adopt a definition roughly similar to that of Thomas Aquinas, who believed this intellectual study to involve God and the works of God (or, otherwise put, all things in relation to God).¹ This kind of reflection has a promising future, where the complexities of modern life will need to be viewed in light of God’s luminosity and the challenges of humanity will require consideration from the perspective of God’s truth.

The path of theology in the future is not owing to the intellectual sophistication or moral fortitude of theologians. A scan of the theological field over the last several decades includes a number of movements or emphases that have come and gone (e.g., the death of God theology). There have been hopeless detours and hapless mistakes, and even the most faithful of theologians err in their listening and testifying to God’s Word. Theology is always done East of Eden. The promise

1. See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Volume 1: *Christian Theology* (trans. Thomas Gilby; Oxford: Blackfriars, 1964), 1a.1.7, reply; on the relation of thinking “about God” and “about all other things,” see Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (trans. Francesca Aran Murphy; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 41–3, 413–15. Early creedal summaries of the faith included “two elements” that “remain constant,” namely, the identity of God and the exposition of the works of God (in particular, the gospel narrative), according to Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, volume one: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 117.

and potential of theology, then, cannot be premised on institutional vitality, academic sophistication, moral clarity, or ecclesial power alone.

The promise of theology follows from the electing love of the triune God. “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light” (Ps. 36.7-9). God is “the fountain of life”—“in his presence is fullness of joy; at his right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16.11). The rest we find in God involves his illumining work that we might see and know both him and life in him: “you will show me the path of life” (Ps. 16.11); “in your light do we see light” (Ps. 36.9). God brings life and light to our world—humans have hope not only for existence but for knowledge being gained and truth being known.

The goodness of the triune God gives promise and a future to theology. It is of this glorious one that we say “in your light do we see light.” The potential of human knowledge of God is entirely premised on the gratuity of God. We live in an *ek*-centric fashion, wherein we constantly receive life from the outside and live on borrowed breath. More specifically, we might say that we live in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is alive and luminous: in his light we do see light. As John Webster has reminded us: “He is that from which we move, not that towards which we strive; he is not that which we posit (rationally, experientially), but the one whose unqualified self-existence posits us.”² This Word is “living and active.”³ Karl Barth spoke of him as “eloquent and radiant,” reminding us that he compels with beauty, truth, and goodness.⁴

Not only does theology have a future because of the triune God but theology can help shape the human future more broadly. “Nature commends grace; grace emends nature.”⁵ The communicative presence of God brings grace, and this grace transforms or transfigures human creatureliness in its particularity and specificity. Herman Bavinck expands on this idea: “Human beings are in every respect dependent on the world outside of them. In no area are we autonomous; we live by what is given, i.e., by grace. But, reciprocally, we are made and designed for that

2. John Webster, “Resurrection and Scripture,” in *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (LNTS 348; ed. Andrew T. Lincoln and Angus Paddison; London: T&T Clark, 2007), 141.

3. See Chapter 2 in this volume.

4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume 4: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Part 3.1 (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; trans. G. W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 79. For astute and poignant reflections on the prophetic office of Christ, see John Webster, “‘Eloquent and Radiant’: The Prophetic Office of Christ and the Mission of the Church,” in *Barth’s Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth’s Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 125–50.

5. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 1: *Prolegomena* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 362.

whole world outside of us and connected to it by a whole spectrum of relations.”⁶ Theology points to the ways in which God’s grace renews humans.

Theology does so instrumentally: serving as a prompt and aid to the church’s testimony to the life-giving gospel of Jesus. It is Christian testimony in worship and witness that is the church’s primary calling. Theology serves as a critical tool meant to render this testimony more faithful and, hence, effective. The distinction between first- and second-order language proves helpful here: while the praise and proclamation of the church is first-order language, the tools of theological analysis are second-order language meant to help critique and commend the church’s primary calling.

A primary way in which theology will serve the church is by offering critique of idolatry. Nicholas Lash views doctrine in this way: “one of the principal functions of doctrine, as regulative of Christian speech and action, would be to help protect correct reference, by disciplining our manifold propensity toward idolatry.”⁷ Lash further identified this “stripping away of the veils of self-assurance by which we seek to protect our faces from exposure to the mystery of God’ as the prompt for viewing theology as a critical practice.”⁸ Idolatry is nothing new—Israel of old and the *ekklēsia* of today are lured into its traps. Theological reflection serves as a prophetic check to this tendency of our religious culture and character.

Theology and Biblical Interpretation

We have seen that God’s goodness is determined to fill all things with his glory (Eph. 4.10). God’s sharing his life with us involves his shedding abroad the knowledge of his love. Thus, we have wonderful news to proclaim to the enslaved: because there is a living God revealed in Jesus Christ, there really can be life for those caught in the pangs of death. God not only promises such life, he sees fit to provide for our knowledge of this promise. The Lord not only acts but he speaks testimony about his deeds. In short: because Jesus is alive, theology has a future.

God’s self-revelation has taken particular shape: among Israel, in Jesus of Nazareth, by his prophets and apostles. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was well aware of the need to consider God in his particularity:

In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world. The place where the questions about the reality of God and about the reality of the world are answered at the same time is characterized solely by the name: Jesus Christ. God and the world are enclosed in this name ... we cannot speak rightly

6. *Ibid.*, 501.

7. Nicholas Lash, “When Did the Theologians Lose Interest in Theology?,” in *The Beginning and End of “Religion”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 134.

8. Nicholas Lash, “Criticism or Construction? The Task of the Theologian,” in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 9.

of either God or the world without speaking of Jesus Christ. All concepts of reality that ignore Jesus Christ are abstractions.⁹

Bonhoeffer knew full well the danger of fuzzy religion and natural theology unconstrained by Christological revelation and creedal convictions. He had seen the use of religious language in the Nazi propaganda, and so he was concerned that Jesus and the triune God shape our convictions and our very selves, rather than simply caring about our social formation according to the status quo of one's religious pedigree or dominant religious subculture. Terms like "kingdom," "hope," and "righteousness" have very particular meaning given by the Christian God. Human nature as well as divine being has been revealed in the face of Jesus Christ (Jn. 1.18). Like the disciples on the mount of transfiguration, then, we are summoned to "listen to him" (Mt. 17.5).

Now we turn to find sustenance in the Word of God. "The holy, Christian Church, whose only Head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, abides in the same, and does not listen to the voice of a stranger."¹⁰ Jesus Christ is alive and he speaks through his prophetic auxiliaries; Jesus Christ is risen and he sanctifies by his Holy Spirit. The Epistle to the Hebrews offers a concluding benediction that is *apropos*: "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever" (Heb. 13.20-21). Notice that the risen one is "the great shepherd of the sheep"—there is gospel in the present tense here: he tends the sheep; his Father equips for every good work; by him God works in us that which is pleasing to his Father. And this benediction sums up the spiritual exercise of listening to or (now) of reading this apostolic scripture: it is in this auxiliary or instrument that Jesus exercises his pastoral care for his sheep.

The Scriptures do not come to us bare; they are texts, but they are not mere texts. They have been sanctified by God for a specific calling; hence the tendency to refer to them as "Holy Scripture."¹¹ They function within a nexus of the triune God's communicative presence. In discussions of dogmatic prolegomena, theologians often speak of the principles of theology to express this communicative matrix. Herman Bavinck is illustrative. He speaks of three foundations or principles of theology: "first, God as the essential foundation (*principium essendi*), the source of theology"; "second, the external cognitive foundation (*principium cognoscendi*)

9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (ed. Clifford Green; Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 54.

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

11. On language of the sanctification with respect to the nature of Scripture, see John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Current Issues in Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5–41.

externum), viz., the self-revelation of God, which, insofar as it is recorded in Holy Scripture, bears an instrumental and temporary character”; “finally, the internal principle of knowing (*principium cognoscendi internum*), the illumination of human beings by God’s Spirit.”¹² He insists: “They may and can, therefore, never be separated and detached from each other. On the other hand, they do need to be distinguished.”¹³ God is the principle of being, and God’s agency as “source of theology” functions in two ways: externally and internally. Christ speaks through his written Word, and the Holy Spirit illumines human reception of the same.

Perhaps no passage of Scripture so exemplifies this location of the Bible in the economy of grace as 2 Timothy 3–4. Oftentimes this text is quoted for what it says directly of the Bible: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3.16–17). Taking Paul’s reference to what we would now call the “Old Testament” Scriptures (*graphe*) as extended to the apostolic “New Testament” writings as well, theologians argue that this passage speaks of their inspiration and effectiveness. Notice, however, that the passage continues: “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word” (2 Tim. 4.1–2). The emphasis upon the written Word comes in the midst of a declaration that Paul and Timothy exist “in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus.” The scriptural embassy functions only in the administration of its sovereign speaker: the risen Christ. Because Christ is communicatively and redemptively present to us through these Scriptures, they are to be to us as a means of grace.

When thinking about God’s work outside and inside us, it is helpful to reflect on our deep need. In an early letter Franz Kafka identified what we sorely lack and, if we are honest, should want:

If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? Good God, we would also be happy if we had no books, and such books as make us happy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are those books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.¹⁴

We need words of life. We require the burning coal placed to our lips and the transfigured glory presented before our very eyes. Like those who have traipsed

12. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 1, 213 (see also 505, 580). See also John Webster, “The Domain of the Word,” in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 3–31.

13. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 1, 214.

14. A letter from Franz Kafka (cited by George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 67.

through the temples of this age, we require a bath (baptism), a word (the Word of God), and a meal (the Eucharist). We need to be renamed, reclaimed, and resourced, and God provides for all these needs through his Word proclaimed and made visible in the sacraments. The key is that *God* does this: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4.6).

The future of theology is pegged to its close tie with God’s Word, because here God is present with all his sanctifying beauty. Here our desires and practices are recalibrated by God and to God. It is just this—our intentionality and our direction—that can go so terribly awry. Nicholas Lash has defined idolatry as taking many forms, yet “common to them all is setting our hearts on something less than God.”¹⁵ This takes shape in “getting the reference wrong: of taking that to be God which is not God, of mistaking some fact or thing or nation or person or dream or possession or ideal for our heart’s need and the mystery ‘that moves the sun and other stars.’”¹⁶ Our problem is not to lack passion for the divine or a will to worship; our problem is an insistence in approaching God or the gods on our own terms and in our own way.¹⁷

A theology that will flourish constantly needs the presence of the communicative God. By his election Scripture is “the eternally youthful Word of God.”¹⁸ Scripture is that which is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4.12). Therefore, theology that will flourish must take the form of what John Webster has termed “biblical reasoning.” Webster has distinguished between “exegetical reasoning” and “dogmatic reasoning,” yet he argues that both are subsumed under this broader commitment to biblical reasoning.¹⁹ Whether in the mode of specific exegesis of a given passage (“exegetical reasoning”) or synthetic reflection upon the contours of the whole biblical canon (“dogmatic reasoning”), theology is a positive and not a *poietic* science; it is receptive, not creative. It follows God’s revelation given to us now in Holy Scripture rather than fashioning its own object.

The rule and boundaries given to theology by God’s Word are precisely what makes theology a free science. Karl Barth reminds us: “[T]his means that we shall be guided by the direction of Holy Scripture, that we shall not have to champion the thesis in our own strength or on our own responsibility, and that we may thus champion it without anxiety because it is not really exposed to the charge of arbitrariness.” Theology is “guided” and, thus, it can be practiced “without anxiety.”

15. Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (London: SCM, 1988), 258.

16. Lash, “When Did the Theologians Lose Interest in Theology?” 134.

17. Walter Brueggemann, “Foreword,” *Journal for Preachers* 26 (Easter 2003), 1; see also Patrick D. Miller, *The God You Have: Politics, Religion, and the First Commandment* (Facets; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

18. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 1, 384–5.

19. On these terms, see John Webster, “Biblical Reasoning,” in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 129–32.

Barth expands further: “The distinctive thought-form of the Bible is not something which is discovered in that way; it is demanded, enforced and indeed created by that which is attested, namely, by the lordship of Jesus Christ Himself.”²⁰ The risen Christ directs and demands, enforcing and creating life, by the instrument of his prophetic and apostolic word. When theology is practiced in this domain, his reign and his peace cast out all fear and anxiety.

Emphasis upon the agency of the risen Christ by and through his Holy Spirit does not undercut or downplay the empirical agency of men and women who pray, think, read, question, and so forth. Theology is done by humans. John Owen reminds us: “The Holy Spirit so worketh in us as that he worketh by us, and what he doth in us is done by us.”²¹ And the way in which we involve ourselves in this work is according to our humanity as such; again Owen is helpful: “That he acts nothing contrary unto, puts no force upon, any of the faculties of our souls, but works in them and by them suitably according to their natures.”²² Theological science is work, human work, that requires care, commitment, and the development of certain competencies. But it is work that is always the gift of another—the loving triune God of eternity—who shapes and sustains its exercise and endurance.

Renewal through Retrieval

Theology has a future, and theology’s hope is premised upon its ever-fresh grace given in God’s Word to which it attends. Theology—like every facet of the church’s life—will live by grace alone or it will die. Knowing God’s promise, however, the real question is not whether or not it will have a future but how it will receive the promised future which it has been pledged by God.

20. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume 4, 95–6. For further reflections on how freedom is found in boundaries, see Reinhard Hütter, *Bound to Be Free: Evangelical Catholic Engagements in Ecclesiology, Ethics, and Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), esp. 111–81.

21. John Owen, *Pneumatologia, or A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* (Works of John Owen 3; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 204.

22. *Ibid.*, 225. For further reflections on the nature of divine and human agency involved in theological work (or other historical events), see Antonie Vos and Eef Dekker, “Modalities in Francis Turretin: An Essay in Reformed Ontology,” in *Scholasticism Reformed: Essays in Honor of Willem J. Van Asselt* (ed. M. Wisse, M. Sarot, and W. Otten; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 74–91; Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 2–3. These reflections from Reformed theologians follow a broadly Augustinian and Thomist approach to providence. Thomas’s own words are instructive: “During the whole of a thing’s existence, God must be present to it, and present in a way in keeping with the way in which the thing possesses its existence” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.8.1, reply).

Over and again we are told that Christianity must change or die. Its metaphysics must be recast, lest it appear oppressive and narrow-minded, reducing the many to the one. Its liturgy must be rethought, or else it fails to communicate and compel contemporaries. Its polity must be reshaped, or else it will not be positioned to meet the pressing challenges of an increasingly mobile, fluid, interactive, flat world. Its moral commitments must be revised, or else it will find itself on the back end of societal reform and be likened unto the imperialists, misogynists, and racists. In these various ways, exemplified by everything from the emerging church to the revisionism of the mainline churches and not a few supposed evangelicals too, the future is to be seized by reinvention.

Yet there is another way: a path to renewal by means of retrieval. This path expresses greater doubt in our own ability to manipulate circumstances and creatively meet challenges. This path demonstrates deeper reliance upon the wisdom of those who have faced analogous situations in centuries past and on continents far away. This path sees its calling not only in terms of effectiveness in the present but in terms of faithfulness to the past.

The approach of seeking theological renewal by way of retrieval is based on the very example of Jesus and his apostles. If ever there were charismatic leaders fit to start *de novo*, it was those leaders who served at the very founding of the Christian church. Yet when one reads the apostle Paul's writings, it becomes immediately apparent that his arguments are shaped thoroughly by the scriptures of Israel and are cast in canonical terms precisely because Paul views himself as a thinker and practitioner ruled by *Torah*.²³ Similarly, the anonymous author of the Epistle to the Hebrews saturates his writing with lengthy exegetical forays. He cannot engage in Christology without addressing the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 110), and he does not articulate an atonement theology but by reflecting upon the promises of the fiery prophet (e.g., Jer. 31.31-34). Indeed, the very structure of his Epistle takes the form of a renewed Deuteronomy, wherein the scriptural matrix of the past is recontextualized for a new redemptive situation. Whereas Deuteronomy recontextualized the Mosaic law for the life in Canaan, Hebrews now recontextualizes the entire Old Testament for life this side of Jesus' exaltation and heavenly session.²⁴ A further scan of the apostolic writings (whether the use of Ezekiel and Daniel in the Apocalypse or the regular allusion to Exod. 3.14 in the Gospel according to John) would provide further evidence for this well-attested reality: the apostles administered their charismatic leadership by means of stewarding their scriptural past for the ecclesial present.

The New Testament provides other examples of biblical traditioning, wherein Scripture is the ultimate authority amid a number of lesser yet no less divinely

23. See especially Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

24. David M. Allen, *Deuteronomy and Exhortation in Hebrews: A Study in Narrative Representation* (WUNT 2:238; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2008).

intended authorities meant to shape and sustain the faith and practice of the Christian community.²⁵ For instance, when Paul writes to young Timothy about his pastoral charge, he urges him not merely to follow in Paul's path but also to maintain a catholic heritage. It is no small thing that he does call Timothy to imitate him and to minister as he has done so (see 2 Tim. 1.8; 3.10-11); this itself shows that a mentor has genuine authority, and it manifests Paul, the apostle of freedom, willing to call Timothy to follow his authoritative example. Still more notable, however, is Paul's embrace of a wider pattern that both Timothy and he follow. "Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you" (2 Tim. 1.13-14; see also 1 Tim. 6.20). The deposit here, and explicitly in 1 Tim. 6.20, precedes Paul himself; he has been deposited or given this pattern just as much as has Timothy.²⁶ That which is to be guarded is not merely an object of study but a particular "pattern" of words. The church and her ministers, according to Paul, are committed not simply to a common conversational space or subject but to a particular approach in communicating and confessing it.²⁷ Paul not only notes this pattern of doctrine as something prescriptive—that which Timothy and he are to honor—but also as a pledge of God. I. Howard Marshall comments that 2 Tim. 1.12 has just insisted that the God whom Paul has believed is "able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me."²⁸ Paul expands on the way in which the triune God does guard this deposit entrusted to Paul (and now also, by extension, to Timothy) by pointing to the Holy Spirit in verse 14. The Spirit guards the apostolic deposit by

25. This paragraph and the next are taken from Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 71–94.

26. I. Howard Marshall with Philip H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 1999), 726–7; cf. 676. On Paul's Gospel as related to earlier oral tradition, see Peter Stuhlmacher, "The Pauline Gospel," in *The Gospel and the Gospels* (ed. Peter Stuhlmacher; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 156–66.

27. Donald Wood has registered concerns on this front about how too often emphasis upon catholicity and the exegetical tradition skates lightly over the binding and authoritative nature of its primary form—the church's creeds and confessions—in the interests of promoting an ongoing space for conversation (see "Some Comments on Moral Realism and Scriptural Authority," *European Journal of Theology* 18, no. 2 (2009), 151–3; see also Oliver J. O'Donovan, "The Moral Authority of Scripture," in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 165–75). For further reflection, see "A Ruled Reading Reformed: The Role of the Church's Confession in Biblical Interpretation," in Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval in Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 95–116.

28. Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 714–15.

preserving its transmission and communication from one generation to the next (*à la* Ps. 145.4).

Some have suggested that this kind of portrayal of early Christianity might be termed “early Catholicism,” a departure from the vibrant Paulinism of other New Testament writings. Without engaging that historiographic debate here, we can point to the continued emphasis in these pastoral epistles upon Scriptural authority as the final arbiter of Christian faith and practice.²⁹ “All Scripture is breathed out by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3.16-17). Thus, Timothy is to “preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4.2). The apostle Paul here envisions a ministry that focuses upon preaching the scriptures and yet doing so cognizant of a vibrant and ongoing interpretative tradition that serves to provide authoritative parameters for expositing those sacred scriptures. Scripture and tradition are not mutually exclusive here—the former generates the latter, while the latter serves the former. One is reminded here of Zacharias Ursinus’s comments about how Scripture is meant to shape systematic theology, which then informs catechesis; this is the order of being and of authority.³⁰ At the same time, however, the order of knowing runs precisely the other way: one is catechized, then formed as a theologian, and finally capable of reading the Bible well.

The apostles not only point to the truth of Jesus and the life found therein but they demonstrate the way of Jesus. The path of the gospel is not one of innovation or ecclesial reinvention—charismatic or otherwise—but of biblical traditioning and inhabiting the catholic heritage of God’s people. In other words, we not only entrust ourselves to the triune God or to Jesus specifically but entrust ourselves to the triune God, who in Christ has promised to provide for us through certain means. We live receptively, and that means that we submit ourselves to spiritual authorities, scriptural rules, and our catholic context.

This posture of receptivity runs against the tendencies of the modern and late modern (what is frequently termed the “postmodern”) eras. By and large theology has been practiced in ways that run in a deistic manner. Indeed, the common moniker given to the theological or doctrinal task today—“constructive theology”—suggests the frequently *poietic* and anthropocentric nature of this intellectual calling. Humans construct a theology based on various assumptions, resources, and needs. Inventiveness and creativity are high values in this schema.

29. It is worth noting a recent argument that, without ever focusing upon this genetic or developmental question, nonetheless puts the lie to the argument that there was a marked shift toward an “early Catholicism.” It does so from the other side, however, by highlighting the traditioned or catholic nature of earlier texts rather than arguing for the ecclesiastical mildness of certain later texts. See Edith Humphrey, *Scripture and Tradition: What the Bible Really Says* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 27–34, 43, 136–7.

30. Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (trans. G. W. Williard; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), 9.

Three centuries after Kant, his moral concerns about deference to religious tradition remain sturdy: dogma, orthodoxy, confessions, creeds—these all symbolize intellectual oppression in the wider cultural sphere.³¹ This Kantian suspicion of the catholic past has affected biblical interpretation and theology.

Mark Bowald has argued that “most contemporary accounts of biblical hermeneutics are deistic.”³² In modern biblical criticism the interpreter is construed as one given the task of getting back behind the accretions: whether they are historical and contextual or ecclesiastical and imperialist. The role of the interpreter is to prosecute an excavation, peeling back layer upon layer to get to something more pristine. The process is premised, at least in theological rather than strictly religious studies contexts, on the notion that God acted there and then, and we have only to get back to these primal events.

In this chapter we have sketched a radically different approach to theology. We do theology always in the wake of God’s agency, not merely in the past but in the present. We remember the wisdom of Jewish rabbis who always began their works on page two, cognizant that they spoke in the wake of God’s communication. Yet we do not embrace this dependence as a strictly chronological count, as if God acted and now we respond. Theology depends upon grace at every moment. This is not unique to theology, of course, for all things hold together in Christ (Col. 1.15). But theology should express greater cognizance of this dependence than other human activities.

For theology to flourish it must regain its bearings as an exegetical discipline and a receptive practice. Our faith must be placed in the specific, particular ways wherein God promises to meet his people’s needs. Theology must be centered on the means of grace: they are word-focused, ecclesially bounded, and missionally aimed. We will briefly reflect on each of these aspects

First, the means of grace for theology are word-focused, whether in terms of the reading and proclamation of the gospel itself or its visible demonstration in the practice of the sacraments. The scriptural writings are the authoritative auxiliaries of Christ’s ongoing speech to the church; *sola Scriptura* is meant to honor the final authority of Scripture over other valid authorities in the Christian and churchly life. The 1559 French Confession of Faith portrays the role of *sola Scriptura* in the life of the church:

[I]nasmuch as it is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation, it is not lawful for men, nor even for angels,

31. For his attack on traditioned reasoning (at least in its Christian form), see Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” in *Practical Philosophy: Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (ed. Mary J. Gregor; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17–22.

32. Mark Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics: Mapping Divine and Human Agency* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 173. For further criticism of deistic approaches to biblical interpretation, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 1, 384–5.

to add to it, to take away from it, or to change it. Whence it follows that no authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations, or edicts, or decrees, or councils, or visions, or miracles, should be opposed to these Holy Scriptures, but, on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them.³³

There will be other authorities, councils, judgments, and wisdom, of course, and *sola Scriptura* is no denigration or denial of such realities.³⁴ But God exercises his ultimate sovereignty over all ecclesiastical and theological practices by means of his scriptural ambassadors: the apostolic and prophetic writings through which Jesus Christ addresses his people.

Second, the means of grace for theology are ecclesially bounded and, therefore, theological reflection does well to learn again from its ancestors the ways of life, lest it continue to flirt with the self-aggrandizing path to death. There are other authorities in the Christian life: there are preachers who proclaim the Word, there are pastors who administer the sacraments, and there are councils that govern the life and ministry of the church judicially and, one prays, theologically. One does not engage the Scriptures separate from this nexus of formative influence. The reader will be shaped, for good or ill, by their immediate context. Better to be cognizant of this cultural formation (both Christian and non-Christian and perhaps even outright anti-Christian) and to engage intentionally not only one's immediate ecclesial environment but the wider catholic context of the church.

Third, the means of grace for theology are missionally aimed. We will find that theology that seeks ecclesial renewal through catholic retrieval will be well placed to encourage the church's contribution to the future of humanity in its fullness. Whereas modern and late modern theology has tended toward narrowing focus, catholic theology has offered a much more holistic approach to the church's witness. "Theological research, we are now prepared to say, is devotion to exploring the reality which exists in the presence of God's name. It follows in the way, the trace, of the reality drawn in by this name."³⁵ All reality is so drawn in by this name—for it is the name of the majestic one—that theology will reach out in mission to address God's grace for and claim upon everything.³⁶

33. "The French Confession of Faith (1559)," in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, 145–6 (article V). See also "The Geneva Confession (1536)," in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, 120 (chapter 1).

34. For engagement of misapprehensions (by friend and foe alike) of *sola Scriptura*, see Michael Allen and Scott Swain, "The Catholic Context of *sola Scriptura*," in *Reformed Catholicity*, 49–70.

35. Hans G. Ulrich, "Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Reflections Toward an Explorative Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 1 (2006), 53.

36. For reflection on how theology addresses all reality without becoming a totalizing discourse, see Michael Allen, *Reformed Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 156–77.