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"THESE ARE WRITTEN"
TOWARD A CRUCIFORM THEOLOGY OF SCRIPTURE

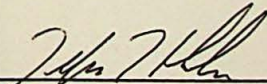
A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematic Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By
Peter H. Nafzger
February 2009

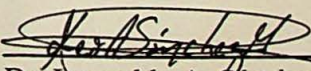
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"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

John 20:30-31 (ESV)

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PREFACE

This project is the result of my own personal struggle to understand the Bible. My struggle has not been with a single passage or chapter in the Bible—although there are plenty of passages that require some struggling—but rather with the nature and function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation. Ten years ago, when serious questions about the Bible were beginning to surface for me, I would not have phrased it that way. But now, after nearly a decade of examining the theology of Scripture more closely, I have concluded that the writings in the Old and New Testaments are most appropriately understood in terms of the role that they play in God's plan to save his fallen creation.

From as early as I can recall, I remember being taught and believing that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God. I believed that it tells the truth about God, the universe, and me, and I looked to it for guidance and direction in life. My theology of Scripture was fairly straightforward: "God said it; I believe it." When questions about the Bible occasionally arose, they were usually related to the application and interpretation of individual passages.

As I began more formal theological studies, however, basic questions about the nature and function of the biblical writings became important to me. These questions did not stem from an inability to accept that God could do such miraculous things as speak through a donkey or turn water into wine, and they did not arise out of doubts that God could have inspired sinful human beings to write without making mistakes. My struggle with the Bible came from a sense of discomfort about the way in which I conceived of the Scriptures in the first place. My belief that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God was not able to answer foundational questions that I found myself asking. These questions included: why were these particular writings included in the canon and not others—and what do we do with books in the New Testament that the early church was not sure about? What does it mean for the Scriptures to have authority in the church—and if the church canonized these writings, how should we understand the authority of the church in relation to the authority of the Scriptures? How should we (or how *can* we) interpret the living and active Word of God—and why do Christians disagree about so many interpretive issues? As I asked these kinds of questions it became increasingly apparent that my conception of the Bible was unable to answer them adequately. I began realizing that I needed a more comprehensive theological account of why I believe that the Bible is the Word of God and how this belief is consistent with the rest of my faith—especially my faith in Jesus, the crucified and risen Son of God.

My discomfort with the way in which I conceived of the Bible led me to a critical examination of the modern approach to the Scriptures. For the most part modernity offered two options for understanding the nature of the Bible. It was either the inspired and inerrant Word of God or it was a fallen human product that contains mistakes and myths. The latter was unacceptable because, when carried to its logical conclusions, it results in a rejection of the basic tenets of the Christian faith. This left me with the former, which was articulated most clearly in the doctrine of inspiration. I reasoned that, if the doctrine of inspiration was the best way of understanding the Scriptures, I should not be afraid to put it to the test. This is what I have been doing for the last ten years, and this dissertation is my first formal attempt to explain what I have found.

Simply put, I have concluded that the modern framework within which the Bible has been approached in recent centuries is problematic. Neither side of the debate fully accounts for the nature and function of the Scriptures in the biblical narrative, and both sides remain dogmatically

detached from the rest of the Christian confession—especially from Christ and the Gospel. Rather than trying to reform one of the two modern options, it seemed better to take a step back and approach the theology of Scripture with a different perspective, a new paradigm, a fresh start. I have taken comfort in the fact that I am not alone. Theologians from various backgrounds and traditions have recently come to the same conclusion, including theologians from my own background and tradition.

The account of the Scriptures that I am offering in this dissertation is not the only way in which a theology of Scripture might be articulated. But as I will attempt to demonstrate, this account flows from and is consistent with the trinitarian and soteriological narrative that undergirds the entire Christian faith, and therefore it is better suited than either side of the modern debate to handle contemporary questions about the canon, authority, and interpretation of the Scriptures.

There are many people who have helped make this dissertation possible. This list begins most appropriately with my parents. Before I was able to read a single word in the Scriptures they led me to saving faith in Jesus by speaking God's living and active Word to me at home. Their faithful proclamation of God's convicting Law and comforting Gospel gave me a cruciform theology from an early age, and for that I am eternally grateful. During the last five years they have supported me and my family in many additional and practical ways, and I appreciate their continued love and support.

I am also thankful to my brothers and sisters in Christ at New Life Church—Lutheran in Hugo, Minnesota. After many years of theological education, the last year and half serving as their partner in the Gospel has only begun to teach me what it means to be a minister of the Word among the people of God. I am honored and humbled to proclaim the spoken Word of God and to teach the written Word of God among them, and I am thankful for their willingness to let their new pastor finish his graduate studies on the job.

There are many people at Concordia Seminary who have contributed to the completion of this project. I am grateful to Dr. Andy Bartelt and the International Seminaries Exchange Program for giving me the opportunity to study at the *Lutherische Theologische Hochschule* in Oberursel, Germany. The year I spent in Oberursel gave me my first taste of independent theological research and taught me to love the German language and my German heritage. I am also grateful for the support and assistance that I have received from the Graduate School, including the Dean of Advanced Studies, Dr. Bruce Schuchard, and the Director of the Graduate School, Dr. Reed Lessing. I have also appreciated Krista Whittenburg's willingness and availability to help throughout the entire process. Among my fellow students I want to express specific thanks to my brother-in-law, Rev. Jim McCoid. His ever-readiness to discuss the fine points of the theology of Scripture with me in the classroom, on the basketball court, and on family vacations helped me think through many issues before I ever typed a word.

Among the faculty of Concordia Seminary I am especially grateful to several specific professors who have been directly involved in the completion of this dissertation. Dr. Robert Kolb has read a number of drafts and has made helpful suggestions along the way. He has helped shape me as a pastoral theologian and has helped me refine my understanding of the living and active Word of God. Drs. Jeffrey Kloha and Leopoldo Sánchez have offered many helpful insights to help me argue more consistently and more pointedly. Prof. Kloha's expertise in the canon has helped me take seriously the history of the apostolic writings during the first several centuries. His influence can be clearly seen in chapter five. Prof. Sánchez has helped open my

eyes to the joint mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation. He helped shape my account of the trinitarian Word of God in chapter three.

There remain two professors whose contributions have been invaluable. The first is my father, Dr. Samuel Nafzger. According to my transcripts he taught only one of my classes at Concordia Seminary. But as I reflect on my theological training I see his pastoral guidance all along the way. Our many conversations about the Bible have allowed me to benefit from his own work on the theology of Scripture as well as his lifetime of studying the Scriptures in the church. This dissertation is an attempt to make explicit the theology of Scripture and the Word of God that he and I share.

I also owe a profound debt of gratitude to Dr. Joel Okamoto. It would be difficult to overstate the positive influence he has had on my graduate studies. His keen intellect and his willingness to ask difficult questions is what initially led me to seek his guidance as a *Doktorvater*. After five years of working together on the theology of Scripture, he has taught me by example that a critical and rigorous examination of our confession of faith is part of what it means to be a faithful theologian. His patient and diligent review of countless versions of this dissertation is a testimony to his kindness and to his commitment to helping his students become theologians of the cross. He has improved this account of the Scriptures in many ways, and I thank him for his collaboration and friendship.

Finally, and most importantly, I am deeply thankful to my wife, Katie. You have contributed to this dissertation in more ways than you realize. During the last five years you have been an invaluable sounding board for the practical implications of my thoughts about the theology of Scripture. Our conversations have helped shape my thinking about how and why we read the Scriptures. You have also made many practical sacrifices at home for me and for this project. While I have spent endless hours reading and writing about the Scriptures and the Word of God, you have been speaking the living and active Word to our children for their salvation. That is more important than anything I may have accomplished here. Words cannot express my love and appreciation for you.

It is to you that I dedicate this dissertation.

ABBREVIATIONS

- ANF *The Ante-Nicene Father: Translations of the Fathers down to A.D. 325.* 10 vols. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994.
- BC *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.* Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.
- CA Augsburg Confession (*Confessio Augustana*)
- Ap Apology of the Augsburg Confession
- SA Smalcald Articles
- SC Luther's Small Catechism
- LC Luther's Large Catechism
- FC Formula of Concord
- SD Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord
- CD Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. 4 vols. Translated by Geoffery Bromiley. London: T & T Clark International, 2004.
- ESV English Standard Version of the Holy Bible
- LW *Luther's Works*. American Edition. 55 vols. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg and Fortress Press, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1955-1986.
- TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. 10 vols. Edited by Gerhard Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by Geoffery W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1964-1976.
- WA *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 1883).

ABSTRACT

Nafzger, Peter H. "'These Are Written': Toward a Cruciform Theology of Scripture."
Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2009. 244 pp.

This dissertation is an attempt to ground the Christian theology of Scripture in the trinitarian economy of salvation. Rather than approaching the Scriptures with the assumptions, concepts, and categories that have governed the modern "battle for the Bible," this account locates the Scriptures in the theology of the Word of God. In the biblical narrative this Word is found in three forms: Jesus Christ is the personal form of the Word of God who was sent by the Father in the power of the Spirit for the salvation of the world. His identity and mission come together in the cross, and all that he did and said was vindicated in his resurrection from the dead. The proclamation of God's deputized prophets, apostles, and preachers in the church is the spoken form of the Word of God. This form of the Word is the primary means by which God forgives sins and creates saving faith in the hearts of sinful human beings. In this context the Scriptures are most properly understood to be the written form of the Word of God. They are definitive versions of the prophetic and apostolic Word. They serve the proclamation of the Word as the only rule and norm for the preaching and teaching of the church. This foundation in the theology of the Word of God enables the church to answer more fully and consistently contemporary questions about the canon, authority, and interpretation of the Scriptures.

INTRODUCTION

“Christ crucified.” This is how the apostle Paul summarizes the Christian faith in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:23). He says, “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:1–2). In contrast to Jews who demand signs and Greeks who seek wisdom, Christians believe the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world.¹

To human wisdom the “word of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18) appears foolish. But to those who believe it is the wisdom of God and the power of salvation (1 Cor. 1:22–30; Rom. 1:1–4, 16) in which they find the forgiveness of sins and eternal life (Acts 10:39–43; Eph. 1:7). This emphasis on the death and resurrection of Jesus is highlighted in all four canonical gospels as the climax and culmination of his life and ministry.² The apostolic preaching recorded in the book of Acts (Acts 2:14–38; 3:12–26; 4:10–12; 5:29–32; 7:51–53; 8:26–35; 10:34–43; 11:19–20; 13:16–41; 17:2–3; 26:22–23) and the apostolic writings that make up the rest of the New Testament (Rom. 6:1–10; Gal. 3:1–14; Eph. 2:13–20; Phil. 2:6–11; Col. 1:15–23; 1 Tim. 1:15; 2 Tim. 2:8–13; Tit. 2:11–14;

¹ “Christ crucified” is shorthand for the entire narrative of the crucified and risen Christ. Gustav Wingren writes, “Christ’s death and resurrection belong inseparably together, the way to resurrection goes through death.” *The Living Word* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 59. Cf. Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 1 (note 1).

² Each gospel focuses on and highlights Jesus’ death and resurrection. One third of the combined gospel accounts is devoted to reporting the events surrounding the last week of Jesus’ life.

Heb. 2:14–15; 1 Peter 3:18–19; 1 John 4:9–10) repeatedly return to the death and resurrection of Jesus as *the* constitutive Christian event. The earliest Christian creeds are centered on Jesus' crucifixion under Pontius Pilate,³ and the worship of the first Christian communities concluded with a celebration of the Lord's Supper as a proclamation of his death (1 Cor. 11:23–26).⁴

Inseparable from Jesus' death and resurrection are the writings of the prophets who foretold his suffering (Luke 24:25–26, 45–46; John 5:39; 1 Peter 1:10–11) and the apostles he sent to proclaim his Gospel (e.g., Rom. 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1). The prophetic writings foretold the coming of a promised Messiah—an “anointed one” of God who would deliver his people from bondage (Is. 42:1). Jesus identified himself as this promised Messiah as he interpreted these writings in light of his own life and ministry (Luke 4:14–21). His apostles proclaimed the Gospel by highlighting his fulfillment of these writings (Acts 8:35; 13:13–42; 17:2–4; 28:23–28) and early Christian converts verified the apostolic message by searching the Scriptures Jesus claimed to fulfill (Acts 17:11–12). Jesus' mission and identity is bound together with the writings that make up today's “Old Testament”—he makes them intelligible and they make him intelligible.

Also inseparable from Jesus' death and resurrection are the written records of the message he sent his apostles to proclaim. Although Jesus himself did not leave any writings, he instructed his disciples to teach everything that he had commanded them

³ Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 2nd edition (London: Longmans, 1960). Kelly notes that, in addition to the creedal statements in the Scriptures that focus on the death and resurrection of Christ (16–21), the baptism profession of faith in Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* (46), the creedal statements in the letters of Ignatius (68–69) and Justin's *Apology* and *Dialogue with Trypho* (71–75) all center around Jesus' suffering and death on the cross.

⁴ On the central place of the Lord's Supper in early Christian worship, see Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966).

(Matt. 28:20); he commissioned them to speak on his behalf and with his authority (Luke 10:16) and to forgive sins in his name (John 20:20–23; cf. Luke 24:47); he prayed for those who would believe in him through their message (John 17:20); and he gave to them his Spirit to lead them into all truth (John 16:13–15; cf. John 20:21–23 and Acts 2:1–4). The apostles proclaimed Jesus’ message by speaking and by writing, and the definitive written versions of this message are found in what is known today as the “New Testament.” Together with the writings of the prophets, these apostolic writings are regarded in the church as Holy Scripture.⁵ They are read in worship, studied in the classroom, and meditated on at home. It is impossible to conceive of the Christian faith without these writings, and therefore it is appropriate to describe Christian history as an “ongoing encounter with Holy Scripture.”⁶

Despite the central significance of these writings for the Christian faith, a great deal of confusion and disagreement exists—inside and outside the church—about the nature and function of the Scriptures. In his historical survey of the theology of Scripture, Justin Holcomb asks some questions that have not yet been definitively answered:

What is scripture? Is it divine? Human? Both? Is scripture authoritative? If so, how and for whom? What is the scope of its authority? Is scripture inspired by God? What about scriptural interpretation—is that inspired? Does God illuminate humans to understand scripture? Is there an appropriate method of interpreting scripture? What is its purpose? How *is* scripture used? How *ought* scripture to be used? How do scripture and tradition relate? Does scripture interpret tradition or does tradition interpret scripture? Or both?

⁵ N. T. Wright says, “Jesus himself was profoundly shaped by the scriptures he knew, the ancient Hebrew and Aramaic texts whose stories, songs, prophecy and wisdom permeated the Jewish world of his day. The earliest Christians searched those same scriptures in their effort to explore, understand and explain what the living God had accomplished through Jesus, and in their eagerness to reorder their life accordingly. By the early second century many of the early Christian writings were being collected, and were themselves treated with reverence and given a similar status to the original Israelite scriptures.” *Scripture and the Authority of God*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2005), 1.

⁶ See Gerhard Ebeling, *The Word of God and Tradition: Historical Studies Interpreting the Divisions of Christianity*, trans. S. H. Hooke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 11–31.

What does it mean for a Christian to call the Bible “the Word of God”? And if Jesus is also called the Word of God, how does Jesus as the Word of God relate to the Bible as the Word of God?⁷

Holcomb’s questions show that there remains uncertainty and disagreement among Christians about many issues related to the Scriptures. Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues that these uncertainties include the existence of such a thing as “Scripture” in the first place. He writes, “Most of us hear the word ‘scripture’ without stumbling over it. Using it, we give the impression, even to ourselves...that we know what scripture is. On reflection, it turns out that it is hardly the case.”⁸ Smith challenges us to take another look at this well-known book called the Bible and answer a fundamental question about its contents: what is Scripture?

Prior to the seventeenth century the church’s answer to this question was fairly straightforward. Christians believed that the Scriptures were the written Word of God. With the rise of modern rationalism, however, this belief was called into question. Some theologians began reading the Scriptures from a rational and critical perspective; they began questioning the reliability and authenticity of the Scriptures; they began emphasizing the fact that sinful human beings had composed and transmitted these writings. One result of this modern turn toward rational criticism was a dismissal among critical theologians of the traditional belief that the writings of the prophets and apostles were the Word of God. Not everyone accepted this rational approach to the Scriptures, however. Many rejected it as a departure from historic Christianity. These theologians went to great lengths to argue that the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God and

⁷ Justin Holcomb, *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 1–2.

⁸ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 1.

therefore perfectly and completely true. The dispute between critical theologians and those who maintained the traditional belief became known as the modern “battle for the Bible,”⁹ and the questions that framed the discussion several hundred years ago remain at the center of debate today.¹⁰

In his theological account of the Scriptures Telford Work describes this modern debate as “the crisis of Scripture.”¹¹ He compares it to the iconoclastic controversy that arose in the eighth century. Similar to that debate over the use of icons in the church, in modern times there has been “a *wholesale* attack...from *inside* the Church, on the idea and use of Scripture.”¹² Work explains:

[S]ince the Enlightenment the concept and practice of Scripture have been under unprecedented and sustained attack. From an ever-thickening stack of new hermeneutical proposals to radical uses of the historical-critical method (from both liberal Protestants and fundamentalists) and the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” new ways of appreciating the Bible have challenged traditional concepts of Scripture in ways sometimes reminiscent of the era of Iconoclasm. “Formerly, people saw nothing but God” in Scripture, says Aidan Nichols. “Now they see nothing but humans.” Protestants in general, and fundamentalists in particular, have been labeled bibliolaters by their rivals. In return, these movements have faulted Catholics, then modern Protestants, for adopting human traditions that usurped or denied Scripture’s divinity. Liberals have been called adoptionists and ebionites, conservatives docetists and monophysites, neo-orthodox Nestorians—not because of their formal Christologies, but because of the Christological implications of their uses of Scripture. These charges and countercharges are reminiscent of the atmosphere in the eighth century.¹³

⁹ See Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

¹⁰ The relationship between the Bible and the Word of God remains an important topic in contemporary theology. The Lutheran World Federation met in February 2006 to consider whether the Bible can be equated with the Word of God in their study program called “The Authority of the Bible in the Life of the Church.” See *Lutheran World Information 2* (2006): 11.

¹¹ Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4. His emphasis.

¹³ Work, *Living and Active*, 4-5.

Work points out that the iconoclastic controversy was not resolved until the church articulated a comprehensive account of the nature and function of icons, and he suggests that nothing less is required today for the theology of Scripture. He notes that the “battle for the Bible” has been conducted on narrow terms, focusing almost exclusively on whether or not the Scriptures are historically true. If there is to be a “triumph of orthodoxy” with respect to the theology of Scripture the church must articulate a comprehensive account of the nature and function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation.¹⁴

Work is not alone in his dissatisfaction with the modern debate. A growing number of contemporary theologians from a variety of backgrounds and traditions have raised questions about the assumptions, concepts, and categories that have governed the modern debate. They have offered helpful suggestions about how to move beyond the modern battle and have made significant contributions toward a comprehensive theology of Scripture. Lacking in the contemporary discussion, however, is an account of the Scriptures that is shaped by and consistent with the biblical narrative’s focus on the cross. This dissertation attempts to fill that gap. It offers a cruciform account of the nature and function of the Scriptures in the trinitarian economy of salvation.

In the first two chapters of this dissertation I critically evaluate the way in which the Scriptures have been approached in modern times. Chapter 1 begins by considering the two sides of the modern “battle for the Bible,” and it argues that this battle has amounted primarily to a debate over the historical truthfulness of the Bible. The reliability of the Scriptures is fundamentally important for the validity of Christianity’s central claims, and

¹⁴ Work, *Living and Active*, 3-9.

therefore the critical rejection of the truthfulness of the Scriptures is incompatible with historic Christianity. There is much more to the theology of Scripture, however, than an affirmation of its historical truthfulness. This is where the doctrine of inspiration falls short. Its disproportionate focus on defending biblical inerrancy against rational criticism has limited its ability to provide answers to contemporary questions about the canon, authority, and interpretation.

In order to move beyond the modern debate, chapter 2 examines Karl Barth's theology of Scripture as an important step in the right direction. His dogmatic relocation of the Scriptures under the Word of God provides a more comprehensive framework for considering the Scriptures in relation to the rest of the Christian confession, especially to Christ and church proclamation. Barth's trinitarian perspective and his emphasis on the function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation are helpful improvements on the modern debate, but his account falters in other ways. His philosophical presuppositions keep him from following the biblical narrative in several important ways. First, he limits God's ability to speak through the prophets and apostles (and even through Jesus himself) by insisting that the finite is incapable of containing the infinite. This manifests itself in his understanding of the person of Christ, the proclamation of the Gospel, and the Scriptures. Second, his disproportionate emphasis on the incarnation of Christ makes the death and resurrection of Jesus theologically inconsequential. Although Barth recognized problems with the modern debate over the Scriptures and helped point in the right direction by emphasizing the dogmatic priority of the Word of God, his account is finally unacceptable.

Chapter 3 is my attempt to reorient the theology of Scripture around the Gospel of Christ crucified. It is the primary contribution that I am trying to make to the contemporary discussion. In order to provide a foundation for understanding the nature and function of the Scriptures that is consistent with the biblical narrative, chapter 3 begins by reexamining the nature and function of the Word of God in the divine economy. It highlights the biblical narrative's claim that the one true God is a speaking God. This God speaks his living and active Word at many times and in various ways, but he speaks *definitively, ultimately, decisively, and for all time* in his Son, Jesus Christ, the personal Word of God. In fulfillment of the Word that God had spoken by his prophets, this personal Word was sent by the Father in the power of the Spirit to do the Father's work and speak his Word for the salvation of humankind. Some accepted his message and ministry and believed, but others rejected and crucified him. The personal Word did not remain in the grave, however. In the power of the same Spirit by whom he was conceived, he was raised from the dead and vindicated by the Father as the Son of God. After completing his work of salvation through his death and resurrection, this risen Word sent his apostles with his Spirit to continue his ministry of proclaiming the Word of God for the salvation of sinners. The apostolic writings that have been collected and circulated in the church are the definitive versions of their proclamation, and together with the written record of the prophetic proclamation, they are properly recognized as the written form of the Word of God. This written Word provides the final rule and norm for Christian preaching and teaching.

This account of the Word of God in chapter 3 provides the foundation for the theology of Scripture that I begin to address more specifically in chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 4 is an excursus into the various dogmatic structures that have been used to make theological sense of the relationship between the Scriptures and the Word of God. It evaluates the popular "Analogy of the Word" and its comparison of the two natures of Christ with the two natures of the Bible; it reexamines Barth's threefold form of the Word and his understanding of the relationship between Jesus Christ, the Scriptures, and church proclamation; it takes a closer look at Luther's understanding of the written and spoken forms of the Word of God as the means by which God relates to his human creatures. Chapter 4 concludes by offering a revised version of Barth's threefold form of the Word of God as a helpful framework for understanding the relationship between Jesus, the proclamation of the Gospel, and the Scriptures.

Chapter 5 concludes this project by examining some implications of this account of the Word of God for the theology of Scripture. It returns to the three issues I examined in chapter 1 and attempts to show how a cruciform account of the Word of God in the trinitarian economy of salvation provides more solid grounds for speaking about the canon, authority, and interpretation of the Scriptures. Chapter 5 is admittedly selective and incomplete. None of the issues I examine receive exhaustive consideration, and there are many aspects of the theology of Scripture that I do not even mention. My goal in this final chapter is not to answer every question related to the Scriptures or to offer a comprehensive theology of Scripture. Instead, I hope to show in very preliminary ways how my account of the Scriptures as one form of the Word of God addresses questions about the canon, authority, and interpretation in ways that are more consistent with the biblical narrative than either side of the modern debate. Chapter 5 should be seen as the *first step* toward a cruciform theology of Scripture.

Almost fifty years ago Herman Sasse saw the need to articulate a theology of Scripture that moves beyond the modern concepts and categories. He writes, “Wir brauchen einen *neuen Konsensus über das Wesen und Autorität der Heiligen Schrift*, ein neues Verständnis des für die Kirche notwendigen Lehrstücks *Sacra Scriptura*.”¹⁵ More recently, and with a bit more creativity, N. T. Wright suggests something similar:

Writing a book about Scripture is like building a sandcastle in front of the Matterhorn. The best you can hope to do is to catch the eye of those who were looking down instead of up, or those who were so familiar with the skyline that they had stopped noticing its peculiar beauty. But as I have taken part in many discussions over the years about what the Bible is, and the place it should occupy in Christian mission and thinking, I have increasingly come to the conclusion that there are some, perhaps many, people both outside and inside the church who need to be nudged to look up once more, and this time with fresh eyes, not just at the foothills, but at the crags and crevasses, the cliffs and the snowfields, and ultimately at the dazzling and dangerous summit itself.¹⁶

My goal in this dissertation is to provide the kind of fresh perspective that Sasse and Wright are seeking. More than just a new look, this dissertation approaches the theology of Scripture from the perspective of the cross. It relocates the theology of Scripture within the theology of the Word of God in ways that are consistent with the biblical narrative and its emphasis on Christ crucified. At its foundation, this dissertation approaches the theology of Scripture with John’s statement toward the end of his gospel in mind: “These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

¹⁵ Hermann Sasse, *Sacra Scriptura: Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift* (Erlangen: Verlag der Luth. Mission, 1983), 8. His emphasis.

¹⁶ Wright, *Scripture*, xiii.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MODERN APPROACH TO THE SCRIPTURES

There is little dispute that the Bible is the most influential book ever written. The writings that it contains have stood at the center of commentary and controversy throughout history. Debate has circulated (both inside and outside the church) over its contents, application, meaning, and even its proper “owner.”¹ Although there has never been complete agreement among Christians about every issue related to the Bible, prior to the rise of modernity it was believed throughout the church that the writings it contains are the written Word of God. They were read with reverence and respect, and Christians agreed that they were reliable and true.

With the arrival of the modern world, however, these beliefs about the Christian Scriptures were called into question. Instead of revering them as the written Word of God, some theologians began subjecting them to a rational standard of investigation. They identified apparent contradictions and errors throughout the Scriptures and concluded that these writings were filled with legends and myths. Other theologians rejected this critical approach to the Bible and defended the traditional belief that they were the written Word of God. The debate between these two ways of approaching the Scriptures became known as the “battle for the Bible,” and the lines that were drawn

¹ See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Whose Bible is it? A History of the Scriptures Through the Ages* (New York: Viking, 2005).

between critics and conservatives in the seventeenth century have divided Christendom ever since.²

A Debate about Historical Truthfulness

With the rise of the modern world came changes to every aspect of western life and thought—theology and the church notwithstanding.³ Basic truths that had previously been held throughout Christendom became the object of criticism and scrutiny, and the church of the Enlightenment found itself struggling to survive in a world increasingly dominated by philosophical rationalism. Van Austin Harvey describes the theological atmosphere at this point in history as a clash of conflicting worldviews, or moralities. He argues that the old morality of faith and trust that had characterized the church throughout its first seventeen hundred years was threatened by the emergence of a new morality. This new morality was governed by an epistemology grounded in skepticism and distrust. Harvey explains:

The old morality celebrated faith and belief as virtues and regarded doubt as sin. The new morality celebrates methodological skepticism and is distrustful of passion in matters of inquiry. If Pascal's belief that the heart has its reasons which the reason cannot know can be said of the old ethic, then Nietzsche's conviction that integrity in matters of the mind requires that one be severe against one's heart may be regarded as symbolic of the new one. The old morality was fond of the slogan "faith seeking understanding"; the new morality believes that every yes and no must be a matter of conscience.⁴

² The "battle for the Bible" is not a Protestant phenomenon. Since Vatican II, Rome has struggled to find its footing on questions about biblical inspiration, inerrancy, and authority. See Collin Hansen, "Rome's Battle for the Bible," *Christianity Today* (October 2008).

³ There are different viewpoints regarding the beginning of modernity. Diogenes Allen suggests that modern philosophy started with René Descartes (1596-1650). *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 171.

⁴ Van Austin Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Chicago: Illinois University Press, 1996), 103.

According to Harvey, the rise of modern skepticism presented theologians with two incompatible options. On the one hand was the traditional morality grounded in the pre-modern belief that God acts in history in miraculous ways. On the other hand was rationalism's inherent distrust of anything that cannot be verified by modern standards of reason or science. The battle between these two moralities manifested itself as a struggle between the "historian" and the "believer," and the first major struggle had to do with the Scriptures. Harvey writes:

The first great conflict between the new morality of historical knowledge and traditional Christian belief quite naturally occurred over the problem whether the Bible was to be subjected to the same methodological canons that were to be applied to other ancient and religious traditions and scriptures. The critic insisted on the right to be free and autonomous; the traditionalist insisted that the Bible was a holy and infallible book.⁵

To the "historian" it was a matter of intellectual integrity that the Scriptures be treated like any other human compositions. To the "believer" it was a matter of respect for divine revelation that they remain beyond the grasp of rational criticism. Depending on what they believed about the relationship between these writings and the Word of God, modern theologians generally belonged to one of two groups: those who affirmed the traditional belief and insisted that the Scriptures are the inspired and inerrant Word of God, or those who separated the Scriptures from the Word of God and denied biblical inspiration and inerrancy.⁶

⁵ Ibid., 104.

⁶ See Samuel H. Nafzger, "Scripture and the Word of God," in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics* ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) 107-126.

The Critical Approach to the Scriptures

Theologians on the critical side of the debate accepted the basic tenets of modern rationalism. They abandoned the pre-modern belief that the scriptural writings were historically true in every way, and they dismissed those who defended the traditional belief as unenlightened and naïve. While critical theologians held a wide variety of positions, they shared a common belief that the Scriptures contain impossibilities, inconsistencies, and contradictions. They agreed that the biblical miracles were little more than legends and that its commands were time- and culture-bound to ages long since gone. In the wake of the scientific revolution, theologians on this side of the debate rejected the possibility that these writings could be the inspired and inerrant Word of God. Harvey describes their approach to the Scriptures with legal imagery. He compares the modern critic to a prosecuting attorney and the Scriptures to a witness under interrogation: "No witness can be permitted to go unexamined and no authority unquestioned. The historian does not accept the authority of his witnesses; rather he confers authority upon them, and he does this only after subjecting them to a rigorous and skeptical cross-examination."⁷ In a world come of age, critical theologians concluded that the traditional belief that the Scriptures were the written Word of God was simply incredible and intellectually indefensible.

Gordon Kaufman's 1971 essay, "What Shall We Do with the Bible?" exemplifies the critical approach. He writes:

For centuries, as the very word of God to man, the Bible has provided the context of meaning with which Christian man—indeed, Western man generally—has appropriated and understood his existence and set his course in life...But this is all over with and gone. Though we may recognize and be

⁷ Harvey, *Historian*, 107.

grateful for its contributions to our culture, the Bible no longer has unique authority for Western man. It has become a great but archaic monument in our midst. It is a reminder of where we once were—but no longer are. It contains glorious literature, important historical documents, exalted ethical teachings, but is no longer the word of God (if there is a God) to man.⁸

Although he acknowledges that the Bible remains useful, Kaufman concludes that we must give up our traditional beliefs about it. He explains, “The Bible has become a theological problem for contemporary Christians with no traditional or pat answers acceptable.”⁹ The Jesus Seminar comes to a similar conclusion. With modern rationalism as its final standard, this group of theologians examined the earliest accounts of Jesus’ life and concludes that only ten of one hundred and seventy-six events recorded in the four canonical gospels accurately reflect historical reality.¹⁰ The result is a gospel that can hardly be identified with the message of historic Christianity.¹¹ If Christianity is to continue, the Jesus Seminar argues, it must break free from the antiquated idea that the Scriptures were inspired by God. In his introductory remarks to the Seminar’s first meeting in 1985 Robert Funk offers this suggestion:

⁸ Gordon Kaufman, “What Shall We Do With the Bible?” *Interpretation* 25 (1971): 95–96.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁰ See Robert Funk, ed. *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (New York: Polebridge Press, 1998).

¹¹ Robert Funk writes: “We no longer believe that Jesus was born of Mary without the benefit of male sperm. We no longer think of him literally as performing miracles like walking on the water or stilling the storm. We no longer believe that he fed 5,000 (not counting women and children, according to Matthew) with five loaves and two fish. We are relatively certain that the first reports of his resurrection were luminous apparitions prompted by grief. We think the empty tomb stories are a late and fictional attempt to certify a bodily resurrection. The ascension of Jesus into heaven can only be a fiction. We doubt that Jesus died to atone for the sins of the world, resulting from Adam’s original error. We are convinced that Jesus did not intend to establish a new religion, appoint clergy, or inaugurate celibacy. In sum, there is little of the orthodox story that remains tenable. The essential dogmas of the television evangelists, Fundamentalists, and many Evangelicals are museum exhibits: the divinity of Jesus, the virgin birth, the blood atonement, the bodily resurrection, and the second coming. The decay of the old symbolic universe is so far advanced that many believers no longer find such dogmas interesting enough even to discuss.” “The Once and Future New Testament” in *The Canon Debate*, Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 548.

We need a new narrative of Jesus, a new gospel, if you will, that places Jesus differently in the grand scheme, the epic story...The fiction of revelation keeps many common folk in bondage to ignorance and fear. We require a new, liberating fiction, one that squares with the best knowledge we can now accumulate and one that transcends self-serving ideologies. And we need a fiction that we recognize to be fictive.¹²

Kaufmann and the Jesus Seminar represent a consistently critical approach to the scriptural writings. After examining the evidence from a rational perspective, they agree that few of the events recorded in the Bible reflect what actually happened in history and they conclude that the Scriptures may no longer be regarded as the Word of God.

Despite the widespread acceptance of the critical approach to the Scriptures in the academic world, not every critical theologian has been as consistent as Kaufman and the Jesus Seminar. On the contrary, Harvey notes that many modern theologians approach the Scriptures with convenient inconsistency. Unwilling to accept the results that follow when rational criticism is carried to its logical conclusions, many modern theologians attempt to have it both ways. They have “examined some of the New Testament traditions with the aid of accepted principles of criticism while they left others alone or handled them quite gingerly.”¹³ In order to affirm the “important” events in the life of Jesus, inconsistent critics pick and choose which miracles are credible and which miracles may be dismissed as legends. As an example Harvey notes the common dismissal of an appearance of an angel at the empty tomb as “obviously legendary” by the same theologians who defend the resurrection of a dead man as historical and true.¹⁴ He rightly wonders about this double standard: “What is the warrant that excludes the one

¹² Robert Funk, “The Issue of Jesus” in *Jesus Reconsidered: Scholarship in the Public Eye*, ed. Bernard Brandon Scott (Santa Rosa, Cal.: Polebridge Press, 2007), 11.

¹³ Harvey, *Historian*, 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 109-110.

judgment but permits the other?"¹⁵ As Marcus Borg observes, "The Bible does not come with footnotes that say, 'This passage reflects the will of God; the next does not,' or 'This passage is valid for all time; the previous passage is not.'"¹⁶

Despite its inconsistent application, Harvey concludes that the critical side of the modern debate has won the battle.¹⁷ Biblical scholarship has become dominated by those who reject the traditional view of the Scriptures, and many mainstream denominations have moved on with a Bible that is neither historically accurate nor respected and read as the Word of God.

The Conservative Approach to the Scriptures

Theologians on the conservative side of the modern debate quarrel with Harvey's conclusion that the critics have won the "battle for the Bible." Rather than giving in to the pressures of modern rationalism, these theologians have responded to the critical approach to the Scriptures with loud and repeated condemnations. They have denounced the application of critical methods of investigation and have devoted themselves to defending their belief that the Bible is the Word of God. Their defense of the traditional belief usually focuses on two related issues: the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the biblical texts, and the complete historical truthfulness of the biblical record.

Originally developed by the orthodox dogmatists of the seventeenth century, this two-

¹⁵ Ibid., 110.

¹⁶ Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but not Literally* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2002), 27.

¹⁷ Ibid., 106.

pronged defense of the Scriptures makes up the main components of the doctrine of inspiration.¹⁸

Proponents of the doctrine of inspiration typically argue that, despite the fact that the human authors physically moved the pens that composed the scriptural writings, the Holy Spirit is ultimately responsible for what was written. The prophets and apostles wrote according to their own particular style and disposition, but the Spirit worked alongside them to ensure that their words were perfect and true in every way. The Spirit gave them the impulse and the command to write and provided the inner revelation and information to be recorded.¹⁹ Abraham Calov, for example, says that the Spirit “accommodated himself at times to the ordinary manner of speaking, leaving to the writers their modes of speech. And yet we must not deny that the Holy Spirit inspired them in the very words.”²⁰ Because they believe that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of the Scriptures, proponents of the doctrine of inspiration conclude that every jot and tittle in the Bible is equally and completely inspired—no matter how insignificant it might appear. Because they are inspired, they are entirely free from mistakes, inconsistencies, or contradictions. The inspiration of the entire biblical account depends on the inspiration of every single word.²¹ In this context biblical inerrancy has frequently taken its place (in practice, at least) as the article by which the church stands or falls. In

¹⁸ Although there is no single “official” doctrine of inspiration, the following description outlines the general points of emphasis made by modern theologians who defend the belief that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Robert D. Preus’ *The Inspiration of Scripture* is generally recognized as the definitive account of the doctrine of inspiration as it was developed by the orthodox dogmaticians of the seventeenth century. I will refer to it throughout this section.

¹⁹ Robert D. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture* 2nd ed. Concordia Heritage Series (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 50ff.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

The Battle for the Bible, for example, Lindsell argues that the single most important issue in Christian theology is biblical inerrancy. To him the most fundamental theological question is this: "Is the Bible trustworthy?"²² The International Conference on Biblical Inerrancy (convened in 1978 to defend the Bible's historical truthfulness) expresses a similar view. Norman Geisler introduces a collection of the essays delivered at this meeting: "The volume is offered as a consensus of contemporary evangelical scholarship on the crucial importance of biblical inerrancy for the present and future vitality of the Christian church."²³ In response to the critical claims that Scripture errs, theologians on the conservative side of the modern debate insist that inerrancy has always been part of the church's confession and that a denial of biblical inerrancy amounts to a departure from historic Christianity.²⁴

The modern "battle for the Bible" has been fought along these two lines for several hundred years now, and there is no foreseeable end in sight. On the critical side of the debate theologians continue to reject the idea that the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God. They continue to highlight what they believe to be contradictions and mistakes, and they continue to dismiss proponents of the doctrine of inspiration as intellect-sacrificing fundamentalists. On the conservative side theologians continue to defend the traditional view that the Scriptures are the Word of God by insisting that the Holy Spirit is their final author. They continue to argue that anything resembling a contradiction or a mistake has

²² Lindsell, *Battle*, 18.

²³ Norman Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), ix.

²⁴ Nearly a third of *Inerrancy* is devoted to demonstrating that biblical inerrancy has been believed throughout Christian history. See chapter 1: "Christ's View of Scripture" (John W. Wenham), chapter 2: "The Apostles' View of Scripture" (Edwin A. Blum), chapter 12: "The View of the Bible Held by the Church: The Early Church Through Luther" (Robert D. Preus) and chapter 13, "The View of the Bible Held by the Church: Calvin and the Westminster Divines" (John H. Gerstner).

a rational explanation, and they continue to identify the critics as enemies of historic Christianity. Despite the many essays and books that have been written in support of these two positions, neither side of the modern debate has articulated a comprehensive account of the nature and function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation.

The End of the Modern Battle

After centuries of fighting over the historical truthfulness of the Scriptures, it is becoming clear that there are problems with both sides of the modern debate.

Theologians on the liberal side who are consistent in their criticism are ultimately left with only one option: a rejection of the historic Christianity and the adoption of a “new gospel,” as Funk suggests. But this conclusion is unacceptable to those who wish to remain in continuity with historic Christianity. Many of those who initially accepted the critical approach to the Scriptures have become uneasy with its conclusions. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson explain, “The historical-critical method was originally devised and welcomed as the great emancipator of the Bible from ecclesiastical dogma and blind faith. Some practitioners of the method now sense that the Bible may have meanwhile become its victim.”²⁵ Josef Ratzinger recognizes the same shift: “To speak of the crisis of the historical-critical method today is practically a truism. This despite the fact that it had gotten off to so optimistic a start.”²⁶ Despite its initial and widespread acceptance, it is

²⁵ Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, eds., *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), ix.

²⁶ Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, “Foundations and Approaches of Biblical Exegesis,” *Origins* 17 (February 11, 1988): 593.

becoming general consensus that historic Christianity is incompatible with a consistently critical approach to the Scriptures.²⁷

On the other side of the debate, the doctrine of inspiration has been recognized as inadequate for other reasons. Rather than constructing a theology of Scripture that flows from the biblical narrative and the rest of the Christian confession, the doctrine of inspiration has been unhelpfully shaped by the rational criticism that it rejects. This can be seen in several ways. First, in response to critical claims that the Scriptures contain errors, proponents of the doctrine of inspiration often conceive of the Spirit's work of "inspiring" as little more than a guarantee that the Scriptures are historically true and reliable. They have paid little attention to the work of the Spirit in relation to Christ and the Gospel. Instead, conservative theologians have spent an inordinate amount of time and energy focusing on issues peripheral to the church's mission of proclaiming Christ crucified.²⁸ Second, in order to justify their use of the Scriptures as the source and norm of dogmatic theology, they have presented their theology of Scripture in the prolegomena, precariously detached from the rest of the Christian confession. Robert Preus acknowledges this detachment in his account of the doctrine of inspiration: "Yes, the powerful emphasis of a Luther upon the centrality of justification is wanting in some of the theological literature of the seventeenth century... It is true that their treatment of

²⁷ Gerhard Maier discusses some of the fatal problems with the critical approach to the Scriptures. *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans. Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), 11-49.

²⁸ Hermann Sasse criticizes those who focus on obscure details (such as ventilation in the belly of the great fish in the book of Jonah) in order to defend biblical inerrancy. He notes a 1927 study published in the *Princeton Theological Review* that argues that the temperature inside the great fish was 104-107 degrees Fahrenheit. See Ronald R. Feuerhahn and Jeffery J. Kloha, eds., *Scripture and the Church: Selected Essays of Hermann Sasse* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Monograph Series, 1995) 99-100.

the *sola scriptura* is more detached from the article of justification than it might have been."²⁹

This dogmatic separation of the Scriptures from Christ and the Gospel has contributed to a widespread misunderstanding of the nature and function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation. Many defenders of the traditional belief have conceived of the Bible as little more than a collection of isolated facts and divinely inspired pieces of information, with the Gospel of Christ crucified as little more than one of God's many revealed truths.³⁰ In addition to this detachment from the Gospel, the migration of the Scriptures to the prolegomena has forced the doctrine of inspiration to provide the epistemological warrant for the rest of the Christian confession. As a result, it has been stretched beyond its theological and systematic capability. The situation has been created in which the entire Christian faith appears to hinge upon the inspiration (and inerrancy) of every single word.

Harvey suggests that the problems with the doctrine of inspiration began with the initial conservative response to rational criticism. He argues that conservative theologians in the seventeenth century had three options for responding to the rational approach to the Scriptures:

- (1) They could appeal to the state to repress the new and dangerous doctrines;
- (2) they could retreat from discussion and hold up to ridicule the occasional

²⁹ R. Preus, *Inspiration*, 209–210. Preus recognizes this problem with the doctrine of inspiration, but he does not offer a solution.

³⁰ A popular example of this view of the Scriptures can be seen in Bruce Wilkinson's *The Prayer of Jabez* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2000). Wilkinson reads 1 Chronicles 4:10 as the foundation of the Christian life with no theological connection to the salvation of God in Christ. The popularity of this book—as a New York Times #1 Best Seller it has sold over 9 million copies—demonstrates the need for a clear articulation of the relationship between Scripture and the Gospel of Christ crucified.

inconsistencies and extravagances of the new science; and (3) they could step into the arena of debate and attempt to vindicate their own view.³¹

Because they found neither of the first two options acceptable, Harvey suggests that they settled on the third option:

The only really viable alternative was to enter the lists of the debate and to attempt to vindicate the truth of the sacred narratives. To do this, however, it was necessary to pay a costly price: it was necessary to accept the general canons and criteria of just those one desired to refute. One had, so to speak, to step onto the ground that the critics occupied. This was fatal to the traditionalist's cause, because he could no longer appeal to the eye of faith or to any special warrants. The arguments had to stand or fall on their own merits.³²

To the extent that Harvey is correct, the doctrine of inspiration has been in trouble from the start. The seventeenth-century dogmaticians allowed the debate over the Scriptures to become an argument over whether or not the Scriptures are historically true.

The Impact on the Theology of Scripture

The doctrine of inspiration developed by the seventeenth century dogmaticians is not necessarily *wrong*. To the contrary, its affirmation of the historical truthfulness of the biblical texts is necessary if the church is to remain in continuity with historic Christianity. The problem, however, is that the doctrine of inspiration has focused its attention almost exclusively on defending the historical truthfulness of the Scriptures against rational criticism. In doing so it has isolated the Scriptures from Christ, the Gospel, and the rest of the Christian confession. This dogmatic isolation has resulted in a

³¹ Harvey, *Historian*, 104–105.

³² *Ibid.*, 105–106. Harvey's claim that it was necessary for conservative theologians to accept the general canons and criteria of the critics may be debated. Indeed, in this dissertation I am arguing that there is a more helpful way of defending the traditional Christian beliefs about the Bible than accepting the rational terms of the modern debate.

theology of Scripture that lacks a sufficient foundation for understanding three fundamental scriptural issues: canon, authority, and interpretation.³³

Canon

For all the debate about the Scriptures in modern times, the question of the canon has played a surprisingly insignificant role in the discussion. The doctrine of inspiration makes little mention of the canon,³⁴ and with the exception of an occasional ecclesiastical controversy,³⁵ the canonical question has not played a significant role in the modern debate. This situation is beginning to change, however, as the last forty years have witnessed a rising interest in the historical and theological issues involved in the process of canonization. In order to understand the reason for the absence of the question of the canon in the modern debate, it is helpful to investigate the point at which it faded from discussion. This requires a return to the sixteenth century.

On April 5, 1546 the first decree of the fourth session of the Council of Trent officially established the biblical canon in Roman Catholic theology.³⁶ It listed the contents of the Old and New Testaments, “lest doubt should arise in anyone’s mind

³³ These three aspects of the theology of Scripture are inseparably connected. In many ways they are three different ways of looking at the same issue. The canonicity of a book, for example, is based on and determines its authority, which is grounded in and exercised through its interpretation. Although they are distinguished here for heuristic purposes, canon, authority, and interpretation cannot be separated.

³⁴ R. Preus discusses the question of the canon only briefly in the preface to his study of the doctrine of inspiration (*Inspiration*, xi–xv).

³⁵ A dispute arose in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the 1850’s, for example, when a pastor named Roebbelen was charged with false teaching for stating that, with Luther, he did not consider the book of Revelation to be the inspired Word of God. Roebbelen was exonerated by the president of the LCMS, C. F. W. Walther, with extensive quotations from Martin Chemnitz’s examination of the Council of Trent. See Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 331–332.

³⁶ The text of the decrees concerning the Scriptures in the Council of Trent can be found in Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, part 1, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971).

which the books are that are received by this synod."³⁷ Included in this list are the thirty-nine Old Testament and twenty-seven New Testament books that traditionally make up the Protestant Bible, as well as seven additional books of the Old Testament that are commonly known as the Apocrypha.³⁸ Trent ignores the distinctions within the New Testament that had been recognized since the early church—most explicitly by Eusebius (ca. 263-339)—and makes no mention of the differences between the *homologoumena* and *antilegomena*.³⁹ Instead it decrees,

If anyone does not accept these books whole, with all their parts, as they have customarily been read in the Catholic Church and are contained in the old Vulgate Latin edition, as sacred and canonical, and knowingly and intentionally despises the above-named traditions, let him be anathema.⁴⁰

With this decision the Council of Trent marks a turning point in the history of the Christian understanding of the biblical canon. For fifteen hundred years the exact boundaries of the canon had not been decisively determined. While the canonicity of most of the writings in the New Testament was certain in the early centuries of the church, there were uncertainties surrounding several writings whose canonicity had been debated or questioned. By closing the canon via conciliar decree some fifteen hundred years later, Rome essentially disregarded the historical witness of the early church.

³⁷ Ibid., 168.

³⁸ The Apocrypha includes Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and first and second Maccabees.

³⁹ The *homologoumena* (literally, "agreed upon") were books that were universally recognized as canonical Scripture in the early church. Eusebius included in this group the four Gospels and Acts, the Pauline letters (including Hebrews), 1 Peter, and 1 John. The *antilegomena* (literally, "spoken against") were books whose canonicity was disputed in some circles at the time of Eusebius. He includes James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and Revelation in this group. For a discussion of these distinctions see F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 197–207; Everett R. Kalin, "The New Testament Canon of Eusebius" in *The Canon Debate*, 386–404.

⁴⁰ Chemnitz, *Examination*, 168.

In his comprehensive *Examination of the Council of Trent (1565-1573)* Martin

Chemnitz criticizes Trent's decree:

Can the present church make those writings concerning which the most ancient church had doubts because of the contradiction of some, because the witness of the primitive church concerning them did not agree—can the present church, I ask, make those writings canonical, catholic, and equal to those which are of the first class? The papalists not only argue that they can do this, but they, in fact usurp this authority in that they totally obliterate the necessary distinction of the primitive and most ancient church between the canonical and apocryphal, or ecclesiastical, books.⁴¹

Chemnitz's argument is simple: the church does not have the authority to ignore history.

The exact boundaries of the canon were never firmly settled in the early church and no sixteenth-century decree is able to change that fact. If Rome is able to canonize those books that were not canonized in the first few centuries, Chemnitz reasons, what should stop it from canonizing Aesop's fables?⁴² He concludes, "The church does not have such power, that it can make true writings out of false, false out of true, out of doubtful and uncertain, certain, canonical and legitimate."⁴³

Despite Chemnitz's critique, Trent had spoken and the canon was closed in Rome. It was not long before the Reformed church followed suit by closing the canon in their confessional writings. The Thirty-Nine Articles (1571) listed the books of the Old Testament, explicitly rejecting the apocryphal books that had been canonized by Trent. The Belgic Confession, which was adopted (in revised form) at the Synod of Dordt in 1618, listed all sixty-six books of the Protestant canon with the claim that there can be no quarrel about their authority as Holy Scripture. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) also named the sixty-six books of the Protestant canon as the written Word of

⁴¹ Ibid., 180.

⁴² Ibid., 181.

⁴³ Ibid.

God, affirming that all of them were given by divine inspiration. Similar to the action of the Council of Trent, these confessional statements closed the canon in Reformed theology as well.

Unlike the Catholics and the Reformed, the sixteenth-century Lutherans left the question of the canon open. They did not list the books of the Old or New Testament in the Book of Concord (1580) and, with Chemnitz, they maintained the distinctions between the New Testament *homologoumena* and *antilegomena*. They acknowledged the lack of certainty in the early church surrounding some of the biblical books and they emphasized the primary authority of the undisputed books.⁴⁴ As the seventeenth century arrived, however, the distinction between the *homologoumena* and the *antilegomena* gradually disappeared among the Lutherans as well. J. A. O. Preus identifies Johann Gerhard (1582-1637) as the turning point: "Gerhard marks a definite change in thinking among Lutherans on this subject...[A]fter his time the dogmaticians, while still paying lip-service to Chemnitz, for all practical purposes abolished the distinction between homologoumena and antilegomena."⁴⁵ It was not far into the seventeenth century before the Lutherans (in practice, at least) adopted the Reformed position and began operating with a closed canon.

Before examining the consequences of this development, it is useful to investigate what led Lutheran dogmaticians to move away from the view of Luther and Chemnitz. The modern debate over the Scriptures focused largely on the Holy Spirit's relationship

⁴⁴ One of the ways in which the distinctions between the *homologoumena* and the *antilegomena* were maintained involved the order in which the books of the New Testament were arranged. Luther, for instance, placed James, Jude, Hebrews and Revelation at the end of his German translation after a blank page, clearly separating them from the rest of the New Testament. See Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 243.

⁴⁵ J. A. O. Preus, "The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians," *The Springfielder* 25 (1961): 21.

to biblical texts and the implications this had for their historical truthfulness. Those who developed the doctrine of inspiration depended largely on the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit to verify its inspired nature,⁴⁶ and they responded to critics by affirming the verbal inspiration of the Bible *as a whole*. At a time when the battle was being waged over the Bible as a single book, many conservatives seemed to have thought that questioning any portion of Scripture would concede victory to the critics. As Robert Preus put it, "If the inspiration of only one verse is denied, then all Scripture is not inspired."⁴⁷ The uncertainties about the exact boundaries of the canon may have been too much for the Lutheran dogmaticians to accept, and it did not help matters that some of Luther's more striking statements about James were highlighted by critics in order to support their claims.⁴⁸ J. Preus writes, "Luther's position on James in particular and the early Lutheran position on the *antilegomena* in general were unpleasant and embarrassing to the Lutherans."⁴⁹

In addition to ignoring the differences between books that *did* exist in the early church, the Lutheran dogmaticians introduced a new distinction in order to support their doctrine of inspiration. In place of the historic distinctions that had been made between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena*, the dogmaticians spoke about differences between primary and secondary authorship of the Scriptures. They attributed primary authorship

⁴⁶ Cf. R. Preus, *Inspiration*, 108–109. On the Reformed side, see the Westminster Confession (chapter 1.5).

⁴⁷ R. Preus, *Inspiration*, 39.

⁴⁸ It is commonly known that in his first preface to James, Luther described James as "an epistle of straw," and that he commented in 1542, "I almost feel like throwing Jimmy in the stove." See Mark Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture* (Cumbria: Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs, 2004) 132–138.

⁴⁹ J. Preus, "New Testament Canon," 24.

to the Holy Spirit and relegated human authorship to secondary importance. As Gerhard explains,

There have been noted certain books of the New Testament called apocryphal, but almost for no other reason than that there was doubt concerning them—not whether they were written by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, but whether they were published by the apostles by whom they had been signed. But because there was no doubt concerning the more important authors, namely, the Holy Ghost (but only concerning their writers or ministering authors), and because despite this doubtful authority of these books certain outstanding ancients of the church had raised them to a high level, they have obtained equal authority with the canonical books in the opinion of many people. Indeed, in order that a certain book be regarded as canonical, it is not necessarily required that there be agreement concerning the secondary author or writer. It is sufficient if there be agreement concerning the primary author, or dictator, who is the Holy Ghost.⁵⁰

This distinction between primary and secondary authorship was an invention of the seventeenth-century dogmaticians—it had no basis in the early church or the Reformation.⁵¹ It was intended to safeguard the inspiration of every book in the Bible (including the *antilegomena*), but the cost was a disregard for the historical record. R. Preus summarizes, “The views of the dogmaticians regarding canonicity seem to misunderstand and therefore fail to meet the issues of the question in the ancient church.”⁵²

Partially because of the Lutherans’ tacit acceptance of the Reformed position, the question of the canon has been largely ignored among conservative theologians for the last three hundred years.⁵³ Recent challenges to the traditional understanding of the canon, however, have forced the church to rethink and reevaluate the historical processes

⁵⁰ Ibid., 19. See Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici* 1, ed. Fr. Frank (Leipzig, Germany: 1657/1776), 103.

⁵¹ Ibid.; cf. R. Preus, *Inspiration*, xiii.

⁵² R. Preus, *Inspiration*, xi.

⁵³ J. Preus notes that the question of the canon among Lutherans has not changed since 1700 (“The New Testament Canon,” 24).

involved in the canonization of the Scriptures. Ben Witherington III summarizes some of the issues involved in his article, “Why the Lost Gospels Lost Out.”⁵⁴

Witherington begins by reviewing a scene in Dan Brown’s best selling novel, *The DaVinci Code*.⁵⁵ In what has become an infamous fictional discussion, one of Brown’s main characters challenges the traditional understanding of the process of canonization. He asserts that Emperor Constantine commissioned the writing of a new Bible to support his view of Christ’s divinity. Although there were actually some eighty different gospels that had equal claim to the truth about Jesus, Constantine chose to canonize four that served his agenda and these are the four that are included in the Bible today. The other gospel accounts were outlawed and destroyed.⁵⁶ Brown’s character suggests that the canon of the New Testament was ultimately decided by an ecclesio-political power play. This idea reflects a number of recent proposals by scholars such as Elaine Pagels⁵⁷ and Bart Ehrman.⁵⁸ These scholars have challenged the traditional view of the canon and, along with recent archeological discoveries of documents like the *Gospel of Judas*, they have raised questions about the contents of the canon among Christians and non-Christians alike. The question that needs to be answered is whether or not the modern approach to the Scriptures—specifically, the doctrine of inspiration—is competent to handle the challenges.

⁵⁴ Ben Witherington III, “Why the Lost Gospels Lost Out,” *Christianity Today* (June, 2004): 26–32.

⁵⁵ Dan Brown, *The Davinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁵⁷ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979).

⁵⁸ Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: University Press, 2003).

One way of judging the sufficiency of the doctrine of inspiration with respect to the question of the canon is to examine how its proponents have responded to recent challenges. Witherington's article mentioned above is a ready example. In order to defend the traditional canon, Witherington bases his argument almost entirely on the historical record. He argues that such writings as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, and other non-canonical gospels were never recognized on the same level as the four canonical gospels. To support this claim he points to the early church's practice of collecting and circulating texts that were recognized as genuinely apostolic. He highlights 2 Peter 3:16, which indicates that Paul's letters were known as a collection as early as the end of the first century. He points to Harry Gamble's *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, which argues that a Pauline collection circulated as the earliest and most authentic interpretation of the Christian faith.⁵⁹ He references Martin Hengel's *Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, which shows that the four canonical gospels had appeared together early in the second century as one of the first collections to circulate in a codex form.⁶⁰ Witherington concludes: "[B]y the New Testament period, there was already a core of documents and ideas by which Christians could evaluate other documents... There was never a time when a wide selection of books, including gnostic ones, were widely deemed acceptable."⁶¹

At this point it is important to remember that our purpose in considering Witherington's argument is not to evaluate how well he defends the traditional canon.

⁵⁹ Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁶⁰ Martin Hengel, *Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2000).

⁶¹ Witherington, "Lost Gospels," 29.

Instead, we are examining his defense of the traditional canon because it helps demonstrate the inability of the doctrine of inspiration to provide answers for questions about the canon. It is significant that Witherington bases his argument almost entirely on the historical record. He points to a core of New Testament documents that were recognized as uniquely authoritative already in the first century, and he cites examinations of the way in which early Christians collected and circulated the four canonical gospels and the Pauline epistles. He highlights the writings of Irenaeus and Justin, and concludes that current conspiracy theories are inconsistent with the history of the early church. Relevant to the present discussion is that he does not mention the doctrine of inspiration. Neither the internal testimony of the Spirit nor the doctrine of inerrancy appears anywhere in his argument. The reason for this is simple: the doctrine of inspiration is unable to provide any real support for the traditional understanding of the canon. By focusing primarily on the Holy Spirit's relationship to the text and its historical truthfulness, the doctrine of inspiration has no solid grounding for handling a serious consideration of the history of the canon. Not only did it fail to meet the issues of the early church,⁶² but it also fails to meet the needs of the twenty-first century church. As scholars such as Ehrman and Pagels selectively highlight uncertainties about the canon in the early church, the doctrine of inspiration fails to provide an account of why some books are included in the Bible and others are not.⁶³

⁶² R. Preus, *Inspiration*, xi.

⁶³ We will return to the question of the canon in chapter 5. There I will try to respond to these contemporary challenges in ways that are more consistent with the biblical narrative and the rest of the Christian confession.

Authority

In a collection of essays written by some of the most prominent defenders of the traditional view of the Scriptures in the twentieth century, Carl Henry writes: "In assessing the fortunes of Christianity in our century, we all agreed that authority, particularly the authority of Scripture, is the watershed of Christian conviction." He goes on, "We concurred, too, that the Christian impact in our lifetime had suffered immeasurably from liberal Protestant deletion of authority from biblical religion."⁶⁴ Those who defend the traditional belief often describe the use of critical tools of investigation in the study of the Scriptures as a direct attack on biblical authority. They view the liberal rejection of biblical authority as *the* central problem in modern theology and they lament the fact that "the notion of the Bible as the authoritative word for everyone has long since vanished."⁶⁵ Their concerns are not unfounded, for modernity itself has rightly been described as a "flight from authority" in general.⁶⁶

Despite the focus on biblical authority in the modern debate, the conversation about the authority of the Scriptures has taken place on rather shallow terms. N. T. Wright observes that many modern theologians have argued at length *about* the Bible's authority, but few have explained what they understand the phrase "authority of Scripture" to mean. "The authority of Scripture" is a slogan, says Wright, and it is not nearly as helpful as it is often thought. He compares it to a suitcase, and concludes that this slogan needs to be "unpacked" if it is to remain useful:

⁶⁴ Carl F. H. Henry, ed. *Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker House Books, 1958), 7.

⁶⁵ Terrence E. Freitheim and Karlfried Froehlich, *The Bible as the Word of God in a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 11.

⁶⁶ Cf. Jeffery Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

Slogans and clichés are often shorthand ways of making more complex statements. In Christian theology, such phrases regularly act as “portable stories,” that is, ways of packing up longer narratives about God, Jesus, the church and the world, folding them away into convenient suitcases, and then carrying them about with us...Shorthands, in other words, are useful in the same way that suitcases are. They enable us to pick up lots of complicated things and carry them around all together. But we should never forget the point of doing so, like the point of carrying belongings in a suitcase, is that they can then be unpacked and put to use in the new location. Too much debate about scriptural authority has had the form of people hitting one another over the head with locked suitcases. It is time to unpack our shorthand doctrines, to lay them out and inspect them. Long years in a suitcase may have made some of the contents go mouldy. They will benefit from fresh air, and perhaps a hot iron.⁶⁷

Wright unpacks the meaning of “authority of Scripture” by identifying an important gap in the doctrine of inspiration and its understanding of scriptural authority. He begins by recalling the fact that the Scriptures themselves assign all authority to God alone (Rom. 13:1; cf. John 19:11).⁶⁸ He notes that God exercises his authority here on earth through the person of his Son: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). Wright maintains that, if there is such a thing as scriptural authority, it must be explained how the authority of the Scriptures is grounded in the authority that God has given to Jesus. He concludes, “The phrase ‘authority of Scripture’ can only make Christian sense if it is shorthand for ‘the authority of the Triune God exercised somehow *through* Scripture.’”⁶⁹

This kind of explanation is missing in the doctrine of inspiration.⁷⁰ Rather than demonstrating how Jesus’ authority is exercised through the Scriptures, the doctrine of

⁶⁷ Wright, *Scripture*, 18.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Francis Pieper begins his locus on the Scriptures with the relationship between Jesus and the biblical writings, but rather than developing his entire theology of Scripture along these lines he quickly returns to and remains with the questions that govern the modern debate. *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 193–367.

inspiration defends scriptural authority by pointing to Paul's description of the Scriptures as *theopneustos* (2 Tim. 3:16) and by emphasizing that the prophets were "carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). It bases the authority of the Scriptures "upon its divine origin, upon its inspiration."⁷¹ In this context biblical authority is inseparably linked to biblical inerrancy. The logic goes something like this: (a) the Scriptures are authoritative because they are inspired by the Holy Spirit; (b) because they are inspired they are historically true; (c) their authority, therefore, stands or falls with their historical truthfulness. Lindsell argues, "The authority of the Bible is viable only if the Bible itself is true. Destroy the trustworthiness of the Bible, and its authority goes with it. Accept its trustworthiness and authority becomes normative...Infallibility and authority stand or fall together."⁷² John Webster describes this understanding of scriptural authority as "formalized supernaturalism."⁷³ The authority of the Scriptures "becomes something derived from a formal property of Scripture—its perfection as a divine object—rather than its employment in the divine service."⁷⁴ With the focus on the properties of the Bible as a finished product, the role that the Scriptures play in the economy of salvation is often left out of the discussion.

Standing behind the criticism of Wright and Webster is the idea that authority is a functional concept. David Kelsey made this point thirty years ago in his book *Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*.⁷⁵ He began his study with the observation that "global

⁷¹ R. Preus, *Inspiration*, 89.

⁷² Lindsell, *Battle*, 39.

⁷³ John B. Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 55.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ David Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1999).

affirmations of the Bible's authority, which were commonplace in then current doctrines of scripture, were so vague as to be nearly meaningless."⁷⁶ In order to get behind what he considers empty affirmations, Kelsey ignores what modern theologians *say* about the scriptural authority and instead investigates the ways in which the Scriptures *function* in their theological proposals. Contrary to the claims of conservatives like Lindsell (that authority stands or falls with inerrancy), Kelsey argues that virtually every modern theologian ascribes some sort of authority to the Scriptures—no matter how critical they are of its historical truthfulness. This does not mean that they all agree on the basis or the function of scriptural authority, however. To the contrary, theologians use these writings to authorize their theological proposals in vastly different ways—sometimes in ways that conflict with their own stated theology of Scripture.⁷⁷

Kelsey conducts his study by examining seven different theologians to see how they use the Scriptures.⁷⁸ He asks each of them four questions: “1) What aspect(s) of scripture is (are) taken to be authoritative? 2) What is it about this aspect of scripture that makes it authoritative? 3) What sort of logical force is ascribed to scripture to which appeal is made? 4) How is the scripture that is cited brought to bear on theological proposals so as to authorize them?”⁷⁹ Depending on the answers to these questions, Kelsey identifies three general ways in which the Scriptures function authoritatively in modern theology. In the first category, which he calls “doctrine and concept,” Kelsey identifies B. B. Warfield and Hans-Werner Bartsch as representative theologians. The aspect of the

⁷⁶ Ibid., xi.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁸ The specific theologians that Kelsey examines, as well as their respective theologies, are unimportant for his study. He chooses them because they represent various ways in which modern theologians use the Scriptures.

⁷⁹ Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 15.

Scriptures that makes them authoritative in this view is “stateable content”—for Warfield this refers to inspired and inerrant doctrines, and for Bartsch it refers to biblical concepts. The Scriptures function authoritatively by teaching divinely sanctioned information.⁸⁰

Kelsey describes a second way of understanding biblical authority as “recital and presence.” Rather than basing biblical authority on divinely communicated doctrines and concepts, this approach locates the authority of the Scriptures in the biblical narrative. For G. E. Wright the recital of this narrative tells the reader about the identity of God. Doctrine is inferred from the recital of this narrative, and the Scriptures function authoritatively as the story of God is translated into contemporary idiom. Karl Barth, on the other hand, understands the authority of the biblical narrative to be based on the character it renders.⁸¹ This character, Jesus Christ, is made present where and when God pleases to make himself present through the Scriptures in the “I-thou” encounter. While Wright and Barth disagree about what to do with the narrative (or in Barth’s case, what God does with the narrative), theologians in this category understand the Scriptures to function authoritatively as they tell the Christian story.

Kelsey describes the third way in which modern theologians use Scriptures as “event and expression.” In this view the Scriptures are regarded as expressions of those who have experienced divine revelation. These expressions link the reader with divine revelation and thereby function with authority. Kelsey notes three variations of this conception of the Scriptures in modern theology: L. S. Thornton, Paul Tillich, and Rudolf

⁸⁰ Ibid., 30. The difference between Warfield and Bartsch is that Warfield affirms biblical inerrancy and Bartsch does not, leading them to different conclusions when it comes to the exact content of the information that the Scriptures teach.

⁸¹ Kelsey repeatedly notes that many theologians use Scripture in more than one way. He specifically mentions Barth as one who uses Scripture in a variety of ways (*Proving Doctrine*, 39).

Bultmann. For Thornton the images in the Bible express the event of divine revelation and thereby link the reader with divine creativity.⁸² Tillich labels these images symbols, and he suggests they contain the answers to the existential questions people ask. As expressions of the original revelation in Jesus as the Christ, they bring about subsequent revelatory events in those who read them.⁸³ In contrast to Thornton and Tillich, Bultmann emphasizes the performative force of the New Testament *kerygma*. The Scriptures are authoritative for Bultmann because they are the original expression of the Christian faith. They function authoritatively by shaping the existential faith of the individual.⁸⁴ In contrast to the first two groups which base scriptural authority on their content or narrative, the third group locates authority of the Scriptures in the events they occasion.

Kelsey's study of the use of the Scriptures in modern theology remains helpful because it demonstrates the confusion that surrounds the (still) unpacked phrase, "authority of Scripture." He shows that absolute denials and affirmations of scriptural authority are less helpful than they first appear, for inherent in a writing's identification as "scripture" is at least some kind of authority. He explains:

"Authoritative" is part of the meaning of "scripture"; it is not a *contingent* judgment made about "scripture" on other grounds, such as their age, authorship, miraculous inspiration, etc... To call certain texts "scripture" is, in part, to say that they ought to be *used* in the common life of the church in normative ways such that they decisively rule its form of life and forms of speech. Thus part of what it means to call certain texts "scripture" is that they are authoritative for the common life of the church. It is to say of them that they *ought* to be used in certain ways to certain ends in that life.⁸⁵

⁸² Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 62.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 80–81.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 97–98.

Kelsey helps us see that “authority of Scripture” can only make theological sense if it is understood in functional terms. We must ask not only *if* the Scriptures are authoritative, but also *how* the Scriptures are authoritative. As Armin Wenz observes, “Strittig ist nicht ob, sondern, ‘wie’ die Schrift ‘Autorität sei und normierende Kraft gegenüber allen christlich-theologischen Aussagen besitze.’”⁸⁶

Interpretation

Earlier I described Christian history as an “ongoing encounter with Holy Scripture.” At this point we might revise that description by speaking of Christian history as “the history of the interpretation of Scriptures.”⁸⁷ This does not take away from the importance of the canon or authority, but rather highlights the fact that these writings exist to be read and inherent in reading is interpretation. Beginning with Jesus, who interpreted the prophetic writings as referring to himself (e.g., Luke 24:25-27, 44-47; John 5:39), the history of Christianity could be written in terms of the developments that have occurred in the interpretation of the Scriptures. Debates in the early church between Alexandria and Antioch revolved around the use of allegory and typology. The Middle Ages witnessed a rise in the fourfold method of scriptural interpretation. The Reformation was, in part, a struggle to identify the rightful interpreter of the Scriptures—the papacy or ordinary Christians. In modern times the focus has been on the use of historical-critical methods of interpretation. Despite the significant role that scriptural interpretation has played throughout Christian history, in recent years interpretation has become *the* central issue. In the post-modern context it has been said that “the ‘hermeneutical issue’ has

⁸⁶ Armin Wenz, *Das Wort Gottes—Gericht und Rettung: Untersuchungen zur Autorität der Heiligen Schrift in Bekenntnis und Lehre der Kirche* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996), 11.

⁸⁷ See Charles Valenti-Hein, “In All Senses of the Word: Scripture and Authority in Contemporary Theology” (PhD diss., Marquette University, 1996), 2.

surfaced with a vengeance,”⁸⁸ and that the interpretation of the Scriptures is “the soul of theology.”⁸⁹

There are many different directions that a discussion about scriptural interpretation in contemporary theology might take, for the number of interpretative issues has grown greatly in recent decades. In a study of the current state of the question, the Pontifical Biblical Commission summarizes the contemporary hermeneutical landscape by dividing the various methods and approaches into six categories: (1) historical-criticism (including textual, form, and redaction criticism), (2) literary criticism (including rhetorical, narrative, and semiotic analysis), (3) approaches based on tradition (including canonical criticism, recourse to Jewish tradition, and *Wirkungsgeschichte*), (4) approaches that use the human sciences (including sociology, cultural anthropology, and psychology), (5) contextual approaches (including liberationist and feminist perspectives), and (6) fundamentalist interpretation.⁹⁰ Each of these methods and approaches are part of the post-modern hermeneutical context, resulting in what has appropriately been called “a great tangle of issues.”⁹¹

Rather than attempting to untangle all of these issues, my goal in this section is the same as it was in our consideration of the canon and authority. We will review the modern approach to biblical interpretation in order to evaluate its ability to provide guidance in today’s hermeneutical context.

⁸⁸ Moises Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in Light of Current Issues* Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 2.

⁸⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer, “Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (March 2005): 89.

⁹⁰ Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” *Origins* 23 (January 6, 1994): 497–524.

⁹¹ John Webster, “Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998): 307–341.

Until recently, proponents of the doctrine of inspiration have said relatively little about the interpretation of the Scriptures. What they have said has usually been limited to a rejection of the historical-critical method.⁹² While their refusal to accept any method of interpretation that stands in judgment over the Scriptures is consistent with historic Christian interpretation, there is much more to interpreting these writings than affirming or rejecting any particular method. For this reason we will not examine individual readings or particular strategies for reading. Instead, it seems more helpful to take a step back and examine the way in which modern theology has conceived of the nature of scriptural interpretation in the first place.

For all their differences regarding the historical truthfulness of the Scriptures, modern theologians on both sides of the debate tend to conceive of scriptural interpretation in a remarkably similar way. Webster suggests that the modern understanding of the nature of interpretation flows from a distinctively modern anthropology. This anthropology is shaped by two fundamental ideas about humankind: "immediacy and autonomy."⁹³ He notes that these two underlying themes govern the modern understanding of scriptural interpretation, regardless of a given interpreter's belief about whether or not the Scriptures are historically true. This attitude of "immediacy and autonomy" manifests itself in two distinct ways as modern interpretation is often viewed as (1) individualistic and (2) objectivistic.

⁹² Francis Watson suggests that historical criticism is not so much a single method, but rather a "shifting set of conventions, never clearly defined and constantly under negotiation." Quoted in Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) 22 (note 36). For this reason rejections of historical-criticism as a single method of interpretation are not as helpful as sometimes is thought.

⁹³ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 73.

Much like modernity in general, modern interpretation of the Scriptures is often characterized by a spirit of individualism. This can be seen among conservative and critical theologians alike as both tend to neglect the idea that the Bible is the church's book—that it was written by believers to believers.⁹⁴ Stanley Hauerwas suggests that (in western Christianity, at least) this individualistic mentality has been detrimental to the communal nature of scriptural interpretation:

Indeed literalistic-fundamentalism and the critical approaches to the Bible are but two sides of the same coin, insofar as each assumes that the text should be accessible to anyone without the necessary mediation by the church. The reformation doctrine *sola scriptura*, joined to the invention of the printing press and underwritten by the democratic trust in the intelligence of the "common person," has created the situation that now makes people believe they can read the Bible "on their own."⁹⁵

William Willimon agrees. He argues that both sides of the modern debate have "assumed that it is possible for the Bible to make sense apart from the living, breathing community which makes it make sense. Both groups assumed that it was possible to understand the Bible, the church's book, without being converted into the church's faith."⁹⁶

Criticisms like these of Hauerwas and Willimon quickly raise eyebrows among those who consider themselves heirs of the Reformation. At the center of debate in the sixteenth century was the ability of ordinary Christians to interpret the Scriptures without the controlling supervision of Rome. Luther's immortalized confession at the Diet of Worms captures the Reformation interpretive spirit: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by evident reason—for I can believe neither pope nor

⁹⁴ The Gospel of Luke, for example, was written so that those who believe might have an orderly account of the Gospel (Luke 1:1–4); Paul wrote his letters as a believer in Christ to fellow believers (e.g., Rom. 1:1–7, 1 Cor. 1:1–2, Eph. 1:1).

⁹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 17.

⁹⁶ William Willimon, *Shaped by the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 26.

councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeated and contradicted themselves—I consider myself conquered by the Scripture adduced by me and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.”⁹⁷ This declaration of independence from Rome’s control over interpretation has lived on in Protestant theology, which is why Hauerwas’s and Willimon’s statements sound suspicious to Protestant ears. Their insistence on bringing interpretation back into the church is reminiscent of Rome’s response to Luther in the Council of Trent:

Furthermore, in order to restrain willful spirits, the synod decrees that no one, relying on his own wisdom in matters of faith and morals that pertain to the upbuilding of Christian doctrine, may twist the Holy Scripture according to his own opinions or presume to interpret Holy Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church has held and holds, whose right it is to judge concerning the true sense and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, or contrary to the unanimous consensus of the fathers, even though such interpretations should at no time be intended for publication. Those acting contrary to this shall be reported by the ordinaries and be punished with the penalties appointed by law.⁹⁸

On guard against this kind of Roman supervision and consistent with modernity’s emphasis on the autonomous individual, modern Protestants are hesitant to speak of the church as a necessary component in the proper interpretation of the Scriptures.

Despite their close proximity to Trent, the seventeenth century dogmaticians did not advocate the kind of individualism that has come to characterize modern scriptural interpretation. To the contrary, they insisted that the Scriptures are properly interpreted within the church. Preus describes their view: “The orthodox teachers hold that the Church is the interpreter of Scripture, but in such a way that each Christian searches and

⁹⁷ Quoted in Thompson, *A Sure Ground*, 249.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Chemnitz, *Examination*, 38.

interprets Scripture himself.”⁹⁹ The difference between the individualism that governs the modern approach to interpretation and the dogmaticians’ rejection of Rome’s attempt to control interpretation is that, for the dogmaticians, interpretation belongs to individuals *in the church*. All Christians, they argued, are involved in the interpretation of the Scriptures—but to be a Christian involves being a part of the church.

The Reformation emphasis on *sola scriptura* must be seen in these terms, for the reformers did not intend for the interpretation of the Scriptures to occur in isolation from the church or from its historic understanding of Christian faith. D. H. Williams explains,

Magisterial Reformers such as Luther and Calvin did not think of *sola scriptura* as something that could be properly understood apart from the church or the foundational tradition of the church, even while they were opposing some of the institutions of the church... The early Reformers declared the Word of God, as it is communicated in Scripture, to be the final judge of all teaching in the church. But functioning as the norm of faith and practice did not mean that Scripture was the sole resource of the Christian faith. As its own history attests, Scripture is never really “alone.”¹⁰⁰

The sixteenth-century reformers went to great lengths to demonstrate that their understanding of the Scriptures was nothing more than a return to the theology of the early church. Reinhard Hütter explains, “The Reformation *sola scriptura* does not make the Church superfluous; rather, it implies the Church since it functions as intra-ecclesial criterion, something very different from later, banalized ‘thin’ version of *sola scriptura*.”¹⁰¹ This “thin” view of *sola scriptura*, coupled with modernity’s overall rejection of external authority, has led modern interpreters on both sides of the debate to view “Scripture alone” as “my interpretation of Scripture alone.” Williams observes that

⁹⁹ R. Preus, *Inspiration*, 156.

¹⁰⁰ D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 97.

¹⁰¹ Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*, 27 (note 17).

this “hyper-individualism” has led to a “great number of Christians today who think of the Bible as the believer’s Bible, not the church’s Bible.”¹⁰² In this context, the dogmaticians’ insistence that interpretation belongs to the individual Christian has resulted in a separation of the Scriptures from the Christian community. Hauerwas concludes: “[F]undamentalists and biblical critics make the Church incidental.”¹⁰³

Along with this individualistic attitude, modern theologians have also tended to imagine scriptural interpretation with an attitude of objectivism. Charles Hodge, one of the leading Reformed proponents of the doctrine of inspiration in the 19th century, said about the interpretation of the Scriptures:

If natural science be concerned with the facts and laws of nature, theology is concerned with the facts and laws of the Bible. If the object of the one would be to arrange and systematize the facts of the external world, and to ascertain the laws by which they are determined; the object of the other is to systematize the facts of the Bible, the ascertaining of principles or general truths which those facts involve.¹⁰⁴

Hodge reasons that because the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God and without error, their truth should be clear to any rational person who reads them. R. C. Sproul represents a contemporary version of this view when he suggests that any reasonable person who reads the Bible must come to the conclusion that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God.¹⁰⁵ Willimon summarizes this view: “Common sense, when confronted with the ‘facts’ of Scripture, could rightly interpret Scripture.”¹⁰⁶ While modern critics and

¹⁰² Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 99.

¹⁰³ Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*, 26.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Willimon, *Shaped*, 25.

¹⁰⁵ R. C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone—The Evangelical Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2005), 75.

¹⁰⁶ Willimon, *Shaped*, 25.

conservatives disagree about which parts of the Scriptures should be identified as factual, they often share this objective approach to interpretation.

There are a number of problems with viewing the interpretation of the Scriptures in objectivistic terms. First, the idea that anyone is able to interpret the Scriptures from a neutral standpoint is no longer defensible. Alister McGrath explains, "As someone who began his academic career as a natural scientist, I am intensely aware of the fact that allegedly neutral 'observation' is actually theory laden...[S]ince Bultmann, we have all learned to wonder if there is any such thing as a 'presuppositionless exegesis,' whether in the academy or in the church." He concludes, "The demand for detachment is quite simply an illicit claim to an objectivity that cannot be held in practice."¹⁰⁷ There is no such thing as reading any text, much less the Scriptures, without bias or preconception. This leads to a second problem: an objectivistic view of scriptural interpretation makes faith in Christ and the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit irrelevant. Hauerwas speaks of this problem in a sermon called "The Insufficiency of Scripture":

To claim that if Jesus had joined us on the Emmaus road, we would have recognized him is not unlike claiming that in order to understand the Scripture all we have to do is pick it up and read it. Both claims assume that "the facts are just there" and that reasonable people are able to see the facts if their minds are not clouded. Yet as we shall see, the story of the Emmaus road makes clear that knowing the Scripture does little good unless we know it as part of a people constituted by the practices of a resurrected Lord. So Scripture will not be self-interpreting or plain in its meaning unless we have been transformed in order to be capable of reading it.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Alister McGrath, "Reclaiming Our Roots and Our Vision: Scripture and the Stability of the Christian Church," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 64.

¹⁰⁸ Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*, 49.

The target of Hauerwas's criticism is the modern attitude of immediacy and autonomy that assumes the Scriptures are able to be understood properly by anyone apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in the community of the faithful.

At the heart of the individualism and objectivism that governs the modern view of interpretation is a particularly modern understanding of the perspicuity of the Scriptures. A standard tenet of the doctrine of inspiration, biblical perspicuity is the affirmation that, because it is the Word of God, the Bible must be clearly understandable without interpretive guidance from the church. Preus identifies the key question: "How can we be saved through faith in the message of Scripture if that message is not clear?"¹⁰⁹ As the seventeenth-century dogmaticians unpack their understanding of biblical perspicuity they include a number of important nuances that are often lost among modern interpreters. First, the dogmaticians insist that the clarity of the Scriptures applies only to matters of salvation: "It clearly sets forth all we need to know to be saved."¹¹⁰ Not everything in the Scriptures is clearly comprehensible, for there are many obscure and dark passages. Second, and more importantly, the dogmaticians emphasize that true understanding requires the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit. "A true spiritual understanding, a *noticia Spiritus*, of Scripture is attained only by the regenerate and only by means of illumination which the Holy Spirit bestows through Scripture."¹¹¹ Unless the reader of the Scriptures is taught by the Holy Spirit, he or she will not understand what is being read. The true meaning of the Scriptures can only be brought about by the same Spirit who inspired it, and for this reason the dogmaticians emphasize the need for the Holy Spirit to

¹⁰⁹ R. Preus, *Inspiration*, 156.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

illuminate the reader and enable proper interpretation. This dependence on the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is often absent among modern theologians. Even when it is retained in theory, Stephen Fowl observes, it rarely figures prominently in any practical way. He explains, "All Christians give some place to the Spirit in interpretation. In fact, however, this often amounts only to lip service."¹¹²

With the rise of modern individualism and objectivism in biblical interpretation, theologians on both sides of the debate have presumed to exert "mastery" over the Scriptures.¹¹³ In this context the idea of the perspicuity of the Scriptures has been stretched beyond its ability to provide helpful direction for interpretation. It is no longer sufficient to say with the dogmatists, "The Bible does not require the interpretation of others,"¹¹⁴ as if the true meaning of the biblical writings is "just there."

Summary

The problems with the modern debate over the Scriptures become clear when questions about the canon, authority, and interpretation are considered more closely. The doctrine of inspiration, with its dogmatic detachment from the rest of the Christian confession (specifically from Christ and the Gospel), is unable to provide an adequate foundation for addressing questions that are being raised in contemporary theology. To say that the Bible is historically true is an important thing to say. But much more needs to be said about the nature and function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation. Jobst Schöne summarizes the problem by citing Konrad Hoffmann:

¹¹² Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 11.

¹¹³ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 104.

¹¹⁴ R. Preus, *Inspiration*, 156.

Wenn diese Schrift nichts anderes wäre als ein irrumsloses Buch, wäre sie wenig. Irrtumslos ist starr, ist Kälte, vornehme Abgesondertheit von allem Irrenden, Fehlenden und Fallenden...Die Schrift aber ist mehr als ein irrumsloses Buch. Sie ist das Buch, in dem die Allmacht von der Barmherzigkeit und die Allwissenheit von der Gnade geheiligt wird. Der treue Gott spricht in diesem Buche...Fehllos, truglos, irrumslos, ist alles viel zu wenig.¹¹⁵

Throughout this chapter I have argued that the church of the twenty-first century needs a theology of Scripture that is able to address the various challenges facing Christianity today. In this respect Gordon Kaufman is correct: the traditional way of speaking about the Bible is no longer acceptable.¹¹⁶ The time has come for a comprehensive examination of the nature and function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation. Alister McGrath writes,

In the recent past, we have been overwhelmed by the force of a rhetoric that has sought to persuade us that there are no other options than an obscurantist fundamentalism and a culturally and intellectually sophisticated liberalism. But that viewpoint now seems to belong to a different world—a world that is now definitely located in the past. The rise of postliberalism and postmodernism symbolize—even if they do not resolve—the collapse of confidence in these certainties of yesteryear. We can now begin to work toward the reconstruction and retrieval of our heritage, by reclaiming the Bible for the church.¹¹⁷

If there is to be a “triumph of orthodoxy” in the crisis of Scripture, and if the Bible is to be reclaimed for the church, then the Christian theology of Scripture must be able to handle contemporary questions about the canon, authority, and interpretation. This requires a reconsideration of the assumptions, concepts, and categories that have

¹¹⁵ Jobst Schöne, “Die Irrlehre des Fundamentalismus im Gegensatz zum lutherischen Schriftverständnis” in *In Treue zu Schrift und Bekenntnis: Festschrift für Wolfgang Büscher* edited by Jürgen Diestelmann (Braunschweig, 1994), 183.

¹¹⁶ Kaufman, “What Shall We Do,” 96.

¹¹⁷ Alister McGrath, “Reclaiming Our Roots and Our Vision: Scripture and the Stability of the Christian Church,” in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 87.

governed the modern debate and a return to the biblical narrative and its focus on the Gospel of Christ crucified.

CHAPTER TWO

BEYOND THE MODERN BATTLE FOR THE BIBLE

In March of 2005 N. T. Wright's *Scripture and the Authority of God* was published in London by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Eight months later the same book was published in the United States by HarperCollins, but this time it had a new name: *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*. While it may be disputed whether the change was an improvement,¹ the American title reflects the growing consensus that there are problems with the modern battle over the Scriptures. Dissatisfied with the concepts and categories that have governed the debate, an increasing number of contemporary theologians are approaching the theology of Scripture in distinctively un-modern ways. Instead of focusing exclusively on whether or not the Bible is historically true, they are examining the Scriptures in terms of the role they play in the divine economy. Instead of concentrating solely on the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the original texts, they are investigating ways in which all three members of the Trinity are related to the Scriptures. This growing desire to move "beyond the Bible wars" is resulting in a comprehensive reconsideration of the nature and function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation.

¹ D. A. Carson prefers the original title. "Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review" *Trinity Journal* 27 (2006): 45.

Although the widespread interest in the theology of Scripture is a relatively new phenomenon, the move beyond the modern battle began almost a century ago. Above all it was instigated by Karl Barth's doctrine of revelation and the Word of God in his magisterial *Church Dogmatics*. Barth saw problems on both sides of the modern debate and argued that neither liberal criticism nor the doctrine of inspiration adequately understood the issues involved. He rejected Protestant liberalism for dismissing the possibility of divine revelation altogether, and he rejected what he saw as the doctrine of inspiration's exclusive identification of revelation with the Scriptures. He insisted that divine revelation is absolutely necessary for the Christian faith, but he also insisted that divine revelation includes more than the scriptural writings.² In order to move the discussion beyond the modern debate, Barth examined the Scriptures in relation to Christ and church proclamation. In doing so he shifted the theological discussion about the Bible away from a dispute about inspiration and inerrancy toward a fuller dogmatic investigation of the Word of God.

Karl Barth: Back to the Word of God

The cover of the April 20, 1962 issue of *Time* magazine pictures a 75 year-old Swiss theologian standing in front of an empty tomb with a crown of thorns lying on the ground at its opening. Religion editor John Elson begins the feature article:

On a hill outside Jerusalem, a carpenter from Nazareth, condemned by the Roman Procurator of Judea and the high priest of the Jews, died upon a cross. Four historians of the time soberly reported that he was buried, and that on the third day the carpenter, Jesus, rose from the dead. Since that first Easter, his followers have defied all reason to proclaim that the Jew of Nazareth was the

² This was nothing new, of course. Christians have always recognized that divine revelation encompasses more than the Scriptures. But in terms of the dogmatic treatment of the theology of Scripture (especially the doctrine of inspiration), revelation and Scripture have often been treated as one and the same.

Son of God, who, by dying for man's sin, reconciled the world to its Creator and returned to life in his glory. Christians have always been content to stand by this paradox, this mystery, this unfathomable truth. "If Christ has not been raised," wrote St. Paul to the young church at Corinth, "then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." In the 20th century, no man has been a stronger witness to the continuing significance of Christ's death and Christ's return than the world's ranking Protestant theologian, Swiss-born Karl Barth.³

Arguably the most influential theologian of the twentieth century,⁴ Karl Barth has stood at the center of theological debate ever since his Romans commentary appeared in 1919 like a "bombshell landing in the playground of the theologians."⁵ Herbert Hartwell suggests that Barth instigated a "real turning point in man's theological thinking" by taking his stand "on a new point of departure for the whole problem of theology, a point of departure diametrically opposed to that of most of the other Protestant theologians since the Reformation, so that his theology may be said to represent a Copernican turn in the history of human thought."⁶

The center of Barth's turning point is his doctrine of the Word of God—the subject of both parts of the first volume of *Church Dogmatics*.⁷ The origins of his understanding of the Word of God can be traced back to his experience as a pastor in the small Swiss town of Safenwil (1911–1921). As a pastor Barth took very seriously his regular

³ John Elson, "Witness to an Ancient Truth" *Time* (April 20, 1962), 59.

⁴ Pope Pius the XII is said to have described Barth as the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas.

⁵ Roman Catholic theologian Karl Adam is recognized as the source of this description of Barth's commentary on Romans. See William P. Anderson, *A Journey Through Christian History: With Texts from the First to the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2000), 162.

⁶ Herbert Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 1–2.

⁷ While Barth wrote about the Word of God throughout his career, I will focus primarily on his mature theology of the Word of God as it appears in the first volume of *Church Dogmatics*. For an overview of his earlier writing on the Scriptures and the Word of God, see Geoffrey Bromiley, "The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 276–282.

responsibility of proclaiming the Word of God in the church. This fundamental pastoral task created for Barth an existential dilemma, because his high respect for divine transcendence conflicted with the possibility of human beings actually speaking the Word of God. Much like Kierkegaard, he saw an “infinite qualitative difference” between human beings and God. “We are human,” Barth reasoned, “and so cannot speak of God.”⁸ The only way that human beings can presume to speak the Word of God is if God himself intervenes in some miraculous way. “To speak of God seriously,” he concluded, “would mean to speak in the realm of revelation and faith. To speak of God would be to speak God’s words, the words which can come only from him.”⁹ In order to make sense of his duty to proclaim the Word of God, Barth came to depend entirely upon the miracle of divine revelation. He believed that if God did not reveal his Word, church proclamation (and Christian theology in general) would simply be impossible.

Barth’s belief in the necessity of divine revelation stood in sharp contrast with the liberal theology that he had learned as a student. Ever since Schleiermacher had made the religious consciousness the center of theology, mainstream Protestant theology had found increasingly little room for divine revelation. Theology in Europe had become the human search for the divine, and Barth’s teachers—Wilhelm Herrmann, Adolf von Harnack, Ernst Troeltsch—left the Christian preacher with little more than his own thoughts about God to proclaim. Klaas Runia explains, “This means that there is no message from God any more, but pious man speaks to himself about himself.”¹⁰ When Barth took this liberal

⁸ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 198.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth and the Word of God* (Leicester, England: Theological Students Fellowship, 1980–1986), 1.

theology into the parish, he quickly recognized its bankruptcy. The only option he saw was a complete rejection of the theology in which he had been trained and a radical return to the biblical theology of the Reformation.

Despite his rejection of the critical side of the modern debate, Barth was unable to accept the only modern alternative. "Of the history of the doctrine of inspiration as such," he criticizes, "it must still be said that in the Evangelical Church it finally made the statement incomprehensible. After a promising start it was for the most part a chapter of accidents."¹¹ Barth does not fault the seventeenth-century dogmatists for teaching something new about the Scriptures. To the contrary, he acknowledges that their account of the theology of Scripture was "merely the development and systematization of statements which had been heard in the Church since the first centuries."¹² The problem with the doctrine of inspiration to Barth is that it does not teach enough about the Scriptures—it is not "supranatural enough."¹³ In Barth's view the doctrine of inspiration identified revelation directly and exclusively with the Bible, and this resulted in a number of significant problems. It led to a "freezing" of the work of the Holy Spirit in the original composition of the biblical writings; it separated the Scriptures from church proclamation; it restricted divine revelation to propositional information; it failed to account for God's continuing work of revelation *through* the Bible; and it limited the freedom and grace of God. In short, Barth accuses the doctrine of inspiration of

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 1/2:526.

¹² Barth, *CD* 1/2:525.

¹³ *Ibid.*

dissolving the mystery of the Word of God by denying “the sovereignty of the Word of God and therefore the Word of God itself.”¹⁴ Barth explains:

The statement that the Bible is the Word of God was now transformed...from a statement about the free grace of God into a statement about the nature of the Bible as exposed to human inquiry brought under human control. The Bible as the Word of God surreptitiously became a part of the natural knowledge of God, i.e., of that knowledge of God which man can have without the free grace of God, by his own power, and with direct insight and assurance.¹⁵

As part of the natural knowledge of God, “The Bible was now grounded upon itself apart from the mystery of Christ and the Holy Ghost...It was no longer a free and spiritual force, but an instrument of human power.”¹⁶

Because of the problems that he saw on both sides of the modern debate, Barth argued that the theology of Scripture must be completely reconsidered. He refused to play by the rules that governed the modern debate—that the authority of the Bible and its nature as the Word of God go hand in hand with inerrancy—and challenged both rational criticism and the doctrine of inspiration. For this reason Barth has become the target of conservatives and liberals. Mary Kathleen Cunningham explains,

[F]ew theologians have drawn as diversified a group of critics to their hermeneutical theory and exegetical practice as has Karl Barth. Professional biblical scholars have accused Barth of being an enemy of historical criticism and of practicing a kind of “pneumatic” exegesis. Evangelical theologians have expressed concerns about what they perceive as an opening for subjectivism in Barth’s treatment of biblical authority and inspiration, while liberal theologians have charged him with “biblicism,” “revelational positivism,” and a “ghettoized” theology that does not thoroughly engage the concerns of the world.¹⁷

¹⁴ Barth, *CD* 1/2:522.

¹⁵ Barth, *CD* 1/2:522–523.

¹⁶ Barth, *CD* 1/2:525.

¹⁷ Mary Kathleen Cunningham, “Karl Barth,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 184.

As Cunningham notes, proponents of the doctrine of inspiration often read Barth with great suspicion. They highlight some of his more striking statements about the Bible and identify him as yet another version of Protestant liberalism. There is no dispute, however, that Barth claimed to do nothing more than affirm what the Scriptures themselves say. Cunningham affirms, "Few theologians in the history of Christianity have been as self-consciously concerned with doing theology in accord with Scripture as Karl Barth."¹⁸ Francis Watson agrees: "From beginning to end, Barth's *Church Dogmatics* is nothing other than a sustained meditation on the texts of Holy Scripture."¹⁹ As a noted Barth scholar has suggested, a close investigation of his doctrine of the Word of God reveals that, rather than an enemy of conservative theology, Karl Barth may actually be an ally.²⁰

Christ as the Starting Point

Church Dogmatics, as Barth envisions it, is an attempt to recover divine revelation. In contrast to liberalism's reduction of Christian theology to human talk about God, Barth stresses the necessity of divine revelation as the starting point for all Christian theology. He emphasizes God's transcendence against those who had domesticated him, and he maintains that if humans are to talk about God at all, God must speak first. Runia explains, "Revelation is not a human, but only a divine possibility. God is both the subject and the object of revelation. Even though revelation comes to us in the words of men, it is not these men who are the revealers, but *God Himself reveals Himself* through

¹⁸ Cunningham, "Karl Barth," 183.

¹⁹ Francis Watson, "The Bible" in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John B. Webster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 57–71.

²⁰ Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture is in Becoming" in *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority, Hermeneutics*, eds. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis Okholm (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 75.

these men.”²¹ The only possibility for Christian theology in the first place is the reality of divine revelation, which means that knowledge of God is knowledge of what God has revealed.²²

To Barth divine revelation is one and the same as the Word of God. The Word of God is much more than information, however. It is best recognized as an event, the mysterious and miraculous work of God reconciling the world to himself. This gets to the heart of the Christian message as Barth sees it. The content of the divinely revealed Word of God is nothing other than God himself: “Revelation in fact does not differ from the person Jesus Christ nor from the reconciliation accomplished in Him. To say revelation is to say ‘The Word became flesh.’”²³ Simply put, “God’s revelation is Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”²⁴ It is here that we see the central significance of Christology in Barth’s dogmatic theology. As the revelation and Word of God, Jesus stands as the foundation of all Christian faith and life. This makes the task of Christian dogmatics nothing more than an explanation of the name “Jesus Christ.” He explains, “The content of the New Testament is solely the name Jesus Christ, which, of course, also and above all involves the truth of his God-manhood. Quite by itself this name signifies the objective reality of revelation.”²⁵ Dogmatic theology, including the dogmatic theology of Scripture, must be built on the incarnate Son of God if it is to remain truly Christian. He writes,

A church dogmatics must, of course, be christologically determined as a whole and in all its parts, as surely as the revealed Word of God, attested by Holy Scripture and proclaimed by the Church, is its one and only criterion,

²¹ Runia, *Karl Barth and the Word of God*, 2. His emphasis.

²² Barth, *CD* 1/1:187.

²³ Barth, *CD* 1/1:119.

²⁴ Barth, *CD* 1/1:137.

²⁵ Barth, *CD* 1/2:15.

and as surely as this revealed Word is identical with Jesus Christ. If dogmatics cannot regard itself and cause itself to be regarded as fundamentally Christology, it has assuredly succumbed to some alien sway and is already on the verge of losing its character as church dogmatics.²⁶

Any doctrine of Christ that does not dominate Christian theology, Barth concludes, cannot rightly be called Christology, for the entire biblical narrative points toward the Word of God made flesh. He explains,

Every statement in the New Testament originates in the fact that the Word was made flesh. God's covenant with man, the covenant which God made with Abraham, with Moses and David, finds its reality solely, but completely and finally, in the fact that God was made man, in order that as man He might do what man as such never does, what even Israel never did, appropriate God's grace and fulfill God's law. This is what God did Himself as man in Jesus Christ. For that very reason in Jesus Christ the kingdom of God is at hand, as nigh as it can get while time has not yet become eternity. So the New Testament declares. It declares nothing else, it declares, broadly speaking, nothing more than the Old Testament. But it declares it in a different way, because it is looking back at fulfillment.²⁷

To Barth Jesus Christ is the beginning, the end, and the main subject of all Christian theology.²⁸ Elson summarizes, "Above all [Barth] writes of the mysterious history of Christ. Knowledge of God is knowledge of God through Christ. Faith is faith in Christ; the church is the Church of Christ; the Bible is the witness of Christ. Theologian Hans Frei calls him a 'Christ-intoxicated man.'"²⁹

²⁶ Barth, *CD* 1/2:123.

²⁷ Barth, *CD* 1/2:124.

²⁸ George Hunsinger suggests that Barth's theology is best understood in light of six motifs, or modes of thought, that run throughout *CD* and shape his mature theology. At the heart of all six of them is Christ. He writes, "In short, as the living reality to whom his scriptural depiction analogically points, and as the divine rationality by whom the understanding sought by faith is warranted, Jesus Christ is the center of the foundational motifs. As the event of the absolute miracle of grace and as the absolute mystery of its content, Jesus Christ is the center of the structural motifs. And as the objective Mediator of revelation and salvation, in whom the truth of God may be known and the reality of humanity found, and as the Word of personal address encountered in fellowship, attested in witness and appropriated by prayer, he is the center of the freestanding motifs. Realism, rationalism, actualism, particularism, objectivism, and personalism, as they shape Karl Barth's theology, are directed toward Christ the center." *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: University Press, 1991), 233.

²⁹ Elson, "Witness," 60.

The Triune Word of the Triune God

Although he emphasizes that the Word made flesh is the focus and starting point for all Christian theology, Barth does not limit his discussion of the Word of God to Christ. He speaks about the Scriptures as the written Word of God and church proclamation as the spoken Word of God, and he emphasizes that they both are intricately connected to Christ, the revealed Word of God. In Telford Work's opinion this trinitarian framework is Barth's most significant contribution to the theology of Scripture.³⁰ Similar to the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the three forms of the Word of God (revelation, the Scriptures, and church proclamation) may be distinguished, but not separated. In this respect the Word of God makes up the only true vestige of the Trinity.³¹ Barth writes,

There is only one analogy to this doctrine of the Word of God. Or, more accurately, the doctrine of the Word of God is itself the only analogy to the doctrine which will be our fundamental concern as we develop the concept of revelation. This is the doctrine of the trinity of God. In the fact that we can substitute for revelation, Scripture and proclamation the names of the divine persons Father, Son and Holy Spirit and *vice versa*, that in the one case as in the other we shall encounter the same basic determinations and mutual relationships, and that the decisive difficulty and also the decisive clarity is the same in both—in all this one may see specific support for the inner necessity and correctness of our present exposition of the Word of God.³²

As Barth sees it, proclamation of the Word of God is God's direct address to human beings. He explains,

Proclamation is human speech in and by which God Himself speaks like a king through the mouth of his herald, and which is meant to be heard and accepted as speech in and by which God Himself speaks, and therefore heard

³⁰ Work, *Living and Active*, 67.

³¹ Barth, *CD* 1/1:347.

³² Barth, *CD* 1/1:121.

and accepted in faith as a divine decision concerning life and death, as divine judgment and pardon, eternal Law and eternal Gospel both together.³³

The foundation for church proclamation is the fact that God himself has given the commission to speak. Those who proclaim his Word have been called by God to speak on his behalf. Barth quotes Luther: "If it is to be God's Word, it must be sent."³⁴ The Word that God sends to be proclaimed is not just any word, however. It is the Word of Christ, the revelation of God.³⁵ The proclamation of this Word hinges not on the human beings who proclaim it, but rather on God's free decision to reveal himself through it. The work of the church is to obey God's commission to proclaim his Word. Even when the church does this, however, its proclamation does not necessarily result in proclamation of the divine Word, for human speech cannot be identified with the Word of God unless God chooses to unite himself to it. "The Word of God is the event itself in which proclamation becomes real proclamation."³⁶ From time to time God, in his divine freedom, chooses to exalt human speech and speak about himself through the words of his commissioned spokesmen.³⁷ But because he is sovereign, God is never bound to make human proclamation become "real" proclamation.³⁸ For this miraculous event the church always hopes and expects.

The original form of this proclamation and the criterion by which all subsequent proclamation is judged is the church's canon, which is the Bible. As Barth understands it,

³³ Barth, *CD* 1/1:52.

³⁴ Barth, *CD* 1/1:90.

³⁵ Barth, *CD* 1/1:91.

³⁶ Barth, *CD* 1/1:93.

³⁷ Barth, *CD* 1/1:95.

³⁸ By "real" proclamation Barth means human proclamation through which God directly encounters human beings in Christ, his revealed Word.

the Scriptures are nothing more than the prophetic and apostolic proclamation put into writing: "It is the deposit of what was once proclamation by human lips."³⁹ Barth argues that the Scriptures and proclamation "may thus be set initially under a single genus, Scripture as the commencement and present-day preaching as the continuation of one and the same event, Jeremiah and Paul at the beginning and the modern preacher of the Gospel at the end of one and the same series."⁴⁰ But despite this similarity, the Scriptures and proclamation remain distinct as two forms of the Word of God. The difference between them is in the order in which they relate to each other—the "supremacy, the absolutely constitutive significance of the former [Scripture] for the latter [proclamation], the determination of the reality of present day proclamation by its foundation upon Holy Scripture and its relation to this, the basic singling out of the written word of the prophets and apostles over all the later words of men which have been spoken and are to be spoken to-day in the Church."⁴¹ This is what Paul means when he says that the church is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles.⁴² Apostolic succession means that the church is guided by the writings of the apostles.⁴³ As the church's canon, the Scriptures are the "necessary rule of every word that is valid in the Church."⁴⁴ They exist in the church as the canon and written Word of God because they testify to the incarnate Word of God.⁴⁵ "The prophetic and apostolic word is the word, witness, proclamation, and preaching of

³⁹ Barth, *CD* 1/1:102.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Barth, *CD* 1/2:580.

⁴³ Barth, *CD* 1/1:103.

⁴⁴ Barth, *CD* 1/1:104.

⁴⁵ Barth, *CD* 1/1:107.

Jesus Christ," he writes.⁴⁶ The Scriptures are not only *about* Jesus (who is God's revelation), but like proclamation, from time to time they *become* divine revelation—they become Jesus himself. In this way the Scriptures impose themselves on the church as the only canon and final authority in the church.⁴⁷ Similar to the proclaimed Word of God, the Bible becomes the Word of God in the event that God chooses to reveal himself through it. Barth summarizes,

The Bible, then, is not in itself and as such the expected future revelation, just as Church proclamation is not in itself and as such the expected future revelation. The Bible, speaking to us and heard by us as God's Word, bears witness to past revelation. Proclamation, speaking to us and heard by us as God's Word, promises future revelation. The Bible is God's Word as it really bears witness to revelation, and proclamation is God's Word as it really promises revelation.⁴⁸

It is in this context that Barth suggests biblical inspiration must be understood. Instead of speaking about inspiration as a guarantee for historical truthfulness, Barth understands inspiration to involve the entire work of the Holy Spirit in and through the Scriptures, including especially the Spirit's work of enlightening those who read and hear it. Instead of focusing on the *sedes doctrinae* of the doctrine of inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21), Barth highlights 1 Corinthians 2:11-14:

So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:11-14).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.; cf. 1/2:540.

⁴⁸ Barth, *CD* 1/1:111.

While he does not deny that the biblical writings themselves are inspired, Barth insists that inspiration is not to be confused with “permanent inspiredness.”⁴⁹ Inspiration involves the entire work of the Spirit, from original composition to the reader’s illumination. “It is only spiritually, on the basis of the same work of the same Spirit, by which he can know and therefore speak of these benefits, that they can be known and therefore received.”⁵⁰ He finds this understanding of inspiration in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians:

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life... Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:4-18)

Barth concludes, “Everything depends on the fact that without this work of the Spirit Scripture is veiled, however great its glory may be and whatever its origin.”⁵¹

At this point Barth comes to the third and most important form of the Word of God: Jesus Christ, the “primary” and “absolute” form of the Word.⁵² He describes the Trinity by identifying the Father as Revealer, Jesus as Revelation, and the Spirit as

⁴⁹ Barth, *CD* 1/1:112.

⁵⁰ Barth, *CD* 1/2:516.

⁵¹ Barth, *CD* 1/2:515.

⁵² Barth, *CD* 1/1:290.

Revealedness.⁵³ He explains, “*God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself through Himself. He reveals Himself.*”⁵⁴ It is only in relation to this miracle of divine revelation—God revealing himself through Jesus Christ—that proclamation and the Scriptures are recognized as the Word of God. In order to illustrate how this works, Barth compares the Word of God to the Pool of Bethesda (see John 5:2-7). As he did with the waters in the Pool of Bethesda, Barth suggests that God periodically “stirs” the reading of Scripture and the proclamation of the church so that it might become the Word of God.⁵⁵ It is in this event that God encounters human beings through his Word. God is completely free in his decision to reveal himself in this way, however, and so Barth repeatedly insists that proclamation and the Scriptures become the Word of God only where and when it pleases God (*ubi et quando visum est Deo*).⁵⁶ “When we speak about revelation we are confronted by the divine act itself and as such... [R]evelation is simply the freedom of God’s grace.”⁵⁷ Against the dogmaticians who claimed that the Bible is the Word of God even when it is not being used (*extra usum*), Barth restricts the Word of God to the event of God speaking to humankind.⁵⁸ When God chooses not speak through the Bible or church proclamation, it would be wrong to describe either of them as the Word of God in a *direct* way. For this reason the Scriptures and proclamation are to be understood as the Word of God only *indirectly*. They mediate the Word of God, but they are not to be identified as the Word of God apart from this mediation. “We know [revelation] only

⁵³ Barth, *CD* 1/1:295.

⁵⁴ Barth, *CD* 1/1:296.

⁵⁵ Barth, *CD* 1/1:111; 1/2:530.

⁵⁶ Barth, *CD* 1/1:117; 1/1:120.

⁵⁷ Barth, *CD* 1/1:117.

⁵⁸ Barth, *CD* 1/1:110.

indirectly, from Scripture and proclamation. The direct Word of God meets us only in this twofold mediacy."⁵⁹ This does not mean to Barth, however, that the Bible and proclamation are anything less than the Word of God. He explains,

It is one and the same whether we understand it as revelation, Bible, or proclamation. There is no distinction of degree or value between the three forms. For to the extent that proclamation really rests on recollection of the revelation attested in the Bible and is thus obedient repetition of the biblical witness, it is no less the Word of God than the Bible. And to the extent that the Bible really attests revelation it is no less the Word of God than revelation itself. As the Bible and proclamation become God's Word in virtue of the actuality of revelation they are God's Word: the one Word of God within which there can be neither a more nor a less. Nor should we ever try to understand the three forms of the Word of God in isolation.⁶⁰

To Barth the three forms of the Word of God are much like the three members of the Trinity: they may be distinguished, but they may not be separated.

But is the Bible the Word of God?

At this point many readers of Barth shake their heads and conclude that the first volume to *Church Dogmatics* is a prolonged series of theological contradictions. They highlight the fact that, despite his frequent affirmation of the Bible as the Word of God, he also unambiguously denies the very same idea. In the end, most conservative theologians are suspicious that he never broke free from the liberal theology in which he had been trained. They point to some of his more striking statements as evidence: "There are obvious overlappings and contradictions—e.g., between the Law and the prophets, between John and the Synoptists, between Paul and James;"⁶¹ "[The Bible] only 'holds,'

⁵⁹ Barth, *CD* 1/1:121.

⁶⁰ Barth, *CD* 1/1:120.

⁶¹ Barth, *CD* 1/2:509.

encloses, limits and surrounds [God's Word];"⁶² "On the one hand *Deus dixit*, on the other *Paulus dixit*. These are two different things."⁶³ These statements come amid frequent assertions that the Scriptures must "become" the Word of God⁶⁴ and that the Bible is only a "witness" to the Word of God.⁶⁵ Focused on these comments, proponents of the doctrine of inspiration have a hard time taking seriously Barth's affirmation that the Bible is the Word of God and the final authority in the church.⁶⁶

Proponents of the doctrine of inspiration are not the only theologians who read Barth's doctrine of the Word of God in this way. Theologians from the critical side of the debate often come to the same conclusion. John Morrison explains, "Through Barth, many were attracted to the possibility of substantially 'orthodox' faith commitment and confession without the need wholly to follow the pre-modern Reformers and, even more, pre-modern Protestant Scholasticism's location of present historical authority in the actual concrete text of Holy Scripture as verbally inspired, written Word of God."⁶⁷ Morrison points out that many recognized "Barthians" read Barth as one who separates the Scriptures from the Word of God.⁶⁸ Is the Bible the Word of God for Karl Barth? Critics and conservatives often agree: no.

Despite the prominence of this reading of Barth's view of the Scriptures, it has recently been argued that his view of the relationship between the Bible and the Word of

⁶² Barth, *CD* 1/2:492.

⁶³ Barth, *CD* 1/1:113.

⁶⁴ Barth, *CD* 1/1:110; 1/1:123–124.

⁶⁵ Barth, *CD* 1/2:463; 1/2:507.

⁶⁶ See Bromiley, "The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth," 290–292.

⁶⁷ John D. Morrison, "Barth, Barthians, and Evangelicals: Reassessing the Question of the Relation of Holy Scripture and the Word of God," *Trinity Journal* 25 (2004): 188.

⁶⁸ Morrison, "Barth," 187.

God is not that simple. Bruce McCormack, a noted Barth scholar at Princeton Seminary, suggests that most readers of *Church Dogmatics* have not adequately considered the theological ontology that governs Barth's doctrine of the Word of God. They have not taken into account an important statement that Barth makes early in the first volume of *Church Dogmatics*. McCormack suggests this statement provides a key insight into resolving Barth's perceived contradictions. Barth writes,

The statement that the Bible is God's Word is a confession of faith, a statement of faith that hears God himself speak through the biblical word of humankind. To be sure it is a statement which, when venturing it in faith, we accept as true even apart from our faith and beyond all our faith and even in face of our lack of faith. We do not accept it as a description of our experience of the Bible. We accept it as a description of God's action in the Bible, whatever may be the experiences we have or do not have in this connexion. But this is precisely the faith which in this way sees and reaches beyond itself and all related or unrelated experiences to God's action, namely, to the fact that God's action on man has become an event, and not therefore that man has grasped at the Bible but that the Bible has grasped at man. *The Bible, then, becomes God's Word in this event, and in the statement that the Bible is God's Word the little word "is" refers to its being in this becoming.* It does not become God's Word because we accord it faith but in the fact that it becomes revelation to us.⁶⁹

McCormack points out that the Bible *is* the Word of God for Barth, but "is" in this statement refers to a unique understanding of the nature of being. This is not a defensive move, as if Barth found errors throughout the Scriptures and concluded that the only way to salvage biblical authority was to redefine its ontology. On the contrary, to Barth essences are relations, and these relations have the character of events.⁷⁰ His insistence that the Bible must become the Word of God is based on his belief that *everything* has its being in becoming.⁷¹ McCormack explains, "Barth's understanding of the being-in-

⁶⁹ Barth, *CD* 1/1:110. Emphasis added.

⁷⁰ McCormack, "Being" 69.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

becoming of Holy Scripture was a function of his commitment to the being-in-becoming of the God-human, his actualizing of the doctrine of the incarnation, which brought in its wake the necessity of affirming the being-in-becoming of the Trinity, of human beings and, ultimately, of everything that is."⁷² George Hunsinger describes this aspect of Barth's theology as "actualism."⁷³ To Barth "being" is always "being-in-act." In God's case, he exists in a constant state of activity and is unable to be defined in static terms. He is love; he is grace; he is freedom. He is active in himself as the Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father in the unity of the Spirit, and he is active in his relationship with creation as he draws human beings into relationship with him. As far as human beings are concerned, God's active involvement with them is necessary due to their utter inability to establish fellowship with God. Their salvation depends entirely upon God's gracious act of condescension. Hunsinger summarizes, "Barth's theology of active relations is therefore a theology which stresses the sovereignty of grace, the incapacity of the creature, and the miraculous history whereby grace grants what the creature lacks for the sake of love and freedom."⁷⁴ This actualistic motif can be seen throughout Barth's doctrine of the Word of God as he describes God's Word as an event.⁷⁵ Morrison explains, "Revelation is that event in which the being of God comes to word, and revelation is, too, God's free decision in eternity to be *our* God, and so to bring himself to speech for us."⁷⁶ This does not mean that God's essence undergoes any kind of change,

⁷² *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷³ Hunsinger, *How to Read*, 30.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷⁵ Barth, *CD* 1/1:109; 1/1:143; 1/2:503; 1/2:527.

⁷⁶ Morrison, "Barth," 190. His emphasis.

but rather that he is as he becomes *for us*. His being-in-becoming is his existence as a gracious God.

Human being to Barth is also being-in-becoming, but not in an absolute sense as it is with God. Because of sin, act and being in humans fall apart.⁷⁷ God is completely free; humans are only relatively free. God is pure love; humans are love in a contingent sense. God determines his own existence; humans depend on God to receive their existence.⁷⁸ The difference between divine being-in-becoming and human being-in-becoming stems from two of Barth's fundamental ideas about the relationship between God and human beings. The first (and most important to his theology) is his emphasis on the ontological chasm that separates God from humanity—the Kierkegaardian “infinite qualitative difference” that separates Creator from creature. Because God is “wholly other” his being-in-becoming is distinct from human being-in-becoming. The second is the presence of sin in human beings, which Barth views largely as humankind's inability to know God. Because they are creatures, and sinful creatures at that, human beings are utterly dependent upon God's free and gracious decision to restore them to what they truly are: beings in relation to God.

With this understanding of divine ontology, it becomes clear that Barth's theology of Scripture must be understood in terms of the event it occasions. McCormack explains,

First, what the Bible *is*, is defined by the will of God as expressed in his act of giving it to the church. And this means that where and when the Bible *becomes* the Word of God, it is only becoming what it already is. But second, where and when the Bible does *not* become the Word of God, there God has chosen provisionally, for the time being, not to bear witness to himself in and through its witness *to this particular reader or this particular set of readers of it*. This changes nothing whatsoever as to the true nature of the Bible as

⁷⁷ McCormack, “Being,” 66.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

defined by the divine will which came to expression in the giving of the Bible to the church. It only means that God does not will, for the time being, that the Bible should *become* what it is for these readers.⁷⁹

McCormack points out that Barth's view of the unity between the divine and the human in Scripture is similar to his understanding of the person of Christ. The Bible is neither human only nor divine only, and neither is it a mixture of the two or a *tertium quid*. In its own way and to its own degree it is very God and very man, a witness to revelation which itself belongs to revelation and at the same time is fully human.⁸⁰ The union that occurs between God's Word and the human word in the Scriptures does not result in a divinization of the human writings any more than the incarnation results in a divinization of Christ's human nature. Again McCormack: "If Christ's humanity is true humanity—and it is—then the hypostatic union may not be thought to result in a divinization of the human nature. So, too, in this case, where something a good deal less intimate than hypostatic union is at work: the relation between the divine element and the human element is a relation that Barth describes by means of the metaphor of an 'indirect identity.'" ⁸¹ He quotes Barth,

It is quite impossible that there should be a direct identity between the human word of Holy Scripture and the Word of God, and therefore between the creaturely reality in itself and as such and the reality of God the Creator. It is impossible that there should have been a transmutation of the one into the other or an admixture of the one with the other. *This is not even the case in the person of Christ.*⁸²

McCormack suggests that this clarification of Barth's theological ontology enables us properly to understand what Barth means when he says, "The Bible is not in itself and as

⁷⁹ McCormack, "Being," 66. His emphasis.

⁸⁰ Barth, *CD* 1/2:501.

⁸¹ McCormack, "Being," 68.

⁸² Barth, *CD* 1/2:499. Emphasis added.

such God's past revelation."⁸³ To Barth human language is unable to contain the Word of God. This does not even happen in the work of inspiration. Here, McCormack concludes, is the root of the conservative unease with Barth's theology of Scripture:

At this point, it has to be frankly acknowledged that Barth's denial that the Bible has either an intrinsic or a permanently bestowed capacity to be an adequate bearer of the Word of God is, in large measure, simply a function of the Reformed character of his Christology. If there was a constant in Reformed treatments of the person of Christ, it was that the divine and the human natures of Christ remain undistinct and unimpaired in their original integrity *after* their union in one Person. The writers of the Reformed confessions insisted on this point in order to render impossible the Lutheran affirmation of a communication of the attributes of the "divine majesty" (divine attributes like omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence) to the human nature of Christ, resulting in a "divinization" of the human nature. If the human nature of Christ is not divinized through the hypostatic union, how much less are the human words of the prophets and apostles divinized through the sacramental union by which God joins them to the Word of God... So when evangelical Christians stumble over the claim that human language has no capacity in itself for bearing adequate witness to the Word of God, my suspicion is that they are stumbling not because they are evangelicals, but because they are not *Reformed* evangelicals.⁸⁴

According to McCormack the heart of Barth's refusal to identify the Scriptures as the Word of God is his belief that the finite cannot contain the infinite (*finitum non capax est infiniti*). His theology of Scripture is the logical conclusion of his Reformed Christology.

For Barth the only possibility for the Bible (or church proclamation) to mediate the transcendent Word of God is if God chooses to actualize it and speak through it himself. This is his response to the seventeenth-century dogmaticians who claimed that the Bible is the Word of God even when it is not in use (*extra usum*). Against such "divinizations" of created objects, Barth emphasizes his view of God as being-in-act and his claim that the Word of God does not exist in abstraction or in static terms. "It is the divine will and

⁸³ Barth, *CD* 1/1:111.

⁸⁴ McCormack, "Being," 70. His emphasis.

act that make the Bible to be what it is 'essentially.'"⁸⁵ When the Bible is what it is, it becomes the Word of God. But because God's free and sovereign will is the ultimate cause of its being, the Bible only becomes what it is *where and when God* pleases. This means that the book called *The Holy Bible* that is sitting on my desk right now is not directly the Word of God because it is not becoming anything. God is not using it to reveal himself, and therefore it simply cannot be the Word of God. Even when I *do* pick it up and read it, it does not for that reason alone become God's Word, for God does not always choose to speak through it. At these times it does not become what it is—but that does not change what it *essentially* is.

With Barth's theological ontology in mind, we return to the question posed above. Is the Bible the Word of God for Barth? According to McCormack and Morrison, the correct answer to this question is a bit more complicated than a simple "no." It would be more accurate to answer it like this: *no and yes*—and in that order. Apart from God's actualization of it, the book that is sitting on my desk right now is not the Word of God, for it is not being what it essentially is. It is only what it truly is *where and when* God chooses to reveal himself through it. When God chooses to do this, it is entirely true to say that the Bible *is* the Word of God.⁸⁶

If McCormack and Morrison are correct, theologians who identify Barth as a liberal critic of the Scriptures have not taken into account his theological ontology. While their concerns about some of his more striking statements about the Scriptures are justified, they have not appreciated that the heart of Barth's theology of Scripture is his

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that the only way to understand the theology of Karl Barth is temporarily to forget everything you have ever learned (Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 2). When it comes to Barth's theological ontology, that is probably good advice.

understanding of the nature of God, the nature of humankind, and the infinite chasm that separates them. If there are problems with his view of the relationship between Scripture and the Word of God, engagement must begin with his understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Barth and the Contemporary Theology of Scripture

Barth's rejection of the modern debate over the Scriptures and his doctrine of the Word of God have been widely influential in the contemporary theology of Scripture. Telford Work writes, "[Barth's] treatment of the Word of God in its threefold form, with Scripture occupying the place of the second person of the Trinity, has been so influential that it has set the terms for the twentieth-century discussion of Christology's relevance for bibliology."⁸⁷ By offering an alternative way of conceiving of the Scriptures, Barth changed the way in which the Bible has been imagined in Christian theology. Before we evaluate Barth's theology of Scripture, therefore, it is helpful to take a brief look at the effect he has had on the contemporary discussion.

There are two specific aspects of Barth's doctrine of the Word of God that have been especially influential in the contemporary theology of Scripture. First, theologians have begun to investigate more specifically the work that God does *through* the Scriptures. They have moved away from a narrow concentration on whether or not the information in the Bible is historically true and have begun to consider more fully its function in the economy of salvation. Second, in line with the overall revival of the Trinity in twentieth-century Christian theology, Barth offers ways of applying the old rule *opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt* to the theology of Scripture in more thorough

⁸⁷ Work, *Living and Active*, 19. "Bibliology" is the term that Work uses to describe the doctrine of Scripture.

and tangible ways. Rather than focusing exclusively on the relationship between the text and the Holy Spirit, contemporary theologians are following his lead by investigating the relationship between the three members of the Trinity and the Scriptures.

The Function of the Scriptures

Viewed primarily as a means of providing information about the past (either about what God has said and done, or about what early Christian communities believed he has said and done), theologians stuck in the modern debate treat the Scriptures as little more than objects to be studied and explained. Postliberals like Willimon argue that this is true for both sides of the modern debate—that the liberal and conservative positions are essentially two sides of the same coin.⁸⁸ Both sides, he argues, “believe that ‘facts,’ defined by the prevailing empirical methods of the modern age, are what make any document important.”⁸⁹ The result has been that God’s active work through the Scriptures has been left out of the discussion. Willimon explains,

The Bible becomes fragmented, uninteresting. The story and its political claim upon us is lost in debates over ‘what really happened.’ Modern infatuations—historicism, science, life based only upon what I can know and prove through empirical means—are applied to the Bible in ways that have little to do with the Bible’s original intent.⁹⁰

John Webster suggests that a narrow concentration on the historical truthfulness of the Scriptures has resulted in a flattening of the doctrine of revelation. The problem with the doctrine of inspiration is that it often identifies revelation exclusively with the facts recorded in the Bible. “Revelation,” writes Webster, “was transposed rather readily into a

⁸⁸ Willimon, *Shaped*, 24. Hauerwas makes a similar claim in *Unleashing the Scripture*, 17.

⁸⁹ Willimon, *Shaped*, 25.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

feature of generally 'theistic' metaphysical outlooks."⁹¹ Without material reference to soteriology the role that the Scriptures play in the economy of salvation was limited to the sending of divine information. Webster continues,

Understood in this dogmatically minimalistic way, language about revelation became a way of talking, not about the life-giving and loving presence of God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Spirit's power among the worshipping and witnessing assembly, but instead of an arcane process of causality whereby persons acquire knowledge through opaque, non-natural operations.⁹²

N. T. Wright makes a similar point. He faults modernity for adopting a "shrunk version" of revelation, "a picture of God merely conveying true religious, theological, or ethical information."⁹³ The result of this view of revelation has been "the false antithesis of seeing scripture either as a convenient repository of timeless truth, a vehicle for imparting 'true information,' or as a take-it-or-leave-it resource."⁹⁴ He criticizes,

[S]cripture is more than simply "revelation" in the sense of "conveying information"; more even than "divine self-communication"; more, certainly, than simply a "record of revelation." Those categories come to us today primarily from an older framework of thought, in which the key question was conceived to be about a mostly absent God choosing to send the world certain messages about himself and his purposes.⁹⁵

As Willimon, Webster, and Wright maintain, the modern debate tends to narrow the function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation to the conveyance of information. The writings of the prophets and apostles have become little more than deposits of true information *about* God, rather than an instrument through which God works to accomplish his plan of salvation.

⁹¹ John Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 11.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹³ Wright, *Scripture*, 23.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

Kelsey suggests that the move beyond the modern focus on the informative function of Scripture must begin by recognizing that the Bible does more than convey information. He contends, "It may be perfectly correct to say, in a *theological* proposal, that one of the things that God is 'using' the Bible for is to 'say' certain things to men. But that is at most only *one* sort of the thing Christians have tended to say God is 'doing' with the Bible."⁹⁶ As an alternative to the modern approach, he suggests,

[I]nstead of taking "God saying" as the overarching image for all the various things Christians are inclined to say God "does" with the Bible, we have proposed "shaping identity": Speaking *theologically*, God "uses" the church's various uses of scripture in her common life to nurture and reform the self-identity both of the community and of the individual persons who comprise it.⁹⁷

The Bible, according to Kelsey, shapes the community and the individuals who read it. Willimon argues much the same, as the title of his book *Shaped by the Bible* indicates. He maintains that the distinctiveness of the church consists in the fact that it is formed and reformed by its confrontation with the Scriptures: "A congregation is Christian to the degree that it is confronted by and attempts to form its life in response to the Word of God."⁹⁸

Despite the fact that modernity has set this divine-human encounter in opposition against the truthfulness of the information recorded in the Scriptures, Webster argues that these two aspects of the theology of Scripture are not incompatible. In fact, a truly Christian understanding of the Scriptures affirms the Bible's truthfulness as well as its function in God's plan of salvation. He summarizes:

⁹⁶ Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 214. His emphasis.

⁹⁷ Ibid. His emphasis. Kelsey is correct in saying that God does more than convey information through the Scriptures. But I will argue in the next chapter that God "shapes identity" precisely through the Word that he speaks.

⁹⁸ Willimon, *Shaped*, 11.

To talk of the biblical writings as Holy Scripture is ultimately to refer to more (but not less!) than those writings *per se*. It is, on the one hand, to depict these texts in the light of their origin, function, and end in divine self-communication, and, on the other hand, to make recommendations about the kinds of responses to these texts which are fitting in view of their origin, function and end. "Holy Scripture" is a shorthand term for the nature and function of the biblical writings in a set of communicative acts which stretch from God's merciful self-manifestation to the obedient hearing of the community of faith.⁹⁹

The recognition that the Scriptures must be viewed in terms of their function in the economy of salvation is one of the central point of emphasis in the contemporary theology of Scripture, and Barth deserves much of the credit for turning the discussion in this direction. Wright summarizes,

It is enormously important that we see the role of Scripture not simply as being to provide *true information about*, or even an accurate running commentary upon, the work of God in salvation and new creation, but as taking an active part *within* that ongoing purpose... Scripture is there to be a means of God's action in and through us—which will include, but go far beyond, the mere conveying of information.¹⁰⁰

The Scriptures in Trinitarian Perspective

One of the hallmarks of the modern approach to the Scriptures among conservative theologians is its focus on the Holy Spirit's guidance of the biblical authors. The *sedes doctrinae* of the doctrine of inspiration—2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21—provide the foundation for the belief that the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God, and these passages are normally understood in terms of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the text. Although the seventeenth-century dogmatists affirm the rule *opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* and formally ascribe inspiration to all three members of the Godhead, David Scaer points out that the Holy Spirit has received almost exclusive

⁹⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁰ Wright, *Scripture*, 22. His emphasis.

attention in the doctrine of inspiration. He writes, "Though the dogmaticians affirmed a Trinitarian inspiration, their exegetical exposition of the doctrine centered on the Spirit's relation to the biblical authors. In terms of the cliché, inspiration was Third Article matter."¹⁰¹ Because of the lack of trinitarian substance in the modern debate over the Scriptures, Scaer suggests that contemporary theologians find themselves "caught between a doctrine of biblical inspiration which is offered without serious reference to the Second Article and certain historical-critical methods which have a Jesus-history in which the *incarnatus* has no role."¹⁰² Scaer's critique of the doctrine of inspiration resonates with Karl Rahner's claim that one could dispense with the doctrine of the Trinity and the majority of religious literature would remain virtually unchanged.¹⁰³ Prior to Barth, the Trinity appeared in the modern battle for the Bible in only superficial terms.¹⁰⁴ The Holy Spirit stood at the center of the discussion, and Christ and the gospel played, at most, a minor role.¹⁰⁵ Scaer identifies the problem: "Without the Trinitarian perspective, no doctrine can be considered fully presented."¹⁰⁶

The revival of the Trinity in twentieth-century theology has led to a reconsideration of the Scriptures from a trinitarian perspective. Work suggests, "If Scripture is God's Word then in some sense it reflects God's character; and if God's character is Triune,

¹⁰¹ David P. Scaer, "Biblical Inspiration in Trinitarian Perspective" *Pro Ecclesia* 14 (2005): 148.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁰³ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 11.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. R. Preus, *Inspiration*, 29. Preus' discussion of the Trinitarian nature of Scripture in the doctrine of inspiration requires only a single page.

¹⁰⁵ This is somewhat ironic, given the christological name-calling that has characterized much of the modern debate. Critics refer to conservatives as docetists and monophysites, and conservatives accuse critics of being ebionites and adoptionists.

¹⁰⁶ Scaer, "Biblical Inspiration," 143.

then the Bible reflects the Trinity of God in some significant way.¹⁰⁷ Webster writes, "Holy Scripture is dogmatically explicated in terms of its role in God's self-communication, that is, the acts of Father, Son and Spirit which establish and maintain that saving fellowship with humankind in which God makes himself known to us and by us."¹⁰⁸ Reinhard Slenczka emphasizes the trinitarian nature of Scripture in his essay, "Die Heilige Schrift, das Wort des dreieinigen Gottes."¹⁰⁹ He argues, "Die Heiligen Schriften Alten und Neuen Testaments sind das *Wort des dreieinigen Gottes*, das er spricht, in dem er sich selbst zu erkennen gibt und durch das er wirkt."¹¹⁰ If Scripture is to be understood as divine revelation, says Armin Wenz, the trinitarian and christological theology of the early church must play a central role.¹¹¹

One of the primary ways in which the Trinity is being incorporated into the theology of Scripture is through a renewed interest in the relationship between Christ and the Bible. It is here that Barth's christocentric focus is clearly visible, and this focus manifests itself in the contemporary discussion in two distinct ways. First, Barth's frequent comparison of the Bible to the finger of John the Baptist in Matthias Grünewald's *Crucifixion* has reminded contemporary theologians that the Scriptures were written so that people might believe in Jesus (John 20:31).¹¹² Alister McGrath describes this recovery of Christology for the theology of Scripture. "Christology and biblical

¹⁰⁷ Work, *Living and Active*, 10.

¹⁰⁸ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 8.

¹⁰⁹ Reinhard Slenczka, "Die Heilige Schrift, das Wort des dreieinigen Gottes," *Kerygma und Dogma* 51 (2005): 174-191.

¹¹⁰ Slenczka, "Die Heilige Schrift," 189. Unfortunately Slenczka does not explain who the "er" is in each of these clauses.

¹¹¹ "Eine systematische Theologie, welche mit der Suffizienz der Schrift die Externität der göttlichen Selbstoffenbarung bedenkt, wird daher mit den altkirchlichen trinitätstheologischen und christologischen Entscheidungen daran festhalten" (Wenz, *Das Wort Gottes*, 311).

¹¹² Barth, *CD* 1/1:112; 1/1:262; 1/2:125.

authority are inextricably linked," he writes, "in that it is Scripture that brings us to a knowledge of Jesus Christ... Scripture is read in order to encounter Christ; it is like a lens through which Christ is brought into focus."¹¹³

A second way in which the Scriptures are being considered in relation to the Trinity is through an increasing interest in understanding Christology in terms of the joint mission of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the divine plan of salvation. Known as "Spirit-Christology," this approach to the Trinity refuses to treat any of the members of the Trinity in isolation from one another. Work explains, "The rise of Spirit-Christology has helped recover the relevance of the Holy Spirit as One who conceives, anoints, and empowers Jesus' work in the created order, not just the One who points to it and carries it on in Jesus' absence."¹¹⁴ Viewed from a christological perspective, inspiration is understood as an activity that involves Jesus as well as the Spirit. Scaer explains, "A Christological view of inspiration would require that the words inspired by the Spirit are those of Jesus and ultimately of the Father."¹¹⁵ He summarizes,

Inspiration is not derived baldly from the Spirit of the Trinity, but from the one whom the Creed describes as *crucifixus*. It is not an inward, mystical experience but is historical because it comes from the one who took on flesh and lived among us. The Scriptures are Christological because they originate with him; and the Spirit of Jesus is the Spirit who inspires them.¹¹⁶

Evaluating Barth

Barth's influence in the contemporary theology of Scripture has been far-reaching.

His emphasis on the function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation and his

¹¹³ Alister McGrath, "Reclaiming Our Roots and Our Vision: Scripture and the Stability of the Christian Church," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 66-67.

¹¹⁴ Work, *Living and Active*, 111.

¹¹⁵ Scaer, "Biblical Inspiration," 151.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

trinitarian approach to the Word of God have been adopted and developed in a variety of helpful ways. By relocating the Scriptures under the theology of the Word of God Barth has liberated Scripture from its “prolegomenal ghetto” and has provided a much needed framework for unpacking the theological relationship between the Scriptures and the rest of the dogmatic corpus.¹¹⁷ Despite these positive contributions, however, there are several aspects of Barth’s theology of the Word of God that remain problematic: his Reformed understanding of the doctrine of Christ and his conception of “divine discourse.”

An Inadequate Christology

The strength of Barth’s doctrine of the Word of God is that it is grounded firmly in the doctrine of Christ. The weakness is that his doctrine of Christ is inadequate, and for two reasons. First, his understanding of the person of Jesus Christ—including his relationship to the Father and the Spirit—tends toward the Nestorian heresy. Second, his account of the work of Christ focuses disproportionately on the incarnation, making the death and resurrection of Jesus inconsequential for his understanding of the work of the Word of God.

The Person of Christ. In the previous section we considered McCormack’s suggestion that the problem with Barth’s theology of Scripture (and therefore the problem with his theology of the Word of God) is ultimately a christological problem.

McCormack’s conclusion warrants repeating:

It has to be frankly acknowledged that Barth’s denial that the Bible has either an intrinsic or a permanently bestowed capacity to be an adequate bearer of the Word of God is, in large measure, simply a function of the Reformed character of his Christology. If there was a constant in Reformed treatments of the person of Christ, it was that the divine and the human natures of Christ remain undistinct and unimpaired in their original integrity *after* their union in

¹¹⁷ *Work, Living and Active*, 9.

one Person. The writers of the Reformed confessions insisted on this point in order to render impossible the Lutheran affirmation of a communication of the attributes of the "divine majesty" (divine attributes like omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence) to the human nature of Christ, resulting in a "divinization" of the human nature. If the human nature of Christ is not divinized through the hypostatic union, how much less are the human words of the prophets and apostles divinized through the sacramental union by which God joins them to the Word of God... So when evangelical Christians stumble over the claim that human language has no capacity in itself for bearing adequate witness to the Word of God, my suspicion is that they are stumbling no because they are evangelicals, but because they are not *Reformed* evangelicals.¹¹⁸

In Barth's words,

It is quite impossible that there should be a direct identity between the human word of Holy Scripture and the Word of God, and therefore between the creaturely reality in itself and as such and the reality of God the Creator. It is impossible that there should have been a transmutation of the one into the other or an admixture of the one with the other. *This is not even the case in the person of Christ.*¹¹⁹

Barth's unwavering commitment to the "infinite qualitative distance" between God and humankind becomes obvious throughout his doctrine of the Word as he adamantly defends the sovereign freedom and absolute transcendence of God. Gustav Wingren suggests that this insistence on divine freedom stems from a worldview that is governed by a "*Gott-Mensch* antithesis" in which the primary opposition in reality is between God as Creator and human beings as creatures.¹²⁰ As Barth sees it, the divine and human natures are so vastly different that it would simply be impossible for God to *become* flesh. He writes,

God cannot cease to be God. The incarnation is inconceivable, but it is not absurd, and it must be explained in its absurdity. The inconceivable fact in it is that without ceasing to be God the Word of God is among us in such a way

¹¹⁸ McCormack, "Being," 70.

¹¹⁹ Barth, *CD* 1/2:499. Emphasis added.

¹²⁰ Gustav Wingren, *Theology in Conflict: Nygren—Barth—Bultmann* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 23–44.

that He takes over human being, which is His creature, into His own being and to that extent makes it His own being...But the eternal Word is with the Father and the Holy Spirit the unchangeable God himself and so incapable of any change or admixture. Unity with Him, the "becoming" of the Word, cannot therefore mean the origination of a third between Word and flesh, but only the assumption of the flesh by the Word.¹²¹

In order to guard against the Eutychian error of identifying the two natures of Christ, Barth keeps them separate and falls into the Nestorian heresy. Wingren describes the result: "[T]he gulf between God and man gapes unabridged even in the Incarnation."¹²²

The implications of this understanding of the person of Christ for the doctrine of the Word of God and for the theology of Scripture are clear. Barth's refusal to allow the divine and human to come together in Christ rules out the possibility that God's Word could be united in any direct way with human words, whether they are spoken or written. Wingren explains, "The opposition between the divine and the human remains in the Incarnation in spite of the unity, and the same division comes again between God's Word and man's word in the Scriptures, to be carried over in exactly the same sense into Barth's view of preaching."¹²³

The Work of Christ. Barth's emphasis on the opposition between Creator and creatures surfaces again in his view of Christ's work of salvation. The most basic problem facing humankind in Barth's theology is that it has been created. As creatures, human beings are completely incapable of reaching God on their own. Sin in this view is primarily a lack of knowledge about God that can only be overcome through God's own self-presentation. Wingren observes, "There is in Barth's theology no active power of sin,

¹²¹ Barth, *CD* 1/2:160-161.

¹²² Gustav Wingren, "The Word' in Barth and Luther," *Evangelical Quarterly* 21 (October 1949): 265-285.

¹²³ Wingren, "The Word' in Barth and Luther," 269.

no tyrannical, demonic power that subjects men to slavery and which God destroys in his work of redemption. There is no devil in Barth's theology."¹²⁴ It is here that the importance of divine revelation for Barth's theology of the Word of God can be seen. Barth recognized liberalism's rejection of divine revelation as a departure from historic Christianity, and so he sought to restore Christianity to its original form by emphasizing the need for God to reveal himself to his creatures. In the incarnation Barth saw the solution to this fundamental human need. He writes, "'Incarnation of the Word' asserts the presence of God in our world and as a member of this world, as a Man among men. It is thus God's revelation to us, and our reconciliation with him. That this revelation and reconciliation have already taken place is the content of the Christmas message."¹²⁵ Again, "The Word of God as the Word of reconciliation directed to us is the Word by which God announces Himself to man, i.e., by which He promises Himself as the content of man's future, as the One who meets him on his way through time as the end of all time, as the hidden Lord of all times."¹²⁶ To Barth revelation *is* reconciliation—they are "two sides of the same coin."¹²⁷ And because the incarnation is the primary miracle of divine revelation, it follows that, for Barth, incarnation *is* reconciliation.

Barth understands the basic problems facing humankind to be the absence of God and the inability of human creatures to know him. The solution to these problems revolves around God making himself present. This leads to a view of salvation that consists of God manifesting himself as he did in the incarnation: individual human beings

¹²⁴ Wingren, *Theology in Conflict*, 25. Wingren argues that the absence of evil in Barth's theology is a result of his liberal education.

¹²⁵ Barth, *CD* 1/2:173.

¹²⁶ Barth, *CD* 1/1:142.

¹²⁷ Runia, "Karl Barth and the Word of God," 6.

are saved as God rehearses the incarnation through the miracle of divine revelation. The Scriptures participate in the economy of salvation by mediating God's reconciling presence where and when God pleases. The problem with this emphasis on the incarnation is that makes the death and resurrection of Jesus inconsequential. Despite Barth's frequent affirmation of the "theology of the cross," Jesus' crucifixion has no constitutive significance for his Christology or his doctrine of the Word of God. Even when he addresses Christ's death and resurrection more fully in volume 4, Barth rejects the idea that justification should stand at the center of Christian theology.¹²⁸ Runia correctly explains, "Barth does not deny the reality of the cross and the resurrection. But in a sense they are relegated to a secondary place. The cross is only the consequence of the incarnation."¹²⁹ By replacing "justification" and "forgiveness of sins" with "revelation" and "God's presence," Barth deviates from the central thrust of the biblical account and its emphasis on "Christ crucified." Wingren points out, "The birth of Jesus plays a relatively minor part in the New Testament kerygma. The cross and the resurrection dominate the four gospels, even quantitatively, while some of them do not even relate the story of his birth."¹³⁰ For all the attention Barth gives John the Baptist's finger, he seems to have missed the fact that John is pointing to the one hanging on the cross.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Barth, *CD* 4/1:581-589.

¹²⁹ Runia, "Karl Barth and the Word of God," 12.

¹³⁰ Wingren, *Theology in Conflict*, 120.

¹³¹ Cf. Work, *Living and Active*, 99.

A Limited View of "Divine Discourse"

A second problem with Barth's doctrine of the Word of God is that, despite his threefold structure, he actually allows for only one form of divine speech: Jesus Christ, the revelation of God. He writes, "Revelation is originally and directly what the Bible and Church proclamation are derivatively and indirectly, i.e., God's Word."¹³² Again, "Revelation in fact does not differ from the person Jesus Christ nor from the reconciliation accomplished in Him. To say revelation is to say 'The Word became flesh.'"¹³³ To Barth the Word of God and the revelation of God are identical. This equation of the Word of God and revelation in Barth's theology is a problem, and an illuminating study of "divine discourse" by Nicholas Wolterstorff helps explain why.

Speaking vs. Revealing. In his philosophical investigation into the claim that God speaks Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that "speaking is not revealing."¹³⁴ Speaking and revealing share a number of important traits, and they are often treated as one and the same (especially in modern theology). But in fact, says Wolterstorff, speech and revelation are two different kinds of activities. He begins with an anecdote:

When I mentioned to various friends and acquaintances that I had resolved to reflect and write on the topic of divine discourse, further conversation almost always revealed that they assumed my topic was divine revelation, and that my conversation partners would be a sampling from that vast number of thinkers who have written on the topic of revelation. "Is there anything new to be said on revelation?" a rather skeptical theologian friend remarked. I replied that my topic was divine *discourse*, not divine *revelation*. His response was like that of almost everyone else: "What's the difference?"

¹³² Barth, *CD* 1/1:117.

¹³³ Barth, *CD* 1/1:119.

¹³⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), 19.

To Barth there is no difference. As we considered earlier, he equated revelation with the Word of God.

Wolterstorff, however, suggests that revelation as it is usually understood—also by Barth—and the Word of God are not one and the same. At its very basic, Wolterstorff notes, revelation informs: “Revelation occurs when ignorance is dispelled—or when something is done which *would* dispel ignorance if attention and interpretive skills were adequate.”¹³⁵ While there are a variety of different kinds of revealing and different agents of revelation, the act of revelation itself consists in the transmission of knowledge. It occurs when information that was previously unknown is made known—or, to be more precise, when information that was previously *unknowable* is made known. Wolterstorff explains, “Dispelling ignorance becomes *revelation* when it has, to some degree or in some way, the character of unveiling the veiled, of uncovering the covered, of exposing the obscured to view. The counterpart of the revealed is the hidden.”¹³⁶

Although it is true that speaking may reveal certain things (about the speaker, for instance), the essence of speaking is *not* the transmission of knowledge. To make this point Wolterstorff recalls the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin.¹³⁷ Fundamental to Austin’s account of language is the distinction between two different kinds of speech-acts: locutionary acts and illocutionary acts. A locutionary act occurs when words are uttered or inscribed. It consists of sounds or symbols. An illocutionary act occurs when an act is performed *by means* of that uttering or inscription. That is to say, a speaker performs an act such as asserting, commanding, promising, or asking by uttering sounds

¹³⁵ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 23.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Wolterstorff briefly reviews Austin’s speech-act theory in his first chapter (*Divine Discourse*, 13; see also 33). See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

or writing symbols (locutionary acts) to an addressee. While speech-acts also inform (and thus reveal things), that is not all they do, and that is not even the most important thing they do. "Asserting, commanding, promising, and asking," Wolterstorff explains, "do not consist in the transmission of knowledge."¹³⁸ Through speaking people relate to one another in ways that go beyond the giving and receiving of information. He goes on, "The intended function of promising and commanding is not to inform us of what we don't know but to take on duties *toward* us and to require things *of* us; trust and obedience are the appropriate responses."¹³⁹

Why does this distinction matter for the theology of the Word? The key question in modern theology (as well as modern philosophy) is the question of epistemology: how does one know God (or anything)? While this has always been an important issue in the western world, Wolterstorff points out that in modern times this quest for knowledge has been elevated to "the point of pathology."¹⁴⁰ Epistemology has become the only (or at least, the most important) question in philosophy, making revelation and the transmission of divine knowledge the most important theological topic. Wolterstorff summarizes, "Thus it is that the topic of revelation has assumed looming, structural significance in the theologies of the West."¹⁴¹ It is in this context that we should understand Barth's attempt to move beyond the modern debate over the Scriptures. While he recognizes the centrality of the Word of God in the biblical narrative, the modern question of epistemology continues to govern his doctrine of the Word of God.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Ibid., 33.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 35.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Barth conceives of the Father as Revealer, the Son as Revelation, and the Spirit as Revealedness.

Epistemology and revelation are obviously significant theological concepts, and they have an important place in Christian theology and the theology of the Word of God. But the biblical narrative describes God primarily as one who *speaks* to his people. Much more than simply transmitting information, God issues commands and makes promises through his Word. When the Word of God is located within the framework of revelation, as Barth has done, God's speaking loses its distinctively relational nature and becomes instead the means by which ignorance is dispelled. If Wolterstorff's description of the difference between speaking and revealing is correct, it seems that Barth's account of the Word of God is not as "post-Enlightenment" or "post-modern" as sometimes is thought. Much like Enlightenment Deism, Barth's view of the Word of God (and God himself) remains impersonal and distant.¹⁴³

Deputy vs. Witness. Barth's equation of revealing and "Word of God" is not the only problem with his understanding of God's speech. There is a second aspect of Wolterstorff's investigation into divine discourse that warrants consideration, and it is known as "deputized discourse."¹⁴⁴

Most instances of human speaking occur when the speaker utters sounds with his own mouth or inscribes symbols with his own hand. There are times, however, when a speaker says something that is uttered or inscribed by someone else. Wolterstorff calls this "double agency discourse," and by way of example he describes the common practice of a secretary writing a letter for an executive. The executive does not write the

CD 1/1:295.

¹⁴³ Barth is not the only modern theologian to conceive of the Word of God as revelation. Many proponents of the doctrine of inspiration have treated the Word of God in a similar way. The dogmatic location of the Word of God under divine revelation obscures the personal nature of speaking.

¹⁴⁴ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 42.

words on the page, but when she signs it, the words that were written by the secretary become her own words. The key factor in "double agency discourse" is that the secretary "knows the mind" of the executive.¹⁴⁵ The secretary writes a message that corresponds to the thoughts and intentions of the executive, and the executive agrees by signing her name to it.

This example can be stretched farther to the situation in which the executive "authorizes" the secretary not only to write the letter, but also to sign her name. Wolterstorff describes this as "deputized discourse."¹⁴⁶ When the secretary has been "deputized" to write and sign for the executive, the secretary's signature *counts as* the signature of the executive herself. In this case the executive has granted authority to the secretary to write on her behalf and with her authority. Wolterstorff explains:

[T]o deputize to someone else some authority that one has in one's own person is not to surrender that authority and hand it over to that other person; it is to bring it about that one exercises that authority by way of actions performed by that other person acting as one's deputy. That's what happens when the executive deputizes the secretary to sign the letters "for" her. The act which generates the executive's authorizing signing, and which thereby generates the executive's discourse, is the secretary's act of producing an inscription of the executive's name.¹⁴⁷

To be deputized, Wolterstorff explains, is to write (or speak) in the name of someone else. It is to communicate the message of the one who deputizes.

At this point Wolterstorff turns to the biblical account to demonstrate how the speaking of a prophet is a form of deputized speech. "The phenomena of *speaking in the name of*," he notes, "is of central importance in the case of God's speech."¹⁴⁸ Much like

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 39.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 43.

an ambassador who is sent to speak in the name of the head of state, the prophets were sent to speak in the name of God. "Those who hear the prophet speaking, when he is speaking in his prophetic capacity," says Wolterstorff, "are confronted with that which counts as God speaking; the utterances of the prophet are the medium of God's discourse."¹⁴⁹ This deputized speech does not originate with the prophet; it comes from God. Wolterstorff explains:

Speaking in the name of God is not something that a person just undertakes to do; God will "raise up" the prophet, as God raised up Moses. To be a prophet requires being deputized to speak in God's name. In addition, God will tell the prophet what he is to say, putting words in his mouth; the prophet does not devise the words by himself. The prophet is commissioned to communicate a message from God, and God will give that message to the prophet.¹⁵⁰

With this concept of "deputized discourse" in view, it becomes clear that Barth's doctrine of the spoken Word of God runs into a second problem. Although God's speaking takes center stage in Barth's theology, Wolterstorff notes that there is really only one form in which God can truly be said to speak. In order to demonstrate this point he examines Barth's concept of "witness."

Barth is unambiguous in his description of Jesus as the revealed Word of God. He says that Jesus is God's *original* speech which reveals God himself; proclamation and the Bible are God's *derivative* speech. They reveal God only where and when it pleases God.¹⁵¹ This is an important distinction. To Barth the prophets and apostles (both in their proclamation and in their writing) do not, in and of themselves, reveal God. Instead, they

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 48.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 48.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 64.

are *witnesses* to revelation. They are witnesses to “the revelatory speech of God which is Jesus Christ.”¹⁵²

Wolterstorff observes two things about Barth’s understanding of a witness. First, Barth insists that a witness to revelation is not revelation itself. He is very clear: “In the Bible we meet with human words written by human speech, and in these words, and therefore by means of them, we hear of the lordship of the triune God. Therefore when we have to do with the Bible, we have to do primarily with this means, with these words, with the witness which as such is not itself revelation.”¹⁵³ The implications for divine speech are obvious. Wolterstorff concludes: “The prophets and apostles are not ones who speak *in the name of* God; rather, they are ones who have *witnessed* God’s revelatory speech and who, then, in turn, *witness* to that.”¹⁵⁴ Second, this means that neither the prophets nor the apostles may be seen as deputies who speak God’s Word. As human beings, they are simply incapable of uttering divine words. For Barth “witnessing is human speech, nothing more,” notes Wolterstorff.¹⁵⁵ Apart from God’s “eventist” revelation in Christ there is no divine discourse in Barth’s theology.¹⁵⁶ Despite the fact that Barth at times describes the Scriptures (and proclamation) as the Word of God, Wolterstorff concludes, “It would be a mistake to interpret him as saying thereby that Scripture is a medium of divine discourse.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Ibid., 67.

¹⁵³ Barth, *CD* 1/2:463

¹⁵⁴ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 67-68.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 68.

¹⁵⁶ As McCormack notes, this does not mean that the Scriptures and proclamation are *not* the Word of God to Barth. It means that they are the Word of God *only* when God speaks through them.

¹⁵⁷ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 282.

Wolterstorff completes his examination of Barth's doctrine of the Word of God by wondering why there is less in Barth of God speaking than it first appears. "It is surprising," he admits. "Barth is the great theologian of the Word of God. One gets the impression upon first reading him that many are the episodes of human speech which are the media for divine discourse. But close scrutiny proves that to be not true."¹⁵⁸ Why is this so? Wolterstorff provides the likely answer, "Barth regarded the claim that God speaks by way of authoring Scripture as compromising the freedom of God. God and God alone speaks for God."¹⁵⁹ For God to allow human beings to speak his Word would be for him to limit his freedom, and that is something that Barth cannot accept.

Wolterstorff responds to Barth with a suggestion:

If it is indeed a limitation on God's freedom that God would commission a human being to speak 'in the name of' God, then perhaps we have to take seriously the possibility that God is willing, on occasion to limit God's freedom in that way—or alternatively, consider the possibility that we are working with an alien and inapplicable concept of freedom.¹⁶⁰

A Contemporary Barthian Approach to Scripture

As I have tried to demonstrate, Barth's doctrine of the Word of God is inadequate in a number of significant ways. His Christology tends toward Nestorianism, he pays insufficient attention to the death and resurrection of Jesus, and he is unable to account for God's deputized discourse through his prophets and apostles. These shortcomings create problems for his theology of Scripture, and an examination of a contemporary Barthian approach to the theology of Scripture helps demonstrate how these problems persist in the current discussion.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 73.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 73-74.

¹⁶⁰ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 74.

Much like Barth, John Webster grounds his dogmatic account of the Scriptures in divine revelation. "Revelation," Webster maintains, "is the self-presentation of the triune God, the free work of sovereign mercy in which God wills, establishes and perfects saving fellowship with himself in which humankind comes to know, love, and fear him."¹⁶¹ Quoting Barth, he argues that "revelation is...divine presence"¹⁶²—it is God manifesting himself to sinful human beings. This establishment of fellowship with God accomplishes salvation because it enables finite creatures to know their infinite Creator. "Revelation is the self-giving presence of God which overthrows opposition to God, and, in reconciling, brings us into the light of the knowledge of God."¹⁶³ Revelation saves by removing "human blindness and ignorance."¹⁶⁴

In order to describe God's self-revelation through the Scriptures, Webster speaks in terms of God's "sanctification" of the Bible. "At its most basic," he explains, "the biblical texts are creaturely realities set apart by the triune God to serve his self-presence."¹⁶⁵ He suggests that God "sanctifies" the Scriptures in order to use them in his reconciling work of revelation:

A sanctified text is creaturely, not divine. Scripture's place in the economy of saving grace does not need to be secured by its divinization through the unambiguous ascription of divine properties to the text...Sanctification is not transubstantiation. Nor is it an exclusively natural product arbitrarily commandeered by a supernatural agent. Sanctification is the Spirit's act of ordering creaturely history and being to the end of acting as *ancilla Domini*.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 13.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

Sanctification is a fitting term to describe God's use of the Scriptures, Webster suggests, because it affirms divine action through these writings without having to ascribe divine qualities directly to the texts. The Scriptures are used by God, but they remain part of his finite creation. "Once again," he says, "the rule is: sanctification *establishes* and does not abolish creatureliness."¹⁶⁷

Several Barthian points of emphasis are apparent in this account. First, the absolute distinction between Creator and creature comes through clearly in Webster's conception of how God works through the Scriptures. Webster's description of God's work through the Scriptures in terms of "sanctification" protects the sovereign freedom of God as he reconciles creatures to himself through his Word. "A sanctified text is creaturely, not divine,"¹⁶⁸ Webster insists, and thereby guards the infinite against the control of finite human creatures. Second, by grounding his conception of the Scriptures in revelation, Webster has difficulty finding dogmatic space to address the Word that God speaks through his deputized prophets and apostles. He seems to recognize the importance of the proclamation of the Word, but it gets confused with the Scriptures. This passage is instructive: "Holy Scripture is the location of a struggle for the proper externality of the church, for true hearing of the *viva vox Dei*, for true attention to the sanctified and inspired servant through which God announces the judgment and promise of the gospel, above all, for faith as the end of defiance and false confidence and the beginning of humble listening."¹⁶⁹ Webster recognizes the importance of speaking (*viva vox Dei*) and

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 30. His emphasis.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 28. It is not obvious what Webster would say of divine discourse.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 47.

the human response of “humble listening,” but it is not as clear what he means by “sanctified and inspired servant.”

The third and most problematic similarity between Webster and Barth is the absence of the cross. Salvation in Webster’s account consists primarily in terms of God’s “saving self-manifestation” and “presence.”¹⁷⁰ Like Barth, the cross and the message of Christ crucified is almost entirely absent. Webster explains his view of salvation, “As the gracious presence of God, revelation is itself the establishment of fellowship. It is...a way of indicating the communicative force of God’s saving, fellowship-creating presence. God is present as our saviour, and so communicatively present.”¹⁷¹ Although Webster speaks with regularity about the presence of the “risen Christ,”¹⁷² he does not account for the death of Jesus or the theological necessity of the resurrection for the theology of Scripture.

Summary

In this chapter we have considered Karl Barth as one of the first and most influential theologians who saw that there was a problem with the assumptions, concepts, and categories that have governed the modern approach to the Scriptures. Instead of focusing exclusively on the Holy Spirit’s relationship to the text and the historical truthfulness of the Scriptures, he relocated the theology of the Scripture under the doctrine of the Word of God and considered it in trinitarian and soteriological terms. By doing so he has provided a more comprehensive framework for understanding the nature and function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation. Barth’s contributions have

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 40; cf. 97.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷² Ibid., 18, 38, 50.

been influential in leading contemporary theologians towards a more comprehensive theology of Scripture.

After examining Barth's understanding of the Scriptures and their relationship to the Word of God more closely, however, a number of significant problems have become apparent. The Christology that grounds his entire doctrine of the Word is inadequate, both because of its Nestorian tendencies and because of its dogmatic neglect of Jesus' death and resurrection. Furthermore, Wolterstorff helps show that Barth's insistence on the "infinite qualitative difference" between the Creator and his creatures keeps him from taking seriously prophetic speech *in the name of* God as a form of deputized divine discourse. This is especially problematic when it comes to Jesus himself. He is the personal Word of God who speaks definitively *in the name of* the Father, and it was ultimately this speaking that led to his rejection and crucifixion.

A faithful account of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation necessitates a fuller examination of the Word of God in the biblical narrative. This account must include an appreciation of God's frequent use of deputized discourse, and it must recognize the dogmatic significance of the cross and the empty tomb. This calls for a cruciform account of the Scriptures and the Word of God. As Wingren reminds, "To understand God we must always return to this, that Christ was crucified."¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Wingren, "The Word' in Barth and Luther," 268.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WORD OF GOD IN THE DIVINE ECONOMY

Throughout the first two chapters of this dissertation I have been engaged in a critical evaluation of the way in which the Scriptures have been approached in modern theology. I argued in the first chapter that the modern “battle for the Bible”—which continues to be fought throughout Christendom—has been waged almost exclusively over the historical truthfulness of the biblical account. While the reliability of the Scriptures is a *sine qua non* for the continuity of historic Christianity, I maintained that much more needs to be said about the Bible than that it is historically true. It is here that the doctrine of inspiration falls short. Although it has served in rejecting the rational criticism of Protestant liberalism, it is unable to provide a sufficient foundation for addressing contemporary questions about the canon, authority, and interpretation of the Scriptures. Along with a growing number of theologians from a variety of backgrounds and traditions, I ended chapter one by arguing that if there is to be a “triumph of orthodoxy” with respect to the theology of Scripture, a more comprehensive examination of the nature and function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation is required.

In chapter 2 I identified Karl Barth’s move beyond the modern debate as an important step in the right direction. His relocation of the theology of Scripture under the theology of the Word of God provides a more substantial framework for understanding the nature and function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation. His influence is

evident throughout the contemporary discussion as the Scriptures are being considered in terms of their functional and trinitarian dimensions. Despite Barth's positive contributions to the theology of Scripture, however, problems remain with his understanding of the Word of God. His refusal to allow the finite to contain the infinite and his dogmatic neglect of the death and resurrection of Jesus result in a doctrine of Christ (and therefore also a doctrine of the Word of God) that departs from the biblical narrative. Because of these problems I ended chapter 2 by arguing that Barth's move beyond the modern debate requires reconsideration as well.

At this point my critical evaluation of the current state of the theology of Scripture ends and my work of constructive systematic theology begins. Rather than trying to rehabilitate one side of the modern debate (as theologians on both sides frequently try to do), and rather than trying to make up for Barth's inadequacies by somehow "adding" the cross to his doctrine of the Word of God, I have come to the conclusion that the Christian theology of Scripture needs to start over from scratch. It needs to set aside the assumptions, concepts, and categories that have governed the modern debate and reconsider the nature and function of the Scriptures from the ground up. This requires a return to the biblical narrative,¹ and fundamental to the nature and function of the Scriptures in the biblical narrative is the broader theological concept of the "Word of God." Chapter 3, therefore, is an examination of the nature and function of the Word of God in the divine economy.

¹ See Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

The God Who Speaks

From the beginning of the biblical narrative to the end, the one true God gives himself to be known as a “God of Word.”² Hermann Sasse observes, “Der Gott der Bibel ist der redende Gott, von dem ‘Und Gott sprach: es werde Licht’ auf dem ersten Blatt der Bibel bis zu dem ‘Es spricht, der solches bezeugt: Ja, ich komme bald’ auf ihrem letzten Blatt.”³ Speaking is not incidental to God, as if it were just one more thing that he does. Rather, speech is central to who God is and how he relates to his creation. Joachim Ringleben explains,

Will man von einem Wort Gottes, von Gottes Reden zu uns in vollem Ernst sprechen, dann kann es für Gott nicht äußerlich oder zufällig sein, dann muss das Wort Gottes alles Handeln Gottes bestimmen, es also wesentlich werthafte Handeln sein, und dann muss sogar Gottes eigenes *Sein* mit dem Wort zu tun haben.⁴

In the biblical narrative God communicates with his creation and accomplishes his will through his Word. Through his creative Word he brings all things into existence (cf. Heb. 11:3);⁵ through his spoken and written Word he establishes and maintains relationships with his human creatures;⁶ through his incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Word he accomplishes the salvation of his fallen creation. In contrast to all other false gods, the one true God is known for his ability to speak (see Ps. 115:4-5; Jer. 10:5; Hab. 2:18-19; 1 Cor. 12:2). Sasse notes,

² Work, *Living and Active*, 33. Cf. Barth, *CD* 1/1:132.

³ Sasse, *Sacra Scriptura*, 11.

⁴ Joachim Ringleben, “Die Bibel als Wort Gottes,” in *Die Autorität der Heiligen Schrift für Lehre und Verkündigung der Kirche*, ed. Karl-Hermann Kandler (Neuendettelsau: Freimund-Verlag, 2000), 21.

⁵ Ringleben writes, “Am Anfang war also nicht ein Urknall, sondern das schöpferische Wort, nicht ein stummes Prinzip, eine Idee, ein Seiendes überhaupt, bloßer Stoff, sondern lebendige Rede, sinnstiftende Kommunikation, die schaffende und freilassende Zuwendung Gottes in seinem Schöpferwort. Dies Wort ist so hoch zu schätzen, weil es göttliche Einheit war von Sinn und von Kraft und von Tat” (21).

⁶ See Slenczka, *Kirchliche Entscheidung in theologischer Verantwortung: Grundlagen Kriterien Grenzen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 41.

Die Götzen sind stumm, aber der Herr redet. ...Niemand kann die biblische Lehre vom Reden Gottes, von seinem gesprochenen und geschriebenen Wort verstehen, der sich nicht darüber klar ist, daß das Reden ein Merkmal des einen wahren Gottes ist im Unterschied von den "andern Göttern," deren Verehrung im Ersten Gebot verboten ist.⁷

Because God has spoken "at many times and in many ways" (Heb. 1:1), it seems most appropriate to begin a consideration of the Word of God by taking a closer look at the "many ways" in which God speaks in the biblical narrative.

"Deputized Discourse"

Although God occasionally speaks directly to his human creatures, his most common way of speaking in the biblical narrative is to speak *through* his prophets. In chapter 2 we considered briefly Nicholas Wolterstorff's understanding of "deputized discourse," and at this point his investigation into the claim that God speaks requires closer attention.

Fundamental to the claim that God speaks is a phenomenon that Wolterstorff calls "deputized discourse." "Deputized discourse" occurs when one person speaks *in the name of* another person. In order for this kind of discourse to occur two specific elements must be in effect. The first element involves the content of the message that is conveyed. Wolterstorff notes that the one who sends a messenger to speak on his behalf is responsible for providing and overseeing the message that is given. Wolterstorff calls this element "superintendence," and a few examples will help explain what this means. A low degree of superintendence is in effect when a student asks a classmate to make up an excuse to the teacher for his absence. The classmate has been sent to deliver a message, but he has been given very little direction for what he should say. He is free to tell the

⁷ Sasse, *Sacra Scriptura*, 11.

teacher any excuse that comes to mind. In contrast to this low degree of superintendence, a high degree is in effect when an executive dictates a letter to her secretary. The secretary does the writing, but each and every word is given to the secretary directly by the executive. The degree of superintendence involved in "deputized discourse" depends upon how precisely the sender wants the message to be conveyed.

The second necessary element in "deputized discourse" involves the authority that the sender gives to the deputy. Unlike standard "double agency discourse" which occurs when someone simply relays a message for another person, "deputized discourse" occurs when one person is authorized to speak *on behalf of* another.⁸ Wolterstorff calls this "authorization." He explains, "Being asked to communicate a message for someone is not the same as being deputized to speak in the name of someone... The deputy has, as it were, 'power of attorney.'" One who has been authorized speaks with the sender's authority, even if the one who gives the authorization does not give any specific words to be said. For "deputized discourse" to occur there must be at least some degree of superintendence *and* authorization to speak on behalf of the sender. When both of these elements are in effect "deputized discourse" occurs.

In order to illustrate how "deputized discourse" works in practice Wolterstorff describes the relationship between an ambassador and a head of state. He uses George Kennen and Harry Truman as his examples, and he describes a situation in which Truman sends Kennen to issue a warning to Joseph Stalin about Berlin. As one who has been deputized to speak *in the name of* Truman, Kennen is the one who physically goes to meet with Stalin. Kennen is the one who utters the sounds (locutionary act) that have the

⁸ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 38-42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

effect of warning (illocutionary act) Stalin. But because Kennen has been sent with Truman's message (superintendence) and authority (authorization), the words that Kennen speaks as Truman's deputy *count as* the words of Truman himself. Wolterstorff explains, "If the ambassador was deputized to say what he did in the name of his head of state, then the head of state speaks (discourses) by way of the utterings of the ambassador; locutionary acts of the ambassador count as illocutionary acts of the head of state."¹⁰ It will be very important, of course, for Stalin to be sure that Kennen has actually been deputized to speak *in the name of* Truman—that Kennen has Truman's superintendence and authorization. But if Kennen has been so deputized, Stalin is confronted with Truman's warning through Kennen's speech—whether he is willing to acknowledge it or not.

Wolterstorff notes that the instance of an ambassador speaking *in the name of* a head of state is analogous to the way that God usually speaks in the biblical narrative. Rather than speaking directly to his people without mediation, God normally speaks to his human creatures through his chosen "deputies." In the Old Testament these deputies are known as prophets. Wolterstorff identifies Deuteronomy 18 as the *locus classicus* of the biblical prophet.¹¹ Moses writes:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, "Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die." And the Lord said to me, "They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word

¹⁰ Ibid., 45.

¹¹ Ibid., 47.

in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die." And if you say in your heart, "How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?"—when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken (Deut. 18:15-22).

Wolterstorff points out that God's promise in Deuteronomy 18 to raise up a prophet like Moses contains the two essential components necessary for deputized discourse: authorization and superintendence. The prophet receives the commission to speak for God ("He shall speak in my name"—authorization), and God gives the prophet his own Word to speak ("I will put my words in his mouth"—superintendence). To depart from Wolterstorff's terminology, speaking *in the name of* God as a deputy depends on the prophet's reception of two things: the commission to speak and the Word of God.

No prophet takes up the responsibility of speaking for God on his own. The prophet must be sent by God to speak in his name—that is what it means to be "raised up." Rolf Rendtorff describes the work of the prophet as one who "speaks on the commission of a superior."¹² Barth recognizes this need to be commissioned and points out that human proclamation of the Word of God depends on "God's own direction, which fundamentally transcends all human causation."¹³ He gets this from Luther: "Let none think that God's Word cometh to earth of man's device. If it is to be God's Word, it must be sent."¹⁴ Throughout the biblical narrative God commissions prophets to speak his Word *in his name*. The call of Isaiah is an example: "And I heard the voice of the Lord

¹² Rolf Rendtorff, "Nabi in the Old Testament" in *TDNT* 6:803.

¹³ Barth, *CD* 1/1:90.

¹⁴ Quoted in Barth, *CD* 1/1:90. Cf. Luther, *LW* 22:477: "These two facts are entirely logical: that those who preach the Word of God must necessarily be sent by God; and conversely, that those who are sent by God cannot proclaim anything but the Word of God. It is impossible to derive the Word of God from reason; it must be given from above."

saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me.' And he said, 'Go, and say to this people...'" (Is. 6:8-9, emphasis added).

Equally important as the commission that God gives to his deputized prophet is the content of the message that the prophet is sent to speak. In the biblical narrative this message is known as the "Word of God." Rendtorff explains, "The decisive feature in OT prophecy is the *dabhar*, the word. The prophet has to pass on the *dahbar Yahweh* which he receives."¹⁵ Throughout the prophetic writings the prophets announce that it is the Word of God that they have been sent to speak (cf. Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zeph. 1:1; Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1). Jeremiah describes how this Word was given to him, "Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, 'Behold, I have put my words in your mouth'" (Jer. 1:9). Ezekiel records a vivid image of his reception of the Word:

And [God] said to me, "Son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. And he said to me, "Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it." Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. And he said to me, "Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them" (Ezekiel 3:1-4).

When one of God's prophets speaks the message that he has been given by God, he speaks the Word of God as a divinely appointed deputy. He speaks *in the name of God*.

Wingren explains, "The messenger and he whose messenger he is are bound together.

When the messenger speaks, he who sent him speaks."¹⁶

¹⁵ Rendtorff, *TDNT* 6:810.

¹⁶ Wingren, *Living Word*, 96.

Normative Theory of Discourse

Wolterstorff's definition of "deputized discourse" is not the only significant contribution he makes to the theology of the Word of God. After considering the speech of God's deputized prophets he takes a step back and investigates what actually happens when one person speaks to another. In order to describe the phenomena involved he offers a "normative theory of discourse."¹⁷

Unlike revelation, which is either received or not received (in an impersonal way), Wolterstorff argues that "speaking" or "discourse" involves the establishment of a relationship between (at least) two persons. Austinian speech-act theory comes back into play at this point. By means of uttering sounds (locutionary act) a speaker issues a command or makes a promise (illocutionary act) to an addressee. When that command or promise has been made, Wolterstorff suggests that a "normative stance" has been established between the speaker and the addressee. He gives the example of a person who promises to write a letter of recommendation for another person. The one who makes that promise (illocutionary act) makes a moral obligation (takes a "normative stance") toward the one who requested the letter. If the promiser fails to fulfill the promise, he has failed in his moral obligation and the relationship breaks down. If this becomes a pattern within society, the existence of meaningful communication is threatened. "When a single boy too often cries 'wolf' in the absence of wolves," Wolterstorff explains, "we disregard *his* speech. When it becomes a habit on the part of many to cry 'wolf' in the absence of wolves, our system of speaking itself is undermined."¹⁸ In order for interpersonal communication to function properly, both parties must operate on the basis of trust. The

¹⁷ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 76.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

promiser must be trustworthy and the promisee must trust the promiser. For this reason Wolterstorff says that truthful speech and the ability to trust are “indispensable to the endurance of the system.”¹⁹

A dynamic similar to that of promiser and promisee occurs when one person issues a command to another. Like the moral obligation that the promiser accepts in making a promise, the one who is commanded receives a moral obligation to obey the commander. Not just anyone, however, is in the position to make a morally binding command. In order for a command to be in effect (and therefore establish a moral obligation on the hearer), the one making the command must have the proper authority. Wolterstorff calls the one who possesses this authority a “qualified party.”²⁰ He offers several obvious examples: Only a judge can *pronounce* someone guilty; only Congress can *declare war*; only the umpire can *call* a runner out. Those who do not hold the appropriate position of authority in a given context are unable to issue morally binding commands. A prosecuting attorney does not have authority to pronounce guilt; a mayor does not have authority to declare war; and a fan does not have the authority to call a runner out. One of these individuals may attempt to issue a command—a fan might try to call a runner out, for example—but the addressee (the runner in this case) is not morally obligated to obey. If, on the other hand, the one who makes the command is a “qualified party” (i.e., the umpire), the addressee (the runner) is morally obligated to obey that command—whether or not he agrees with it.

Wolterstorff’s normative theory of discourse is helpful for the theology of the Word of God because throughout the biblical narrative God communicates with his people

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 91.

through such actions as making promises and issuing commands. He morally obligates himself with his promises and he morally obligates his creatures with his commands. He reminds Moses that he is the ultimate “qualified party”: “Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak” (Ex. 4:11-12). As the Creator, God has the authority to make commands that morally obligate his human creatures. As the Almighty, he is able to fulfill the promises that he makes. If we are to have a relationship with him—if we are able to rely upon his communication to us—he must be entirely trustworthy.²¹

Living and Active Words

The Word that God speaks through his deputized prophets is a unique kind of “deputized discourse.” The “normative stance” that God takes in his relationship with his human creatures goes beyond ordinary human interpersonal communication. God’s promises and commands do more than simply impose moral obligations.²² Beginning at creation God uses his Word as his instrument for accomplishing his will. The author of Hebrews describes the Word of God as “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). Philip Edgcumbe Hughes comments on this verse, “It is no dead letter, no utterance lost as soon as spoken in an unresponding void. As the word of the living God it cannot fail itself to be living. And as God is the God who acts with power,

²¹ This is one of the reasons why the truth of the Word of God is so important. If God cannot be trusted, our “system of speaking” with God will be undermined and our relationship with him will break down. This is why it is important for the prophets to affirm the truth of God’s Word. Samuel prays, “And now, O Lord God, you are God, and your words are true” (2 Sam. 7:28). The psalmist proclaims, “The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever” (Ps. 119:160; cf. 2 Sam. 22:31; Neh. 9:13; Ps. 18:30, 19:9, 119:142; Prov. 30:5; Is. 45:19; Dan. 10:1).

²² At this point we are moving beyond Austinian speech-act theory. God is able to do more with his words than human beings.

his word cannot fail to be active and powerful.”²³ This is what Isaiah is speaking about in his description of the Word of God:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Is. 55:10–11; cf. 1 Thess. 1:5).

Barth notes this instrumentality of the Word that God speaks: “To say ‘the Word of God’ is to say the work of God.”²⁴

As a “two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12), the Word of God performs two kinds of work. It cuts in two directions: it has “an edge of life and an edge of death.”²⁵ God told Jeremiah at the beginning of his ministry, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer. 1:9–10). Psalm 29 paints a vivid picture of the destructive power of God’s Word in creation:

The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare (Psalm 29:3–9).

When spoken to human beings, the Word’s “edge of death” is always a response to human sin and disobedience. God speaks a Word of judgment to those who have failed in

²³ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 164.

²⁴ Barth, *CD 1/2:527*. Cf. David Lotz, “The Proclamation of the Word in Luther’s Thought,” *Word and World* 3 (1983): 348–354. Lotz says that for Luther, “*Verbum Dei est opus Dei*: The Word of God is the deed of God” (353).

²⁵ Hughes, *Hebrews*, 165.

their moral obligation to obey his commands. He sends Jeremiah, for example, to speak against the false prophets for misleading his people: "Behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them" (Jer. 5:14). Again, "Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:29). Through Hosea God speaks about those who continue to break his commands: "Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light" (Hosea 6:5). Luther summarizes this destructive work of God through his Word: "Now this is the thunderbolt of God, by means of which he destroys both the open sinner and the false saint."²⁶

The Word of God also has the power to create life. Ezekiel's account of his journey to the valley of dry bones in chapter 37 is an example of the Word's "edge of life." After showing Ezekiel a valley full of dead and dry bones God asked his prophet if the bones could ever live again. The obvious answer was no—they were completely dead. But God wanted them to live again, and so he deputized Ezekiel to speak his life-giving Word:

Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord (*dahbar Yahweh*). Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath (*ruah*) to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord (Ez. 37:4–6).

In obedience to God's command, Ezekiel proclaimed the Word that God had given him and the dry bones took on flesh and blood. He prophesied again and the breath (*ruah*) of God entered into them and they were brought from death to life. Here in Ezekiel we get a glimpse of the trinitarian work of the Word of God. God gives life to those who are dead

²⁶ SA III.2. Luther's description of God's Word of judgment as a "thunderbolt" is found throughout the Old Testament as the prophets describe God's judgment through his Word. See Job 37:1-13; Ps. 18:12-15; Is. 30:30-33; Jer. 25:30-31.

through his Word *and* his Spirit. Webster summarizes the living and active work of this trinitarian Word, "The 'Word' from which the church has its being is thus the lordly creativity of the one who, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, *calls* into being the things that are not."²⁷ Through his Spirit and his Word God tears down and builds up, condemns and forgives, kills and makes alive. He accomplishes this *definitively, ultimately, decisively*, and *for all time* in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Spirit-anointed personal Word of God made flesh.

The Personal Word

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Heb. 1:1–2). Up to this point we have focused primarily on the Word that God spoke through his prophets before the birth of Christ. But the heart of the Christian theology of the Word of God is Jesus Christ, the "Word in the Word."²⁸ John begins his gospel by describing this Word: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1–3, 14). This personal Word made flesh is the "image of the invisible God" for whom and through whom "all things were created" and in whom the "fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:15–19). Barth writes,

It is beyond question that whenever the *Nic. Const.* spoke of the Son of God it always meant the Word of God too. The Word is the one Lord. The Word is

²⁷ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 44.

²⁸ Walter Roehrs, "The Word in the Word," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 25 (February, 1954): 81–108.

spoken by the Father before all time. The Word is light of light, very God of very God. The Word is spoken by God, not made...As the Word which God thinks or speaks eternally by Himself and whose content can thus be no other than God Himself.²⁹

As Barth notes, the theology of the Word of God is fundamentally a christological doctrine. But it is also Christology deeply connected to and framed within the broader trinitarian economy of salvation. For this reason classic Logos-Christology (with its focus on the two natures and their hypostatic union) is not the most helpful way of understanding Jesus' identity as the Word of God. Although it was necessary for the church of the fourth and fifth centuries to articulate the doctrine of Christ especially in terms of his divine essence (against Arius) and his personal constitution (against Nestorius), Jesus is most frequently described in the biblical narrative in terms of his mission as the one sent from the Father in the Spirit. Oscar Cullman points out, "The New Testament hardly ever speaks of the person of Christ without at the same time speaking of his work...When it is asked in the New Testament 'Who is Christ?', the question never means exclusively, or even primarily, 'What is his nature?', but first of all, 'What is his function?'"³⁰

When considering the function of the personal Word of God Jesus' prophetic office stands out. In continuity with the prophets who preceded him, Jesus was sent by the Father to speak the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. He was "deputized" to speak *in the name of* the Father and with his authority. He was not simply another prophet in a long line of God's chosen spokesmen, however. Cullman points out, "Jesus

²⁹ Barth, *CD* 1/1:436.

³⁰ Oscar Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. by Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 3-4.

appears not only as *a* prophet but as *the* prophet.”³¹ Jesus is *the* divinely appointed Deputy, *the* Word of God who accomplishes the will of God in what he says and how he acts and who he is. Unlike the prophets who were led by the Spirit (1 Peter 1:11; 2 Peter 3:16), the Spirit *remained* on Jesus (John 1:32). Unlike the prophets who received the Spirit, Jesus baptized with the Spirit (John 1:33) and *gave* the Spirit to his disciples (John 20:22). Unlike the prophets who pointed towards the suffering and glorification of Christ (Luke 24:47; 1 Peter 1:10–11), Jesus’ proclamation pointed toward *himself*. It was *his* words that were “Spirit and life” (John 6:63); *he* is the one with “words of eternal life” (John 6:68); *he* is the “resurrection and the life” so that those who believe in *him* have eternal life (John 11:25).

Sent by the Father

In the Gospel of John Jesus repeatedly identifies himself as the one who is sent by the Father to do the Father’s will. “I have come down from heaven,” he told a crowd in Capernaum, “not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). In a dispute with the Jews he insisted, “I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me” (John 8:42). Central to the work that the Father sent Jesus to do was the prophetic task of speaking the Word of God *in the name of* the Father. John the Baptist announced, “He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For *he whom God has sent utters the words of God*, for he gives the Spirit without measure” (John 3:31–34, emphasis added). Jesus repeatedly affirmed his commission from the Father by emphasizing, “My teaching is not

³¹ Cullman, *Christology*, 13.

mine, but his who sent me” (John 7:16; cf. John 8:26–29, 14:24, 15:15, 17:6–8).

Throughout the fourth gospel Jesus identifies himself as the Word of God so that “whatever he says and does is the perfect expression of the one who sent him.”³²

Although the prophetic work of Christ is stated more explicitly in John’s gospel than in the Synoptics, the other evangelists also portray Jesus as one who is sent by the Father to do the Father’s will and speak in the Father’s name. After recording his account of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan and temptation in the desert, Luke describes the beginning of Jesus’ prophetic ministry:

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because *he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:16–21; emphasis added).

Throughout Luke Jesus identifies himself and his mission in terms of prophetic proclamation (Luke 4:43; 5:32; 7:22; 11:28; 13:33), and each of the synoptic gospels portray Jesus’ words as uniquely divine (e.g., Matthew 7:28–29, 8:23–27; Mark 1:22–27; Luke 4:32–36). Luther recognizes this prophetic work of Christ: “Now whenever I hear the Man Christ, I conclude that the Word which I hear is also that of the Father, proceeds from the heart of the Father, and is identical with that of the Father...For Christ’s will and Christ’s Word and work are the Father’s will, yes, also the Father’s Word and

³² Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 237.

work.”³³ Using Wolterstorff’s terminology, Jesus is *the* Deputy who speaks with absolute superintendence and complete authorization as the Word of God himself.

At two specific events in the biblical narrative the Father explicitly affirms Jesus’ identity as the Son and Deputy of God. The first takes place at his baptism by John in the Jordan (Matt. 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11) and the second at his transfiguration (Matt 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36). In both cases the Father speaks directly from heaven to announce his pleasure with Jesus as his Son, and in the latter he specifically identifies Jesus according to his prophetic work: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; *listen to him*” (Matt. 17:5, emphasis added; cf. Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35). It is as one who is sent by the Father to do his will and speak his words that Jesus demonstrates his unity with the Father. When Philip asked Jesus to show him the Father, Jesus responded:

Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? *The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.* Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves (John 14:9–11, emphasis added; cf. also John 7:28–29, 8:16–18, 10:30–38; 17:21–22).

Jesus’ oneness and mutual indwelling (perichoresis) with the Father is intimately connected to the work that he does and the Word that he speaks in the power of the Spirit. Central to this work of the Father done by the Son is the giving of life. “For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life,” Jesus explains, “so also the Son gives life to whom he will” (John 5:21). He goes on:

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will

³³ Luther, *LW* 23:64.

live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself (John 5:24–26).

This is what it means for Jesus to have “words of eternal life” (John 6:68). He tells his disciples, “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:40).

Sent in the Spirit

The personal Word who was sent by the Father to give life to those who believe was sent in the power of God’s Spirit. A closer look at the relationship between the Spirit and the Word reminds us that the old rule *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* is more than just an old rule.

The joint work between the Spirit and the Word can be seen throughout the biblical narrative, and this begins already at creation. In the beginning the Spirit (*ruah*) of God who was hovering over the waters (Gen. 1:2) accompanied the Word in his work of creation. The psalmist notes, “By the word (*dabhar*) of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath (*ruah*) of his mouth all their host” (Ps. 33:6). Irenaeus describes the Word of God and the Holy Spirit as the two hands by which God brings into existence all things. He writes, “For with him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things, to whom he also speaks, saying, ‘Let Us make man after Our image and likeness.’”³⁴ After forming the first man from the dust of the earth, Moses writes that God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7). Gustav Wingren describes the work of the Spirit together with the Word: “God’s creation by the Word and

³⁴ *Against Heresies* 4.20.1 in *ANF* 1:487–488.

God's 'breathing in' of the breath of life (Gen.2:7) are, basically, one and the same. Man's life is from God's Word or from God's Spirit: man lives from that which cometh out of the mouth of God (Deut. 8:3)."³⁵

The relationship between the Spirit and the Word continues throughout the Old Testament narrative as the prophets who were deputized to speak the Word of God were guided by and filled with the Spirit of God.³⁶ This same Spirit who empowered the prophetic ministry of Moses (Num. 11:17) was given by God to subsequent prophets so that they could speak his Word in his name (see Num. 11:25–30; 2 Sam. 23:2; 2 Chron. 15:1; Ez. 11:5; Neh. 9:30; Zech. 7:12). They spoke "not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6; cf. Luke 1:67). Felix Porsch notes the connection between the Spirit and the Word of the prophets, "Wie Gott seinen Geist auf den Propheten legt, so legt er auch sein Wort in dessen Mund."³⁷ The Formula of Concord recognizes this unity between the Spirit and the proclaimed Word: "The Word of God, when preached and heard, is a function and work of the Holy Spirit, through which he is certainly present in our hearts and exercises his power there."³⁸

With the conception and birth of Jesus this joint mission of the Word and the Spirit becomes even more explicit. Luke records the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (Luke 1:35; cf.

³⁵ Gustav Wingren, *The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church*, trans. by Victor C. Pogue (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 74.

³⁶ Felix Porsch writes, "Die enge Bezoogenheit von Wort und ruah Jahwehs zeigt sich nicht nur in den 'Schöpfersberichten,' sie wird auch in dem 'pneumatischen Vorgang' des Wortemphanges durch den Propheten erkennbar." *Pneuma und Wort: Ein exegetischer Beitrag zur Pneumatologie des Johannesevangeliums* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1974), 196.

³⁷ Porsch, *Pneuma und Wort*, 197.

³⁸ *FC SD II*, 56.

Matt.1:18). The role of the Spirit in the holiness of Christ does not diminish the uniqueness of the incarnation, but rather shows that even in his birth, the Word of God remains a trinitarian Word. Leopoldo Sánchez explains, "Indeed, the Word alone *assumes* and *becomes* flesh, but he does so *in the Spirit*, namely, in a way that the preexistent Son gladly receives from the Father in the economy of salvation the Spirit who creates and makes holy what he at once assumes."³⁹

The connection between the personal Word of God and the Holy Spirit does not end at Christmas. At his baptism in the Jordan Jesus received the same Spirit by which he was conceived (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; cf. Acts 10:38). This anointing confirmed that Jesus was the Son of God and it identified him as the one who would baptize with the Spirit (John 1:33–34). After being led into temptation by the Spirit, Jesus began his ministry in "in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14) and announced his fulfillment of Isaiah by proclaiming good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, and the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18–19). The baptism of Jesus is significant because, while the Spirit was with Jesus from the moment of conception, it was not until after he received the anointing of the Spirit in the Jordan that he began his prophetic ministry of preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins. We may say that Jesus' identity as Christ "does not become a concrete reality *for us* until the Father anoints *him* at the Jordan with his [i.e., the Father's] Spirit for mission."⁴⁰

In John 6 we get a glimpse into the connection between Jesus' bearing of the Spirit *for us* and his work as the prophetic Word of God. After announcing that he has come to

³⁹ Leopoldo A. Sánchez M. "Receiver, Bearer, and Giver of God's Spirit: Jesus' Life and Mission in the Spirit as a Ground for Understanding Christology, Trinity, and Proclamation" (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, 2003), 52.

⁴⁰ Sánchez, "Receiver," 54.

do the will of the Father as the only one who has ever seen the Father, many of his disciples had second thoughts, saying, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" (John 6:60). Knowing their hearts, Jesus replied, "Do you take offense at this?... It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are *spirit and life*" (John 6:61–63; emphasis added). John records two specific episodes that shed light on what it means that Jesus' words were "spirit and life." Two chapters earlier, after Jesus had returned to Galilee from Samaria, an official from Capernaum approached him with a request to heal his son who was "at the point of death" (John 4:47). Jesus listened to his plea and responded with a simple command: "Go, your son will live" (John 4:49). Trusting Jesus' words the official left, and he learned on the way home that his son was healed at the very hour that Jesus had spoken.⁴¹ The second episode occurs in chapter 11 when John records the death of Lazarus. Several days after Lazarus had died and been buried Jesus arrived and mourned with the survivors. Immediately he went to the grave and spoke words that brought the dead man back to life: "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43). Much like he had done with the official's son, Jesus delivered Lazarus from death by nothing other than his words. Because the words of Jesus are "spirit and life" they are able to unite those who believe in him to his resurrection and life.⁴²

As the anointed one (the "Christ") who bears the Spirit without measure (John 3:34), Jesus performed miraculous signs and wonders in the Spirit's power (Matt. 12:28). He taught with authority (Acts 1:1-2) and cast out demons by speaking (Matt. 8:16). But

⁴¹ It is noteworthy that John introduces this episode by identifying Jesus as a prophet (John 4:44).

⁴² In the account of Lazarus' resurrection, Martha explicitly makes this connection between Jesus and the final resurrection of the dead. John records, "Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die'" (John 11:23–26).

the personal Word of God did not come to forgive the sins of, heal the diseases of, and raise to life only a few isolated individuals in the first century. He came forgive and save *all people*. John the Baptist recognized, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29; emphasis added). As Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so was Jesus lifted up for the salvation of all people (John 3:14–16). The "lifting up" of Jesus took place on the cross, and this pleased the Father. Jesus explains, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father" (John 10:17–18). The mission of the personal Word of God that began with his anointing with the Spirit and continued with his preaching, teaching, forgiving and healing, was not complete (*tetelestai*) until he took the place of sinful humanity on the cross and gave up his *pneuma* (John 19:30).⁴³ It was in his crucifixion that the personal Word of God glorified the Father (John 17:1–5) and after three days "was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4; cf. 1 Peter 3:18).

Rejection and Crucifixion

At the heart of the biblical narrative is the suffering and death of the Spirit-filled personal Word of God. This death was foretold by the prophets (Luke 24:25–27, 44–47) and proclaimed by the apostles (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2) and therefore any attempt to make sense of the Word of God in the divine economy must account for Jesus' rejection and

⁴³ This giving of the Spirit by the Son on the cross points toward the Son's giving of the Spirit after the resurrection to the disciples for their ministry. Just as he had done by the power of the Spirit, he would send them to retain and forgive sins in his name (see John 20:20–23).

crucifixion. It must answer this question: what did Jesus say and do to get himself killed?⁴⁴

Throughout the biblical narrative we see evidence that validates the usefulness of Wolterstorff's normative theory of discourse (especially its recognition of the moral obligations involved in "speaking" or "discourse"). Already in the Garden of Eden God established a normative relationship with his human creatures by issuing commands: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die'" (Gen. 2:16-17). When Adam and Eve fell into temptation and disobeyed this command ("Did God actually say...?"), the death that God had warned (promised) came true as he pronounced judgment on them for their sin (Gen. 3:19). This pattern—God speaking clear commands, the people disobeying, God speaking words of judgment—is a recurring theme throughout the Old Testament narrative. Again and again the people wandered from God's commands and "did what was right in their own eyes" (see Judges 17:6, 21:25), and again and again God sent prophets to remind the people of God's commands and call them to repentance. Despite repeated warnings from God's prophets, the people of God continually failed in their moral obligation to obey him. Isaiah summarizes their story:

They are a rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, "Do not see," and to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel." Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel, "Because you despise this word and trust in oppression and

⁴⁴ The biblical narrative makes clear that Jesus gave up his life on his own accord (e.g., John 10:13, 17-18 and Phil. 2:8), but this is to view the death of Jesus "from above," from the divine perspective. This examination of the Word of God in the divine economy starts with the human perspective. It approaches the death of Jesus "from below."

perverseness and rely on them, therefore this iniquity shall be to you like a breach in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse, whose breaking comes suddenly, in an instant; and its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel that is smashed so ruthlessly that among its fragments not a shard is found with which to take fire from the hearth, or to dip up water out of the cistern (Isaiah 30:9-14).

When Jesus began his ministry of proclamation he was acting in continuity with the long line of prophets who had come before him. Like the prophets of old he called the people of his day to repent of their sins and obey the commands that God had given to them through Moses. In his first sermon Jesus affirmed the Law that had been proclaimed by the prophets:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:16-20).

When the people failed to obey these commands, Jesus spoke prophetic words of judgment and condemnation. Matthew writes:

Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you (Matt. 11:20-24).

Of all his words of judgment, Jesus reserved his harshest attacks for his own religious leaders. Although they knew (and even taught) the law that God had spoken through

Moses, they failed to obey. Jesus explains, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so practice and observe whatever they tell you—but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice” (Matt. 23:2–3). His condemnation of their hypocrisy was clear and to the point: “Woe to you...” (Matt 23:19–36).

Jesus’ proclamation of God’s judgment offended those who claimed to have kept the law of God perfectly. But that is not the only (or even the primary) reason they sought to kill him. The religious leaders wanted Jesus to die because, in addition to speaking words of condemnation, he spoke words of forgiveness. Luke records:

On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. And when he saw their faith, he said, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, “Why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the man who was paralyzed—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home.” And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God (Luke 5:17–25).

Jesus’ words of forgiveness to the paralytic were unacceptable to the religious leaders because, by claiming the ability to forgive sins, Jesus was claiming to be God himself. They knew that God alone is able remove the sin and guilt of those who disobey his commands. They knew, in Wolterstorff’s terms, that God is the only “qualified party” to forgive those who have failed in their “moral obligation” to obey his law.

This was not the only time Jesus claimed identity with God. In John 5 he healed a man on the Sabbath who had been lame for thirty-eight years by telling him to pick up his

mat and go home. When the religious leaders saw the healed man and learned that Jesus was the one who had healed him, they attacked Jesus for working on the Sabbath. Jesus responded to their criticism by saying that he was doing the work of his Father. John records their reaction: “For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal to God” (John 5:17–18; cf. John 10:33).

Jesus was not the first prophet to be rejected and killed for speaking the Word of God (see Luke 11:47–51).⁴⁵ But he was the first prophet who claimed to be the Son of God, one with the Father from the beginning (John 8:58) with the authority to forgive sins and grant eternal life. It was this claim that led the Jews to pick up stones (John 8:59) and finally to demand his crucifixion. As the Jews insisted to Pilate: “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God” (John 19:7; cf. Matt. 26:63–66).

Resurrection and Vindication

Earlier in this chapter we considered the *locus classicus* of the biblical prophet from Deuteronomy 18. The end of that passage bears repeating: “And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?’—when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously” (Deut. 18:21–22).

⁴⁵ Neither was Jesus the last deputized speaker of the Word of God to be killed. In Acts 7:51–53 Stephen, full of the Spirit, was stoned for proclaiming the Law of God. Stephen reminds us that those who proclaim the Word of God can expect rejection, marginalization, and persecution. Peter writes, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Peter 4:12–14).

The opposite of this is also true: if what a prophet says comes to pass, then it follows that he is a true prophet (cf. Jer. 28:19).

It is on this that Jesus' identity as the personal Word of God depends. After his anointing with the Spirit in the Jordan, Jesus began his ministry of speaking and acting *in the name of* the Father. He taught and spoke as one who had authority and he performed miraculous deeds to support his claims. But the ultimate test of his claims to be one with the Father and *the* Prophet and Deputy of God came with his death on the cross. If Jesus had remained in the tomb his divine claims would have been proved false, including his claims to be the Son of God who was one with the Father from eternity, to fulfill the prophetic writings, and to forgive the sins of those who repent and believe in him. Paul's words to the Corinthians summarize what was at stake on Easter morning: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17).

But in fact, Paul continues, Jesus rose (1 Cor. 15:20).

As all four of the canonical gospels report, Jesus rose from the dead three days after he suffered death on the cross. This fulfilled the promise he had made at the very beginning of his ministry: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19; cf. Matt 26:61 and Mark 14:58). After his resurrection the disciples remembered this promise and realized that he was talking about his body (John 2:21).⁴⁶ John records, "When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and *they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken* (John 2:22; emphasis added). It was only *after* the resurrection, *after* he had been vindicated by the

⁴⁶ This is one of the reasons that the bodily resurrection of Christ is essential for the truth of the Christian faith.

Fahter in the power of the Spirit that the disciples “believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.”

Here is the only foundation for the Christian theology of Scripture. In his resurrection Jesus was vindicated as *the* Prophet and Deputy of God. Because his promise to rise from the dead was fulfilled in truth, his entire ministry and message was proved true. This includes his claim to be one with God and able to forgive sins (John 10:30; Luke 5:24); his identification of himself as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6); his affirmation that the Word of God is true (John 17:17); his assertion that he fulfilled the prophetic writings (Luke 24:44); his confirmation of the truth of the prophetic Scriptures (John 10:35); his insistence that he speaks the truth (John 8:45; John 18:37); and his promise to send the “Spirit of truth” to guide his apostles (John 15:26; John 16:13; 1 John 5:6).⁴⁷ The foundation for the truth of all that Jesus was, said, and did is nothing other than his triumphant resurrection from the dead. “Had Christ not risen,” Wingren recognizes, “there would have been no risen Lord to send these preachers forth, no Spirit would have been given, and no life bestowed in the Word.”⁴⁸

At this point a word must be said about the doctrine of inspiration and its attempt to defend the historical truthfulness of the Scriptures. Proponents of the doctrine of inspiration are correct to insist upon the absolute necessity of God speaking truthfully. As Wolterstorff points out, interpersonal communication depends on the trustworthiness of those who make promises. If God cannot be trusted to speak truthfully, humankind’s

⁴⁷ The apostles claimed to speak the truth of God (John 19:35; Rom. 9:1; 2 Cor. 6:3–10; Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5; 1 Tim. 2:7). Wright notes: “It used to be said that the New Testament writers ‘didn’t think they were writing ‘Scripture.’” That is hard to sustain historically today” (*Scripture*, 38).

⁴⁸ Wingren, *The Living Word*, 123–124.

relationship with him falls apart and the Christian faith becomes nothing more than wishful thinking. Quenstedt's words are on the mark:

Through His infinite knowledge God the Holy Spirit cannot be ignorant of anything, can forget nothing; through his infinite truthfulness and infallibility it is impossible for Him to err, deal falsely or be mistaken, not even in the smallest degree; and finally, through His infinite goodness He is unable to deceive anyone, neither can He lead anyone into offence or error.⁴⁹

Werner Elert recognizes the need for God's Word to be true: "The Gospel stands or falls with God's truthfulness and reliability."⁵⁰

Problems arise, however, when the truth and reliability of the *written* Word of God are affirmed a foundation in the *personal* Word of God. Instead of following the logic of the biblical narrative and tying the truth of the Word of God to the resurrection (cf. 1 Corinthians 15), many proponents of the doctrine of inspiration ground their affirmation of the truth of the Scriptures in the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*.⁵¹ This is a tenuous and subjective foundation, however, and it is disconnected from the central Christian belief in Jesus as the personal Word who was sent with the Spirit to do the Father's will.⁵² As I argued in the first chapter, the doctrine of inspiration is correct in affirming the historical truthfulness of the Scriptures. Its problem is that it does not

⁴⁹ Quoted in R. Preus, *Inspiration*, 80.

⁵⁰ Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A Hansen (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1962).

⁵¹ R. Preus writes, "The Spirit testifies through Scripture that Scripture is divine" (*Inspiration*, 108). Again, "The divinity of Scripture is proved by its supernatural effect" (110).

⁵² The work of the Spirit, according to Jesus, is to "bring to remembrance all that I have taught you" (John 14:26) and to "glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:14). The doctrine of inspiration is often guilty of limiting the work of the Spirit to assuring the truth of the biblical account with no connection to Jesus and his work of salvation. R. Preus recognizes this danger: "The manner in which the old dogmatists have treated the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* is perhaps unfortunate. They have taken this doctrine almost exclusively in reference to the authority of Scripture, and they speak of it far less often in reference to Christ as the object of saving faith or in reference to the believer's personal assurance of faith" (*Inspiration*, 115). He concludes, "It is quite clear that the dogmatists' emphasis upon the testimony of the Spirit witnessing to the authority of Scripture cannot be found in Luther" (*Inspiration*, 118).

establish the historical truthfulness of the Scriptures on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.⁵³

“Co-missioned” Apostles

God spoke his Word *definitively, ultimately, decisively, and for all time* in Jesus Christ, the Spirit-filled personal Word of God. But God did not stop speaking when Jesus ascended into heaven. On the evening of his resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples and said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so am I sending you” (John 20:21). As the resurrected and vindicated Word of God, Jesus exercised his divine authority by “co-missioning” his disciples to speak *his* Word with *his* Spirit in *his* name.⁵⁴

Matthew records:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18–20).

Much like his own prophetic ministry, Jesus sent his disciples to call the people to repentance for failing in their moral obligation to obey God’s commands and to offer those who repent and believe in him the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Luke writes:

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ

⁵³ This is precisely the problem with developing a theology of Scripture apart from the theology of the Word of God. Without this grounding in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the theology of Scripture remains disconnected from the Gospel.

⁵⁴ As far as I am aware, the term “co-mission” is a neologism. I use it to emphasize the fact that Jesus sent his apostles to continue *his* mission. Jesus sent them to do the same work of calling to repentance and forgiving sins that the Father had sent him to do (John 20:31). In this sense they shared in and continued the mission of the personal Word of God.

should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that *repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations*, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:44–49, emphasis added).

Among those sent by Jesus is one who was “untimely born” (1 Cor. 15:8). He identifies himself:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations (Romans 1:1–5).

Paul was “sent by Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:1) and “set apart for the Gospel” (Romans 1:1) according to the “will of God” (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1) to “preach him among the Gentiles” (Gal. 1:16; cf. 1 Thess. 2:4). Together with the other apostles he spoke as one who had been sent by the personal Word of God with the “full authority” of the one who sent him.⁵⁵

Sent with the Word and the Spirit

The commission received by the apostles to continue the work of Christ consisted primarily of preaching and teaching the Word they had heard from Jesus. David Lotz writes, “God’s speaking and acting in Christ would remain *meaningless and ineffectual* without the oral witness to the Word made flesh, namely, the apostolic preaching or publishing of Christ to the world, the gospel or ‘good news’ of Christ as ‘God for us.’

⁵⁵ Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, “*apostellō*” in *TDNT* 1:421.

Hence, the personal Word cannot be considered apart from the *spoken Word*.⁵⁶ In order for them to accomplish this work of proclaiming the Word of God, Jesus gave his apostles his Spirit and his Word. John records, "He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld'" (John 20:22–23).

It is helpful at this point to recall that the words of Jesus are "spirit and life" (John 6:63) and that Jesus did not begin his prophetic ministry until he had been anointed by the Spirit in the Jordan (cf. Luke 4:18–19). As the Father had sent the Son with the Spirit (John 3:34), Jesus was now sending his apostles with the same Spirit that he had received from the Father.⁵⁷ With this Spirit they would continue the work of Jesus by speaking in his name and with his authority. Porsch explains, "Sie handeln niemals im eigenen Namen und eigener Autorität, sondern nur im Namen des Senden...sie werden von dem Eigenen Jesu nehmen und es verkünden!"⁵⁸ Wolterstorff summarizes John's description of the relationship between Jesus and his apostles:

In John, from chapter 13 through chapter 17, we get Jesus' final address to his disciples. It too, is a commissioning address; and the undertone, clear though mainly unspoken, is that the disciples are to be Jesus *representatives*. The words that the Father gave to Jesus, Jesus gave to his disciples. They have received them, and know in truth that Jesus came from the Father. They are now to give those words, and that knowledge, to others. They are able to do so because they have been with Jesus from the beginning, and because they will receive the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, who will guide them into all truth; the Advocate will remind them of all that Jesus said to them. "Very truly, I

⁵⁶ David Lotz, "The Proclamation of the Word in Luther's Thought," *Word and World* 3 (1983): 346. His emphasis.

⁵⁷ In this sense "sending with the Spirit" is synonymous with having the authority to speak the Word of God and retain and forgive sins *in his name* (John 20:20–23).

⁵⁸ Porsch, *Pneuma und Wort*, 366.

tell you," says Jesus, "whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me" (13:20).⁵⁹

This apostolic mission began with Peter's proclamation of the Word on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and Luke describes the work of the apostles as the "ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). Paul explains,

These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit (2 Corinthians 2:10–13).

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks about the work that God had given to him:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18–20).

The apostolic Word is the message of reconciliation through repentance and forgiveness in the name of Jesus (Luke 24:47).

The apostles' reception of the Spirit also meant guidance and direction for their teaching of the Word (John 14:25–26). Jesus told his apostles:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:12–15).

⁵⁹ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 293.

The Spirit that Jesus promised to send the apostles ensured the truth of their message. He would lead them into “all the truth.” Barth says of the Spirit: “He is simply the Teacher of the Word: of that Word which is never without its Teacher.”⁶⁰ As the “Teacher of the Word” the Spirit revealed to the apostles the fullness of who Jesus is and what he has done. Porsch explains that the Spirit “führt nicht in eine abstrakte Wahrheit, in eine Welt der Ideen; er vermittelt nicht neues Wissen, noch unbekannte ‘Wahrheiten.’ Sein ‘Führen in die Füllen der Wahrheit’ is eine ‘Reden,’ ein Offenbaren...dessen, was vor Jesus ‘hört,’ was er vom ‘Eigenen’ Jesu ‘emphängt,’ also eine Fortführung der Offenbarung Jesu.”⁶¹ The apostle Paul insisted to the Corinthians that the content of his preaching is nothing other than “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2; cf. 1 Cor. 1:18). Luther emphasizes this point: “At its briefest, the gospel is a discourse about Christ, that is the Son of God who became man for us, that he died and was raised, that he has been established as a Lord over all things.”⁶² Jesus is the content of the Gospel, the gift which God has given and continues to give to fallen humankind through his Word. The Scriptures are about him, which is what Luther means when he describes the Old Testament writings as “the swaddling clothes” and “manger” in which Christ lies.⁶³ To be a Christian is to lay hold of Christ through the power of the Spirit and to trust in him for forgiveness, life, and salvation.

⁶⁰ Barth, *CD* 1/2:244.

⁶¹ Porsch, *Pneuma und Wort*, 302. Although Porsch does not seem to be operating with the distinction between speaking and revealing, his emphasis on the Spirit’s pointing toward Jesus remains helpful.

⁶² Luther, *Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, *LW* 35:118.

⁶³ Luther, *LW* 35:122.

Although the apostolic office came to an end with the death of the last apostle, the apostolic mission of proclaiming the Word of God in the power of the Spirit continues in the church as it awaits Jesus' promised return. Paul explains,

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"...So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:14–17).

Jesus pointed toward this need for preachers when he said to the disciples on Easter evening, "Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name *to all nations*, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). Wingren writes, "*The Word* exists to be made known; only when it is preached is its objective content fully disclosed."⁶⁴

Because the preaching of the Word of God stands at the heart of the church's mission to continue the work of Christ, Luther identifies the Word of God as the first and most important mark of the church.⁶⁵ He writes:

The Church is a mouth-house [*Mundhaus*], not a pen-house [*Federhaus*], for since Christ's advent that Gospel is preached orally which before was hidden in written books. It is the way of the Gospel and of the New Testament that it is to be preached and discussed orally with a living voice. Christ himself wrote nothing, nor did he give command to write, but to preach orally. Thus the apostles were not sent out until Christ came to his mouth-house, that is, until the time had come to preach orally and to bring the Gospel from dead writing and pen-work to the living voice and mouth. From this time the church is rightly called Bethphage, since she has and hears the living voice of the Gospel.⁶⁶

Rather than trying to comprehend God with our eyes (in the rationalistic mode of believing what can be seen), Luther emphasizes the necessity of *listening* to the Word in

⁶⁴ Wingren, *The Living Word*, 13.

⁶⁵ Luther, *LW* 41:148-151.

⁶⁶ *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*. Vol. 1. ed. John Nicholas Lenker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2000), 44.

our relationship with God. He encourages, "Sieh ihn nicht mit den Augen an, sondern stecke die Augen in die Ohren!"⁶⁷

Because of the importance of preaching the Word of God in the church, Luther holds in highest esteem the work of the preacher. Again and again he emphasizes that the Word spoken by the faithful Christian preacher is the Word of God himself. He writes, "Listen, brother: God, the creator of heaven and earth, speaks with you through his preachers."⁶⁸ While it is the preacher who opens his mouth and speaks, God is the one speaking. This is not because of the person of the preacher, but because of the Word that he has been sent to speak. Luther explains, "Darum thut man recht daran, daß man des Pfarrherrns und Predigers Wort, das er predigt, Gottes Wort nennet. Denn das Amt is nicht des Pfarrherrns und Predigers, sondern Gottes; und das Wort, das er prediget ist auch nicht des Pfarrherrns und Predigers, sondern Gottes."⁶⁹ The risen Christ continues to send his people to speak his Word and give his Spirit in the here and now to forgive the sins of those who repent and believe. Luther summarizes:

Denn unser Herr Gott hat vergebung der sünden inn kein Werk gelegt, das wir thün, Sonder in das einnige werk, das Christus gelitten has unnd auferstanden ist. Das selb werk aber hat durch das wort inn der Apostlen und seiner Kirchen diener, ja zur not, in aller Christen mund gelegt, das sie dadurch vergebung der sünden aufstehlen und allen, die es begeren, verkundigen sollen.⁷⁰

The Word and the Sacraments

Luther and the reformers emphasize that God himself is at work through the proclamation of his Word in the church. This often takes place in the form of the

⁶⁷ *Luthers Evangelien Auslegung*, ed. Erwin Mühlhaupt, Zweiter Teil, deuchgesehene Auflage (Göttingen: Bandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), 704.

⁶⁸ Luther, *Tisch Reden WA TR 4:531*, no. 4812.

⁶⁹ *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Werke*, 3. Band (Erlangen: Carl Herder, 1826), 376.

⁷⁰ Luther, *Hauspostille 1544*, in *WA 52.273*.

preacher's sermon, but that is not the only way in which the Word is spoken among the people of God. Luther writes in the Smalcald Articles, "We should and must insist that God does not want to deal with us as human beings, except by means of his external (*äußerliche/vocale*) Word and sacrament."⁷¹

As Luther notes, one of the ways in which God specifically promises to speak his Word is through the sacraments that he has given to the church. In the sacraments there remains an inseparable unity between the Word and the Spirit. Augustine recognized that the key feature in the sacraments is the presence of the Word: "Accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum"—that is, "When the Word is added to the element or the natural substance, it becomes a sacrament."⁷² The Reformers highlighted Augustine's description of the sacraments as the "visible word," the "picture of the Word" in which the Word of God is received with the eyes.⁷³ The constitutive significance of the Word in the sacraments is clearly set forth in Luther's catechisms as he explains baptism and the Lord's Supper. He writes about baptism in the Small Catechism: "For without the Word of God the water is just plain water and not a baptism, but with the Word of God it is a baptism."⁷⁴ In the Large Catechism he says this about the Lord's Supper: "The chief thing is God's Word and ordinance or command."⁷⁵ The Lord's Supper is "set within God's

⁷¹ SA III.8.10. Emphasis added.

⁷² LC Baptism, 18.

⁷³ "For just as the Word enters through the ear in order to strike the heart, so also the rite enters through the eye in order to move the heart" (Ap XIII.5).

⁷⁴ SC Baptism, 9-10.

⁷⁵ LC V.4.

Word and bound to it.”⁷⁶ With both baptism and the Lord’s Supper, it is God’s Word of forgiveness in Christ that makes the difference. Luther explains:

Wherever there is God’s Word, no matter whether it is in Baptism, in Absolution, in the Sacrament [Lord’s Supper] there God Himself speaks to us. In Absolution he absolves us from [our] sins. In the Sacrament or the Lord’s Supper Christ Himself feeds us with his body and blood. We thus have God’s Word in the church, indeed, in the home. Whenever the pastor speaks to us in the church or the father in the house, then God himself speaks to us.⁷⁷

J. T. Mueller summarizes the various ways in which the Word of God is at work among the people of God: “It is the Word, the Gospel, that does everything, nothing else, nothing added by men: the Gospel proclaimed, the Gospel read, the Gospel symbolically presented, the Gospel applied in absolution, the Gospel in Baptism, the Gospel in the Lord’s Supper, the Gospel in the ‘mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren.’”⁷⁸

Inseparable from the Word of God in the sacraments is the life-giving Spirit of God. After leading the people to confess their sins through the proclamation of the Word on Pentecost, Peter told them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). The Augsburg Confession recognizes that the Word and the sacraments are the means by which God gives his Spirit: “Through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ LCV.9.

⁷⁷ Quoted in John Theodore Mueller, “Notes on Luther’s Conception of the Word of God as the Means of Grace” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 20 (August, 1949): 588.

⁷⁸ Mueller, “Notes,” 599. Cf. SA III.4.

⁷⁹ CA V.2. Latin text.

In whichever form it is spoken—through preaching or in the administration of the sacraments—the Word of God remains the living and active instrument through which God kills and makes alive through his Spirit. His Word of law and judgment cuts to the heart (Acts 2:37); it incites rage among those who refuse to repent (Acts 5:33, 7:54); and it is the instrument by which God promises to overthrow the man of lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:8). His Word of forgiveness and life in the Gospel is the “power of salvation for those who believe” (Rom. 1:16); it comes “in power and in the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:5); and it delivers the Holy Spirit into the hearts of those who hear and believe (Acts 10:44). Regin Preter summarizes, “In every word of the *law*, which humbles us and reduces us to nothing, God is uniting us with the *crucified* Christ; and in every word of the *gospel*, which gives us Christ as our righteousness, God is uniting us with the *risen* Christ.”⁸⁰

From Spoken to Written Word

Up to this point in this examination of the Word of God in the divine economy we have said very little about the Scriptures themselves. Our attention has been focused on the Word that God spoke through his Spirit-empowered deputized prophets. We have emphasized that God spoke *definitively, ultimately, decisively, and for all time* through the Spirit-empowered personal Word of God and that the Word spoken by Jesus ultimately led to his death on the cross. We have highlighted the vindication of Christ by the Father in his resurrection from the dead and we have noted that this vindication ushered in the risen Christ’s giving of the Spirit to the apostles and his co-missioning of them with authority to forgive the sins of those who repent and believe. These apostles continued Jesus’ mission by proclaiming the Gospel message of Christ crucified in their

⁸⁰ Regin Preter, Jaroslav J. Pelikan, and Herman A. Preus, *More About Luther* Vol. 2 (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1958), 72.

preaching and in their administration of the sacraments, and their associates (the church) continue this work until the personal Word returns in glory.

It is here, in the context of the trinitarian economy of salvation, that we are now ready to consider the written form of the Word. Indeed, the underlying claim that I am making throughout this project is that the written Word of God is only properly understood when it is approached in relation to the spoken and personal forms of the Word of God. N. T. Wright points in this direction when he describes the role of the Word in the economy of salvation:

Here we have the roots of a fully Christian theology of scriptural authority: planted firmly in the soil of the missionary community, confronting the powers of the world with the news of the kingdom of God, refreshed and invigorated by the Spirit, growing particularly through the preaching and teaching of the apostles, and bearing fruit in the transformation of human lives as the start of God's project to put the whole cosmos to rights. God accomplishes these things, so the early church believed, through 'the word'; the story of Israel now told as reaching its climax in Jesus, God's call to Israel now transmuted into God's call to his renewed people. And it was this 'word' which came, through the work of the early writers, to be expressed in the writing of the New Testament as we know it.⁸¹

As Wright suggests, much of what needs to be said about Scripture has already been said about the personal and spoken forms of the Word of God. After all, the written Word is nothing more than the prophetic and apostolic proclamation about the personal Word put down into writing. Before any biblical text was recorded, the prophets and apostles proclaimed the spoken Word of God on behalf of the personal Word of God in the power of his Spirit. For this reason Barth describes the written Word as "the deposit of what was once proclamation by human lips."⁸² Joachim Ringleben calls the transition of the Word

⁸¹ Wright, *Scripture*, 37.

⁸² Barth, *CD* 1/1:102.

from speech to script as the "Schriftwerdung des Wortes Gottes."⁸³ He writes, "Die mündliche Predigt von Christus zur heiligen Schrift wurde, und das besagt: Das Wort ward Text."⁸⁴

Martin Chemnitz offers a detailed account of this movement from spoken to written Word in his *Examination of the Council of Trent*. In order to defend against Rome's claim that post-apostolic tradition is as authoritative as the apostolic Word, Chemnitz emphasizes that the writings of both the prophets and apostles were one and the same as their proclamation. He begins by speaking about the prophetic writings: "In order that the Word, which is the only organ of the Spirit, may not be corrupted, or it become uncertain what the Word is, God in the Old Testament commanded that it be comprehended in writing."⁸⁵ Chemnitz notes that the Word that God spoke through Adam, Noah, Abraham, and the other patriarchs was not initially written down. Instead, it was passed down from generation to generation "by a living voice."⁸⁶ As the centuries progressed, however, this oral tradition lost its purity and became corrupt. At the time of Moses God provided a more permanent form of his Word. Chemnitz summarizes,

We have thus shown two things from the most ancient sacred history: (1) the purity of the heavenly doctrine was not preserved always and everywhere through tradition by the living voice but was repeatedly corrupted and adulterated; (2) in order that new and special revelations might not always be necessary for restoring and retaining purity of the doctrine, God instituted another method under Moses, namely, that the doctrine of the Word of God should be comprehended in writing.⁸⁷

⁸³ Ringleben, "Die Bibel," 31.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁵ Chemnitz, *Examination*, 76.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 54.

After the Word of God had been written by Moses, Chemnitz says that “the church of the children of Israel was a pillar and ground of the truth, because to them had been entrusted the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2).”⁸⁸ Their written Word of the prophets became the “norm and rule of faith, and of decisions in controversies and disputes concerning religion.”⁸⁹

When it comes to the New Testament, Chemnitz notes agreement between the Lutherans and Catholics in the sixteenth century: “The doctrine of the New Testament...is what Christ in the time of his flesh during his ministry proclaimed with His own mouth, and what the apostles, once they had been led by the Holy Spirit into all truth, preached to every creature in all the world.”⁹⁰ This doctrine that was originally proclaimed both by Christ and the apostles “unwritten and orally” was afterward written down by the apostles.⁹¹ Chemnitz points to Irenaeus:

That alone is the true and living faith which the church has received from the apostles and communicated to her children. For the Lord of all gave His apostles the power of the Gospel, and through them we also have come to know the truth, that is, the doctrine of the Son of God; to whom also the Lord said, “He who hears you hears Me, and he who rejects you rejects Me and Him who sent Me.” For through no others do we know the plan of salvation except through those by whom the Gospel has come to us. That, indeed, which they then preached, they afterward delivered to us in the Scriptures by the will of God, that it should be the foundation and pillar of our faith.⁹²

As their preaching and teaching was being challenged and corrupted by false teachers (cf. Gal. 1:6–9), the apostles put down into written form the Word they had been given to proclaim orally. David Lotz explains, “Christ’s own preaching and that of the apostles

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1. Quoted in Chemnitz, *Examination*, 80-81.

eventually assumed written form, owing to the exigent need to preserve this preaching in its original purity and to protect it from the vagaries of false teachers and heretics.”⁹³

Chemnitz cites numerous examples of early church fathers who understood the origin of the New Testament Scriptures in this way. Chrysostom says, “Matthew wrote when the believers in Christ from the Jews had approached him and asked that he would send them in writing what he had taught them by word of mouth, that it might be preserved.”⁹⁴ Eusebius records a similar idea:

When the Gospel had come to the West, such a great light of devotion illumined the minds of those who had heard Peter that they could not be content with the unwritten teaching of the divine proclamation or remain steadfast in the things which they had learned of the divine Word without writing; but they implored Mark with great earnestness that he would leave them a written account of that doctrine which they had received orally... And they say that the apostle Peter, when he knew this by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was delighted by the wish of these men, in a formal statement approved this writing, confirmed it, and ordained that it should be read in the churches.⁹⁵

Much like the “Schriftwerdung” of the prophets and the gospels, the letters of Paul are nothing other than the written form of his original proclamation of the Word. Chemnitz writes, “The epistles of Paul were written so that they might be ‘reminders,’ embracing in a compendium the very same things which he had clearly transmitted orally and personally.”⁹⁶ This resonates with Paul’s words to the Thessalonians: “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter” (2 Thess. 2:15). Sasse summarizes: “All proclamation that is to be preserved must be written down. The written Word may lack the freshness of oral

⁹³ Lotz, “Proclamation,” 347.

⁹⁴ Chrysostom, *Homily 1 on Matthew*, quoted in Chemnitz, *Examination*, 86.

⁹⁵ Eusebius, II.15, quoted in Chemnitz, *Examination*, 88.

⁹⁶ Chemnitz, *Examination*, 106.

proclamation, but its contents remain the same, and it gains the advantage of remaining unchanged and being preserved for future generations."⁹⁷

As those who had been deputized and co-missioned by God himself, the prophets and apostles occupy a distinctive position in the history of the church. The Word that they proclaimed and wrote is the standard by which all subsequent preaching of the Word of God is measured. Barth says that the prophets and apostles occupy a "singular and unique position and significance,"⁹⁸ and have "supremacy" and "absolute constitutive significance"⁹⁹ for present day preaching. He quotes Luther:

Now when He says, Ye also shall bear witness, for ye have been with me from the beginning, He thereby specially depicts the apostles for all preachers and confirms their preaching so that all the world should be bound to their word, and believe the same without any contradiction and be certain that all they preach and teach is right doctrine and the Holy Ghost's preaching which they have heard and received from Him...Such witness have no preachers on earth save the apostles only, for the others are hereby commanded that they should all follow in the apostles' footsteps, abide by the same doctrine and preach nothing more or otherwise.¹⁰⁰

To speak the Word of God *after* the apostles, preachers in the church proclaim nothing more and nothing less than the Word that they have received from the Spirit-led apostles. That is what it means to be an apostolic church.¹⁰¹ Paul points in this direction when he says that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20; cf. 2 Peter 3:2). The same Spirit

⁹⁷ Sasse, "Luther and the Word of God," in *Accents in Luther's Theology: Essays in Commemoration of the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation*, ed. Heino Kadai (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 71-72.

⁹⁸ Barth, *CD* 1/2:495.

⁹⁹ Barth, *CD* 1/1:102.

¹⁰⁰ Luther, *Crucigers Sommerpostille*, quoted in Barth, *CD* 1/1:103.

¹⁰¹ Barth writes, "Apostolicity is one of the decisive notes of the true Church" (*CD* 1/1:103), and, "The apostolic succession of the Church must mean that it is guided by the Canon, that is, by the prophetic and apostolic word as the necessary rule of every word that is valid in the Church" (*CD* 1/1:104).

that led the prophets to proclaim the coming of Christ led the apostles in their proclamation of Christ crucified. Peter explains,

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things (1 Peter 1:10–12).

It is the continuing work of the church at all times and places to proclaim the same Word of Christ that the personal Word gave to the apostles in the Spirit. H. S. Wilson summarizes, “According to Luther, the preacher has nothing *new* to say other than what has already been spoken and written by the Apostles.”¹⁰²

In his study of the apostolic fathers, H. M. Scott observes that the early church fathers recognized the unique authority of the apostolic message. He explains, “It is plain from direct and indirect references to apostolic writers that their successors shrank from all comparison of position, looked to them as having peculiar authority from Christ, especially endowed by the Holy Ghost, and considered their oral and written instruction as of final character.”¹⁰³ Scott notes that the early fathers viewed their writing and speaking as categorically inferior to the words of the apostles. Ignatius writes, for example, “Shall I reach such a height of self-esteem...as to issue commands to you as if I were an apostle?”¹⁰⁴ Polycarp acknowledges, “Brethren, I write these things to you...not assuming anything to myself, but because ye besought me to do so. For neither I nor any

¹⁰² H. S. Wilson, “Luther on Preaching as God Speaking” *Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (2005): 67.

¹⁰³ H. M. Scott, “The Apostolic Fathers and New Testament Revelation” *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 3 (1892): 485–486.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 480.

other like me can equal the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul.”¹⁰⁵ Barnabas insists that he speaks “not as an apostle but as your teacher, as one of yourselves.”¹⁰⁶ Clement explains, “The apostles were made preachers of the gospel to us by the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was sent by God. So Christ is from God, and the apostles from Christ.”¹⁰⁷ While the distinctions between that which is apostolic and that which is patristic may not always be as clear as have sometimes been suggested,¹⁰⁸ the early church strove to conserve, continue, and ground their ministry in the apostolic message. Scott concludes, “The apostolic writings were not to [the early fathers] the survival of the fittest, the cream of primitive Christian literature, differing only in degree, but not in kind of excellence from post-apostolic works. They were the lively oracles of God, spoken and written once for all to guide the Church in all ages.”¹⁰⁹

John Behr notes this understanding of the Word of God in Irenaeus, who “begins by affirming categorically that the revelation of God is mediated through the apostles.”¹¹⁰ Behr explains that for Irenaeus “the locus of revelation, and the medium for our relationship with God, is precisely in the apostolic preaching of him, the Gospel which, as we have seen, stands in an interpretative engagement with Scripture. The role of the apostles in delivering the Gospel is definitive.”¹¹¹ By virtue of their commission from Christ himself, the Word of God proclaimed by the apostles forms the foundation for all

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 481.

¹⁰⁸ Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 52–53.

¹⁰⁹ Scott, “The Apostolic Fathers,” 488.

¹¹⁰ John Behr, *Way to Nicea: The Formation of Christian Theology* Vol. 1 (St. Vladimir’s Press, 2001), 38.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 38–39.

subsequent Christian proclamation. Irenaeus writes, "We have learned from no others the plan of our salvation than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith."¹¹² D. H. Williams summarizes, "Any of the ancient church fathers would have been horrified to find their written legacy placed on a par with Holy Scripture."¹¹³ When Luther and Barth insist that preachers of the Word of God are preachers of the apostolic Word, they are simply continuing the point of view of the early church fathers.

Summary

I began this chapter by agreeing with Karl Barth that the proper context and foundation for the Christian theology of Scripture is the theology of the Word of God. But unlike Barth's account of the Word, the biblical narrative presents a trinitarian Word that is oriented toward the cross. This narrative portrays Jesus as the Spirit-empowered Word of God who was sent by the Father to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. Some believed his message, but others rejected it and crucified him. On the third day he was raised from the dead in the power of the Spirit and was thereby vindicated by the Father as the true Son of God and Savior of the world. After his resurrection he sent his apostles to proclaim his Word in the power of and guided by the Spirit of truth. They fulfilled this mission in their speaking and in their writing, and the work they were given continues in the church as the people of God continue to proclaim the Gospel of Christ

¹¹² *Against the Heresies*, 3.1.1, in *ANF* 1:414.

¹¹³ Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 60. Augustine writes, "What more shall I teach you than what we read in the apostle? For Holy Scripture fixes the rule of our doctrine, lest we dare to be wiser than we ought. Therefore I should not teach you anything else except to expound to you the words of the Teacher." Quoted in Chemnitz, *Examination*, 152.

crucified for the forgiveness of sins. Wingren explains, "The Word was not just God once upon a time, did not just once upon a time become flesh (John 1:1, 14), but the Word *is* God and now *becomes* flesh. It comes with the reading of the passages of Scripture, with the advance of the *kerygma* as a living Word, with Christ's divinity hidden in the ordinary human voice that proclaims the Word."¹¹⁴ Jesus is not only the one who sent the apostles to proclaim his Word; he is also its content and object. The apostles preached nothing other than "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:18, 2:2) and the purpose of their proclamation and writing was to create faith in Christ and give life in his name (John 20:31).

This account of the Word of God in the divine economy provides a solid foundation for understanding the written Word of God in trinitarian and soteriological terms. Just as Jesus is inseparably united to the Spirit in his life and mission (John 1:32; Luke 4:18–21), so also is the Spirit inseparably united to the Word he speaks (John 3:33; 6:63) and the Word he sends his apostles to speak in his name (John 20:20–23; Luke 24:47). It is natural, then, that this written Word would be recognized as Christ's own "Spirit-breathed" Word (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16), for the Spirit and the Word of God are inseparably united in all three forms.

While there are many ways in which this threefold Word of God might be summarized, at its most basic it could be said that the Word of God saves. The personal Word was sent by the Father in the Spirit to save the world through his life, death, resurrection, and return (1 John 4:14); the spoken Word has the power of salvation as it gives the Spirit, forgiveness, and salvation to those who believe (Rom. 1:16); the written

¹¹⁴ Wingren, *The Living Word*, 213.

Word is the prophetic and apostolic proclamation put down into writing so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ and have life in his name (John 20:31). This written Word is profitable for salvation and useful for teaching and correcting, and in these terms it is described as *theopneustos* (2 Tim. 3:16). In whatever form it appears, the Word of God accomplishes the saving will of the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. Roehrs summarizes,

God speaks before and after the incarnation in the Word and words uttered and written by human beings, also in His determined manner, in order to bring to men the good news of this eternal plan of redemption and its accomplishment, and in order to create in men the faith which accepts this accomplished salvation through the power with which he has invested these words.¹¹⁵

As Paul says to the Corinthians, “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). Martin Franzmann captures this understanding of the saving Word of God in his hymn, “Thy Strong Word”:

Thy strong Word did cleave the darkness;
At Thy speaking it was done.
For created light we thank Thee,
While Thine ordered seasons run.
Alleluia, Alleluia! Praise to Thee who light dost send!
Alleluia, Alleluia! Alleluia without end!

Lo, on those who dwelt in darkness,
Dark as night and deep as death,
Broke the light of Thy salvation,
Breathed Thine own life-breathing breath.
Alleluia, Alleluia! Praise to Thee who light dost send!
Alleluia, Alleluia! Alleluia without end!

¹¹⁵ Roehrs, 105.

Thy strong Word bespeaks us righteous;
Bright with Thine own holiness,
Glorious now, we press toward glory,
And our lives our hopes confess
Alleluia, Alleluia! Praise to Thee who light dost send!
Alleluia, Alleluia! Alleluia without end!

From the cross Thy wisdom shining
Breaketh forth in conquering might;
From the cross forever beameth
All Thy bright redeeming light.
Alleluia, Alleluia! Praise to Thee who light dost send!
Alleluia, Alleluia! Alleluia without end!

Give us lips to sing Thy glory,
Tongues Thy mercy to proclaim,
Throats that shout the hope that fills us,
Mouths to speak Thy holy name.
Alleluia, Alleluia! Praise to Thee who light dost send!
Alleluia, Alleluia! Alleluia without end!

God the Father, light-creator,
To Thee laud and honor be.
To Thee, Light of Light begotten,
Praise be sung eternally.
Holy Spirit, light-revealer, glory, glory be to Thee.
Mortals, angels, now and ever praise the Holy Trinity!¹¹⁶

With this understanding of the saving Word of God in the trinitarian economy we are now ready to consider more closely the theology of Scripture itself. Chapter 4 continues with an overview of the various ways in which the Scriptures and the Word of God have been treated in dogmatic theology, and chapter 5 concludes with some suggestions about how a theology of Scripture that is ground in the theology of the Word of God approaches questions about the canon, authority, and interpretation.

¹¹⁶ "Thy Strong Word," words by Martin H. Franzmann (1907–1976). *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 578.

CHAPTER FOUR

SCRIPTURE AND THE WORD OF GOD IN DOGMATIC THEOLOGY

One of Barth's most helpful contributions to the theology of Scripture is his insistence that dogmatic theology must be grounded in Christ, the personal Word of God.

He maintains,

A church dogmatics must, of course, be christologically determined as a whole and in all its parts...If dogmatics cannot regard itself and cause itself to be regarded as fundamentally Christology, it has assuredly succumbed to some alien sway and is already on the verge of losing its character as church dogmatics.¹

Although it is true that the theology of Scripture must be "christologically determined," this statement does not provide as much direction as it first appears. Throughout the centuries Jesus has been regarded in many different (and often conflicting) ways, and depending on what one believes about his person and work, a "christologically determined" theology can lead to a wide variety of dogmatic conclusions. Indeed, this is precisely the problem with Barth's doctrine of the Word of God. His understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus does departs from the central message of the biblical narrative. Barth *was* right about the centrality of Christ for Christian theology, however, and this is especially true for the theology of Scripture.

Despite the pervasive emphasis on the Word of God in the biblical narrative, dogmatic examinations of the Word of God have been rather rare. Wolterstorff notes that God's speaking has received very little attention in recent philosophical and theological

¹ Barth, *CD* 1/2:123.

thought. He observes, "In the first half of [the twentieth] century there was a great deal of talk among *theologians* about the 'Word of God.' That talk, so far as I can tell, has withered on the vine in recent years."² The primary twentieth-century theologian that he is referring to is Karl Barth, and despite Barth's extensive influence in the contemporary discussion, few have specifically engaged his understanding of the Word of God. This has contributed to an unfortunate lack of clarity when it comes to theological talk about the Word of God. Walter Roehrs noted fifty years ago, "One frequently finds the term 'Word' used so vaguely in contemporary theology that all distinctions are blurred."³ Roehrs' observation still applies today as theologians continue to say important things about the Word of God without explaining what they understand this phrase to mean—contemporary contributors to the theology of Scripture notwithstanding.⁴ Because of the foundational significance of the Word of God for the theology of Scripture, a clear dogmatic framework for considering the relationship between the Scriptures and the Word of God is necessary.

In some ways chapter 4 may be seen as an excursus. Chapter 3 was my attempt to articulate an account of the Word of God in the divine economy, and chapter 5 considers specific aspects of the theology of Scripture in light of the nature and function of the Word. But in chapter 4 our attention is directed toward the various ways in which theologians have considered the relationship between the Scriptures and the Word of God in dogmatic theology. While there are a variety of ways in which these subjects can be

² Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 9.

³ Roehrs, "The Word," 81.

⁴ A good example is the title of Telford Work's book, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation*. In Hebrews 4:12 it is the *Word of God* that is "living and active."

dogmatically arranged, some formulations are more consistent with the biblical narrative than others.⁵ Because a clear understanding of the nature and function of the Word of God is a fundamental building block for the Christian theology of Scripture, this chapter concludes by offering a dogmatic structure that flows from the biblical narrative.

The Analogy of the Word

One way in which theologians try to make dogmatic sense of the Word of God in the biblical narrative is to highlight the ontological similarities between Jesus and the Scriptures. Known as the “Analogy of the Word,” this approach compares the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ to the two natures of the Scriptures. As Christ is composed of a divine and a human nature, so also are the Scriptures composed of both a human and a divine nature. Telford Work notes the popularity of this analogy:

“Theologians in all the major Christian traditions have noticed the double meaning of *logos*, and sensed its relevance for the Christian doctrine of Scripture.”⁶ Clark Pinnock explains,

It is natural to see an analogy between the incarnational character of revelation and the Bible. As the Logos was enfleshed in the life of Jesus, so God’s Word is enlettered in the script of the Bible. In both cases there is some kind of mysterious union of the divine and the human, though of course not the same kind. But in each case both the divine and the human are truly present. The analogy helps us to defend the true humanity of the Bible against Docetism and to defend its divine authority against the Ebionitism of liberal theology.⁷

⁵ In this chapter I will argue that Barth’s threefold form of the Word is the most helpful framework for making dogmatic sense of the Word of God in the divine economy. This is not the only dogmatic possibility, however. Paul Tillich, for example, identifies six forms of the Word of God: (1) the principle of divine self-manifestation, (2) the medium of creation, (3) the manifestation of divine life in the history of revelation, (4) Jesus, (5) the Bible, and (6) church proclamation through preaching and teaching. *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1 (London: Nisbet and Co., Ltd. 1953), 174–176. It would also be possible to categorize the Word of God in the biblical narrative into two forms (created and uncreated) or four forms (incarnate, spoken, written, and sacramental).

⁶ Work, *Living and Active*, 15.

⁷ Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984) 97.

Carl Braaten makes a similar comparison for biblical interpretation. He calls for a “Chalcedonian hermeneutic” that takes into consideration the similarities between the written and incarnate Word:

The relevance of the incarnation to biblical interpretation is spelled out in terms of the Chalcedonian model of explaining the meaning of the “Word made flesh”...Just as the Word became flesh—without one being changed into the other or separated from each other, as Chalcedon taught—so we have treasures of divine revelation in vessels of human language and history.⁸

More recently, Peter Enns has assigned paradigmatic significance to this incarnational analogy for the theology of Scripture in his book, *Inspiration and Incarnation*.⁹ Writing as an Old Testament scholar, he maintains that the only way to make sense of the inspiration of the Scriptures is to understand them as a “necessary consequence of God incarnating himself.”¹⁰

A sophisticated attempt to employ the Analogy of the Word in dogmatic theology is found in Telford Work’s account of the Scriptures. He identifies the Analogy of the Word as the key dogmatic framework for considering the nature and function of the Scriptures, and he identifies an impressive collection of historical theologians to support his account. He begins by recalling Athanasius’ writing on the incarnation of the *logos* together with Augustine’s emphasis on the analogy between human speech and “the enfleshment of the Word.”¹¹ Together they provide the foundation for the Analogy of the Word in Christian theology. There is more to say than these ancient fathers said, however, and so Work improves upon their understanding of the Analogy by highlighting Barth’s threefold form

⁸ Carl Braaten, “A Chalcedonian Hermeneutic,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3, (Winter 1994): 20.

⁹ Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹ Work, *Living and Active*, 52.

of the Word as “a resource for expanding it into a properly Trinitarian account of the Bible.”¹² Barth does well to integrate the Trinity into his doctrine of the Word of God, says Work, but he does not appreciate the true nature of the union between God’s Word and the human word of the Scriptures. He suggests that Barth needs a “stronger correspondence between the hypostatic union and verbal union.”¹³ In order to provide this correspondence Work incorporates Hans Urs von Balthasar’s understanding of *kenosis* of the Word, in which he finds a “quasi-sacramental ontology for Scripture.”¹⁴ By adding the insights of Spirit-christology, Work presents a version of the Analogy of the Word that he calls a “bibliology of Word and Spirit.”¹⁵ He argues that the two natures of the Scriptures must be seen in terms of the economic Trinity, and thereby he provides the “proper contours of the Analogy of the Word.”¹⁶

The Analogy of the Word is one way in which we might make sense of the Word of God in the biblical narrative. It provides a dogmatic framework for speaking about the incarnate Word of God and his relationship to the written Word of God, and for this reason it has been a popular way of thinking about the relationship between the Scriptures and Jesus (especially among proponents of the doctrine of inspiration). Work’s version of the Analogy draws on a wide variety of dogmatic and historical sources, and the result is an Analogy of the Word that is more comprehensive than most attempts to compare Jesus and the Scriptures. Despite Work’s improvements, however, questions remain about the usefulness of viewing the Scriptures (and Christ) in this way. Like the doctrine of

¹² Ibid., 67.

¹³ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴ Ibid., 100.

¹⁵ Ibid., 122.

¹⁶ Ibid., 123.

inspiration, the Analogy of the Word is not necessarily wrong. But there are three reasons to prefer a different conceptual framework.

The first potential problem with the Analogy of the Word is the effect that it has on the doctrine of Christ. Despite the similarities between Jesus and the Scriptures, there is simply no analogy for what God has done in Christ. For this reason the Lutheran dogmaticians were reluctant to use the Analogy of the Word. They were convinced that it would “almost certainly do violence to the doctrine of the personal union,” which was “unique and without analogy.”¹⁷ John Webster agrees: “Like any extension of the notion of the incarnation...the result can be christologically disastrous, in that it may threaten the uniqueness of the Word’s becoming flesh by making ‘incarnation’ a general principle or characteristic of divine action in, through, or under creaturely reality.”¹⁸ By speaking of a hypostatic union between the words of human beings and the Word of God, the unique nature of the incarnation is in danger of becoming just another instance of God operating in and among his creation.

The second reason for questioning the usefulness of the Analogy of the Word is that it conceives of the Scriptures (and Christ) primarily in static and objective terms. This is one of the criticisms that Spirit-christology makes of classic Logos-christology. While it was necessary for the church of the first four centuries to unpack the inner constitution of Jesus’ two natures in order to defend against heresy, Logos-christology’s focus on the hypostatic union tends to obscure the Spirit-filled work of Christ in his mission of salvation and results in an imbalanced view of the person and work of Jesus.¹⁹ In a similar

¹⁷ R. Preus, *Inspiration*, 201–202.

¹⁸ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 22–23.

¹⁹ For a critique of Logos-christology and a helpful discussion of a Spirit-Christology that restores this

way, the Analogy of the Word and its focus on the “two natures” of the Scriptures tends to limit dogmatic attention to the Holy Spirit’s role in their composition. The Scriptures are viewed primarily as a finished product to be studied and analyzed, and the role that they play in the divine economy is often left out of the discussion.²⁰

The final and most compelling reason for questioning the usefulness of the Analogy of the Word is that it leaves out one of the most prominent forms of the Word in the biblical narrative. It focuses on the second person of the Trinity and the writings of the prophets and apostles, but it leaves out the Word that God speaks to and through his chosen people. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the Word that God speaks through his prophets, his Son, his apostles, and his preachers is foundational for the theology of Scripture. The spoken Word is an integral part of the dogmatic relationship between the Scriptures and the Word of God. Among other things, the incorporation of the spoken Word provides a natural safeguard against viewing the Scriptures and the Word of God in static and objective terms: unlike the Bible and Christ, it does not exist apart from its proclamation.

Because of these potential problems with viewing the Scriptures from an incarnational perspective, chapter 4 does not follow Work by trying to rehabilitate the Analogy of the Word for the theology of Scripture. It seems more helpful and more consistent with the biblical narrative to work within a dogmatic framework that accounts for three forms of the Word that God speaks in the divine economy.

balance, see Sánchez, 42-102 and 187-213.

²⁰ Work avoids this particular problem with the Analogy of the Word by incorporating the insights of Spirit-christology.

Barth: Threefold Form Revisited

The usefulness of Barth's threefold form of the Word of God is its ability to incorporate the various ways in which the biblical narrative speaks about the Word of God. His recognition of and emphasis on the proclamation of the Word provides that which is missing in the Analogy of the Word, and his dogmatic relocation of the theology of Scripture under the theology of the Word of God is an important improvement on the doctrine of inspiration. But as we considered in chapter 2, there are some significant problems with the way Barth understands the Word of God and its relationship to the Scriptures and proclamation. Rather than rehearsing that criticism, at this point we will examine more specifically the source of these problems. In order to do so, we recall one of Barth's favorite illustrations for describing God's work through the Scriptures and church proclamation.

The Scriptures, says Barth, are like the Pool of Bethesda.²¹ Just as God occasionally stirred the waters in the Pool of Bethesda so that the lame and the sick may be healed, so also God occasionally "stirs" the Scriptures so that he might encounter the hearer or reader with his saving presence. Through this encounter God reveals himself as the Word of God and reconciles the hearer (or reader) to himself. But just as there is nothing sacred about the water in the Pool of Bethesda, neither are the Scriptures anything more than parts of God's creation: *Deus dixit* and *Paulus dixit* are two different things.²² In order for God to work through the written (and spoken) form of the Word, he must choose to work miraculously each and every time. Everything depends on God's free decision to reveal himself.

²¹ Barth, *CD* 1/1:111; 1/2:530.

²² Barth, *CD* 1/1:113.

Here we have the key to Barth's doctrine of the Word of God. The Word of God, who is God himself, only comes to human beings *where and when* it pleases God. Barth repeatedly returns to Article V of the Augsburg Confession: "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when (*ubi et quando*) he wills, in those who hear the gospel."²³ Barth highlights this phrase in order to protect God from being coerced or controlled into revealing himself, as if he can be "pinned down" in Scripture or in the proclamation of the church. Barth concludes, "The freedom of God's grace is the basis and the boundary, the presupposition and the proviso, of the statements according to which the Bible and proclamation are the Word of God."²⁴ This insistence on maintaining the freedom of God governs Barth's view of the Scriptures, proclamation, and even Jesus himself. Wolterstorff notes, "Barth regarded the claim that God speaks by way of authoring Scripture as compromising the freedom of God. God and God alone speaks for God."²⁵ He quotes Barth:

That the Bible is the Word of God cannot mean that with other attributes the Bible has the attribute of being the Word of God. To say that would be to violate the Word of God which is God Himself—to violate the freedom and sovereignty of God. God is not an attribute of something else, even if this something else is the Bible. God is the Subject. God is Lord. He is Lord even over the Bible and in the Bible. The statement that the Bible is the Word of God cannot therefore say that the Word of God is tied to the Bible. On the contrary, what it must say is that the Bible is tied to the Word of God. But that means that in this statement we contemplate a free decision of God.²⁶

²³ CA V.1-3.

²⁴ Barth, *CD* 1/1:117.

²⁵ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 73–74.

²⁶ Barth, *CD* 1/2:513.

As Wolterstorff points out, Barth's emphasis on the freedom of God actually ends up limiting God. Barth does not allow God to restrict his own freedom. Again Barth:

It is quite impossible that there should be a direct identity between the human word of Holy Scripture and the Word of God, and therefore between the creaturely reality in itself and as such and the reality of God the Creator. It is impossible that there should have been a transmutation of the one into the other or an admixture of the one with the other. *This is not even the case in the person of Christ.*²⁷

Barth's insistence on maintaining the freedom and sovereignty of God keeps him from allowing the infinite God to identify himself directly with finite creatures *in any way*. Not only does Barth prohibit God from deputizing the prophets and apostles to speak his Word; he also prohibits God from speaking through Jesus. Work criticizes this aspect of Barth's doctrine of the Word: "Since Jesus is truly the Word made flesh, his words (whether preserved in writing or not) *are* truly the Word of God in human words, without qualification."²⁸ Ironically, in his effort to defend the freedom of God Barth actually ends up severely limiting God's ability to speak *where and when* it pleases him!²⁹

Luther: Spoken and Written Word

If the theology of Scripture is most appropriately considered under the theology of the Word of God, it follows that a dogmatic account of the Scriptures should draw from theologians who have made significant contributions to the theology of the Word. That is what makes Karl Barth an important conversation partner in this project—he is undoubtedly the most significant "theologian of the Word" in the twentieth century. But he is not the first "theologian of the Word," and a close look at the small print in the first

²⁷ Barth, *CD* 1/2:499. Emphasis added.

²⁸ Work, *Living and Active*, 84.

²⁹ Barth is right that the Word of God is based on God's own decision. But according to the biblical narrative God *decided* to speak his Word through prophets, apostles, preachers, and most importantly, through Jesus.

volume of *Church Dogmatics* shows where Barth got much of his “theology of the Word.” He acknowledges that his goal is to recover the understanding of the Word of God that characterized the theology of the sixteenth-century Reformation, and the theologian he turns to most frequently and extensively is Martin Luther.³⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan describes this “theologian of the Word”:

The theology of Martin Luther was a theology of the Word of God. “The Word they still shall let remain, Nor any thanks have for it; He’s by our side upon the plain With His good gifts and Spirit”—this is not only the concluding stanza of Luther’s hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is our God”; it is the theme and the motto of his whole life and thought. He lived *by* the Word of God; he lived *for* the Word of God. It is no mistake, then, when interpreters of Luther take his doctrine of the Word of God as one of the most important single keys to his theology.³¹

Despite the fact that Luther himself never wrote a dogmatic account of the Scriptures or the Word of God, his understanding of the Word has been summarized by a number of Luther scholars. Two specific studies on Luther’s understanding of the Word of God help show how Luther provides the necessary corrective to Barth’s dogmatic framework.

In his essay called “The Proclamation of the Word in Luther’s Thought” David Lotz asks a basic question: “What does Luther mean by ‘Word of God?’”³² He answers it with thirteen points that summarize the “leading features” of Luther’s theology of the Word of God.³³ First and foremost, when Luther speaks about the Word of God he is thinking of *God himself*. God is *Deus loquens* (the speaking God), and his speaking

³⁰ Barth praises the sixteenth-century reformers for their understanding of Scripture, which was an “honouring of God” (CD 1/2:522). He gives credit for this to Luther and Calvin, but he notes that Luther spoke more “clearly and acutely” (CD 1/2:521).

³¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 48.

³² Lotz, “Proclamation,” 345.

³³ These thirteen points are not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of Luther’s theology of the Word of God.

“always refers to God’s speaking in Christ.”³⁴ Jesus is the eternal Word through whom all things were created and through whom salvation comes to human beings. Second, the Word of God is God’s *historical acts of redemption and revelation*. Luther writes, “In the case of God to speak is to do, and word is the deed,”³⁵ and this applies specifically to his acts of saving and revealing himself as Savior. Third, Luther emphasizes the *spoken* Word of God, the oral witness to the Word made flesh. Christians live by their ears, not by their eyes, and the Word that they hear is the good news that in Jesus Christ God is “for us.” Fourth, the Word of God as Gospel is found throughout the Old Testament in the *promises of a coming Savior*. The New Testament is the *announcement (Botshafft)* of the arrival of this Savior that is given to the church to proclaim. Here Lotz points to Luther’s description of the church as a “mouth-house” (*Mundhaus*) with the mission of proclaiming the Gospel. Fifth, Luther identified the *Old Testament* as the Word of God. It is “the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies.”³⁶ The Gospel that the church is called to proclaim is “hidden” in the Old Testament. Sixth, Scripture stands as *the record of past proclamation*. It was recorded so that it might serve present-day proclamation of the Gospel. Seventh, Luther speaks of the *Holy Scriptures* themselves as the written Word of God “because they have the Holy Spirit as their ultimate author.”³⁷ Lotz speaks of the Scriptures as the Word of God in a “secondary or derivative sense”³⁸ because they always point beyond themselves to Jesus, the incarnate Word. Eighth, Luther placed a great deal of emphasis on the *oral proclamation* of Christ and his

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Luther, *LW* 12:33.

³⁶ Luther, *LW* 35:236.

³⁷ Lotz, “Proclamation,” 348. *Emphasis added.*

³⁸ Ibid.

benefits. Lotz identifies this as Luther's "basic form of the Word."³⁹ This oral proclamation takes place in public preaching, the administration of the sacraments, confession and absolution, and the mutual conversation and consolation of believers. Ninth, the proclaimed Gospel is the Word of God because it brings the *real presence of Christ*. Jesus is not only the object of gospel proclamation, but also the subject—he is the one who speaks and the one who accompanies his Word. Tenth, Luther understood the present-day preaching of the Word as an *event*, for it brings salvation to those who hear and believe it. This salvation is not something that happened in the past, but something that happens in the present. Eleventh, this "Word event" brings about a *personal union* between Christ and the Christian. Lotz explains, "Christ lives in the Christian *by means of the preached Word*."⁴⁰ Twelfth, Luther recognized that the *law and gospel* together to constitute the Word of God. The law shows sinners that they need a Savior and the Gospel accomplishes the salvation that is needed by creating faith in Christ. It is important that the law and Gospel are preached in that order. Finally, Luther envisioned the church as the *daughter or creation of the Word*. The most important office in the church is the preaching office (*Predigtamt*) because through preaching the gospel Christ creates and sustains his church.

A recurring theme in these thirteen points that Lotz makes about Luther's conception of the Word of God is the importance of the proclamation of the Word in Luther's theology. Rather than trying to summarize these thirteen points any further, we turn immediately to another study of Luther's understanding of the Word of God that narrows his theology of the Word of God into more manageable categories.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 350. His emphasis.

Uuras Saarnivaara describes Luther's understanding of the relationship between the Scriptures and the proclamation of the Gospel in an essay called "Written and Spoken Word."⁴¹ Like Lotz, Saarnivaara recognizes the central significance of the proclamation of the Word in Luther's theology. He notes that Luther focused attention on the spoken Word because he believed that God forgives sins and creates faith primarily through the message he has given his people to proclaim. Luther emphasized Jesus' commission to the disciples to forgive sins (John 20:23 and Matt. 18:18); he highlighted Paul's insistence that "faith comes through hearing" (Romans 10:17); and he recognized the proclamation of the Gospel as the power of salvation for those who believe (Rom 1:16). He writes, "Zum ersten vor allen dingen das mündliche wort müsse da sein und mit den ohren gefasst werden, wo der heilige geist ins herz komen sol, welcher mit und durch das wort daw herz erleuchtet und den glauben wirket."⁴² There was no question in Luther's mind that when the Gospel is faithfully preached, God himself is speaking.⁴³

This emphasis on the proclamation of the Word in Luther's theology went together with his emphasis on the Scriptures as the written Word of God and the "highest norm and standard of our faith and life."⁴⁴ Although he recognized that they were written by sinful human beings, Luther believed that the Scriptures ultimately come from God and are therefore completely faithful and true. Unlike many proponents of the doctrine of inspiration, Luther did not spend time and energy trying to resolve apparent "discrepancies" that occasionally appear in Scripture. When he came across something in

⁴¹ Uuras Saarnivaara, "Written and Spoken Word," *Lutheran Quarterly* 2 (1950), 166-179.

⁴² Luther, *Ein Sermon Mart. Luther uber das Evangelion Matth. ix*, in *WA* 29:580.

⁴³ See H. S. Wilson, "Luther on Preaching as God Speaking" *Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (2005): 63-75.

⁴⁴ Saarnivaara, "Written and Spoken Word," 167.

the Scriptures that he could not “harmonize,” Saarnivaara notes that Luther would suggest that we should simply “let it pass.”⁴⁵ Because we are limited in our understanding as fallen human beings, it should not surprise us if we do not understand how certain parts of the Scriptures could be true. But this should not lead us to question their truthfulness or reliability. Instead, Luther suggests, “Give the Holy Ghost the honor of being wiser than yourself, for you should so deal with Scripture that you believe that God himself is speaking.”⁴⁶ With child-like faith Luther simply believed that the Scriptures are “from God.”⁴⁷ Saarnivaara concludes:

Luther did not see any conflict between his conviction that Scripture is the normative word of God, and that God bestows His grace and forgives sins by means of the spoken word and sacraments. All preaching and administration of the sacraments have their source in the written word of God and must take place according to it. Therefore, the proclamation of the word (in sermons and in personal absolution and counseling) and the administration of the sacraments is inseparably connected with the Scriptures. Only a scriptural teaching, preaching, and consolation leads men to the knowledge of Christ and salvation in Him.⁴⁸

In order to summarize Luther’s view that the Scriptures and the proclamation of the Gospel are both the Word of God, Saarnivaara speaks of two forms of the Word (in addition to Christ, the incarnate Word). He explains:

Luther gives both to Scripture (and the written word in general) and the oral testimony and preaching of the word their proper places in the Christian church: the written Word of God is primarily a “revelation-word,” which is the norm and standard of all faith, life and teaching. The spoken word (in preaching, absolution, and sacraments) is the actual “means-of-grace-word,” through which God forgives sins, works faith, and imparts His Holy Spirit.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ibid., 168.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Michael Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Dubuque, Iowa: The Wartburg Press, 1944), 92.

⁴⁷ Saarnivaara, “Written and Spoken Word,” 168.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 169.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 174. “Revelation-word” and “means-of-grace-word” are Saarnivaara’s terms.

As the “means-of-grace-word,” Luther emphasized that God actually speaks through human beings when they proclaim the Gospel of Christ crucified. Unlike Barth, Luther would have affirmed Wolterstorff’s definition of “deputized discourse.” Luther emphasizes that throughout the biblical narrative God *himself* speaks through his prophets, apostles, preachers, and especially Jesus. This spoken form of the Word is the means by which God normally creates faith in the hearts of sinful human beings (Rom. 10:17).⁵⁰ As the “revelation-word,” Luther understood the writings of the prophets and apostles to be perfectly true despite occasional appearances to the contrary. The written Word of God alone is the final rule and norm in the church. This is what *sola scriptura* means. Like Chemnitz after him, Luther suggested that the apostolic Word was written “to provide against the false doctrines and to keep Christians in the divine truth.”⁵¹

Whether he was speaking about the “revelation-word” (Scripture) or the “means-of-grace-word” (Gospel proclamation), Luther always understood the Word of God in christological and soteriological (that is, cruciform) terms. Scripture exists to serve the proclamation of the Gospel, and the Gospel is nothing more than Christ crucified for our forgiveness and salvation.

A Revised Threefold Form of the Word

Luther grants God the freedom to speak his living and active Word through sinful human beings, and in this way he follows the biblical narrative more consistently than Barth. Barth’s structure remains helpful, however, for the biblical narrative clearly speaks of three forms of the Word of God in the divine economy. Luther and Barth together

⁵⁰ On occasion Luther spoke of Scripture as a “means-of-grace-word,” but he normally emphasized the need for the oral proclamation of the Word. He emphasized Paul’s words that faith comes through “hearing” (Rom. 10:17).

⁵¹ Saarnivaara, “Written and Spoken Word,” 171.

remind us that the written Word of God must always be considered in conjunction with the personal and spoken forms of the Word of God.

I conclude this chapter by outlining a revised threefold form of the Word of God.⁵² This structure will provide the dogmatic context for considering three specific aspects of the theology of Scripture in the next chapter.

The Personal Word of God

Any discussion of the Word of God must begin by recognizing that God is a speaking God. He is a “God of Word”⁵³—and a trinitarian Word at that. Through his Word and in his Spirit God brought all things into existence at creation. Through his Word and in his Spirit he issued commands that his human creatures are morally obliged to obey. Through his Word and in his Spirit he makes promises that he morally obligates himself to keep. It is this eternal Word of God, John says in his prologue, that became a human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the personal, Spirit-anointed Word who speaks the Father’s commands and fulfills the Father’s promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation. As Paul explains, “All the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor. 1:20). It was precisely because of his speaking, however, that the personal Word of God was rejected by his own people and put to death on the cross. Three days later the Father vindicated his message and mission by raising him from the dead in the power of the Spirit (Rom. 1:4), just as Jesus had promised (John 2:22).

⁵² This is truly an outline at this point. The substance of my understanding of the Word of God in the divine economy is the subject of chapter 3, and a full-blown theology of the Word of God is well-beyond the scope of this dissertation. I am reminded that Barth’s doctrine of the Word spanned 1370 pages.

⁵³ Work, *Living and Active*, 33.

This first form of the Word of God is the *personal* Word, Jesus Christ. Through him God spoke *definitively, ultimately, decisively, and for all time*. Unlike the impersonal and objective Deism of the Enlightenment, the Christian God restores a relationship with his sinful human creatures by speaking his Word in his Spirit for their forgiveness and salvation.

The Spoken Word of God

The speaking God in the biblical narrative usually speaks his Word through someone other than himself. Throughout the biblical narrative God deputized individuals to speak in his name and with his authority. In the Old Testament he deputized prophets to speak his Word as they were filled with the Spirit of Christ (1 Peter 1:10–11). In the New Testament Jesus sent the apostles with his Spirit to speak his Word with his authority, and the Spirit of truth guided them in their proclamation of the Word (John 16:13). In the church of all ages God continues to send his people with his Spirit to forgive sins (John 20:21–23; 2 Cor. 5:18–19) and proclaim the Word of Christ for the salvation of those who believe (Rom 1:16). The church's proclamation of the Gospel takes place in public preaching, confession and absolution, the administration of the sacraments, and the mutual conversation and consolation of believers. In this way the church continues the apostolic mission.

The second form of the Word of God is a *spoken* Word, and there are three conclusions that can be drawn from the biblical narrative about this form of the Word. First, the spoken Word points to the personal Word. The prophets testified to the death and resurrection of Jesus (Luke 24:44–46), the apostles proclaimed nothing but “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23), and preachers are sent to proclaim the “word of

Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Second, the spoken Word is living and active (Heb. 4:12). Luther calls it a “means-of-grace-word” through which God judges those who are sinful and forgives those who are repentant. It is through this form of the Word that God creates saving faith in Christ (Rom. 10:17). Third, the Word of God is true. All of God’s promises were proved true in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. As Jesus said to the Father, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17).

The Written Word of God

Much of what needs to be about the Scriptures has already been said. The writings of the prophets and apostles are nothing other than definitive versions of the Word that they were sent to proclaim. These writings are the third form of the Word of God—the *written* Word. As the written form of the Word, the same conclusions may be made about the Scriptures that were made about prophetic and apostolic proclamation of the Word. Like the spoken Word, the Scriptures are living and active. God works through the Scriptures to kill those who disobey his commands and to forgive and make alive those who believe in Jesus. Also like the spoken Word, the written Word is true. Jesus affirmed the truth of the Old Testament (John 10:35) and he promised the Spirit of truth to those who would eventually produce the New Testament (John 16:13). The truth of both the Old and New Testaments is confirmed by Jesus’ vindicating resurrection from the dead.

To describe the written Word as “living and active” and “true” is to say important things about the theology of Scripture. But perhaps the most important thing to be said about the written Word of God is what John says at the end of his gospel. He makes explicit his purpose for writing: “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John

20:31). With these words John provides both the starting point and the ultimate goal of the Christian theology of Scripture.

CHAPTER FIVE

TOWARD A CRUCIFORM THEOLOGY OF SCRIPTURE

“Christians are a ‘people of the book,’” write Stanley Grenz and John Franke.¹ The book they are talking about is the Bible, of course, and many Christians—especially those who want to separate themselves from the critical side of the modern debate—embrace this description of what it means to be a Christian. Those who accept the title of “people of the book” also commonly describe themselves as “Bible believers” who worship at “Bible chapels” and attend “Bible colleges.” They often begin their confession of faith by affirming the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures and they speak with confidence about the Bible as the foundation of their faith.²

As I argued at the beginning of this project, there is little doubt that the Christian faith is inseparable from the writings of the prophets and apostles. It is equally clear that the reliability of the Scriptures is fundamentally important for the continuity of historic Christianity. But the description of Christians as “people of the book” or “Bible believers” is not as helpful as it first appears. John Barton makes this point in *People of the Book? The Authority of the Bible in Christianity*.³ Barton argues that Christians who identify themselves as “people of the book”

¹ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Post-Modern Context* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), 57. Cf. Willimon, *Shaped*, 11 and Bruce, *The Canon*, 18–19.

² As the popular Sunday School song puts it: “Oh, the B-I-B-L-E, yes that’s the book for me. I stand alone on the Word of God, the B-I-B-L-E!”

³ John Barton, *People of the Book? The Authority of the Bible in Christianity* (Louisville, Kent.: John Knox Press, 1988)

misunderstand the Scriptures and adopt a narrow, fundamentalistic view of the nature and function of the Bible.⁴ Rather than describing themselves in relation to the Scriptures, says Barton, Christians should understand and identify themselves in relation to Jesus Christ. Joachim Ringleben makes a similar point. He says that Christianity is not so much “eine Buchreligion.” Instead, “Christentum is besser als *Wortreligion* zu kennzeichnen.”⁵

It is as “people of the Word” that I am suggesting Christians should approach the theology of Scripture. “People of the Word” believe first of all in Jesus Christ, the Spirit-filled personal Word of God. This personal Word became flesh and lived among us; he proclaimed repentance and forgiveness of sins as *the* Deputy of God; he suffered and died on the cross for claiming to speak *in the name of* the Father; he was vindicated as the eternal Son of God through his resurrection; and he has promised to return in glory. This personal Word of God is the church’s one foundation. “People of the Word” also believe that God, who spoke *definitively, ultimately, decisively, and for all time* in Jesus Christ, has spoken “in many ways and at many times” (Heb. 1:1) through his deputized prophets and his co-missioned apostles, and that he continues to speak through his people in the church as he sends preachers to proclaim the Gospel of Christ crucified. It is through his spoken Word that God calls sinners to repent of their sins (Acts 2:36–41), offers forgiveness to those who repent (John 20:21–23), and creates faith in the hearts of those who believe (Rom. 10:17). Finally, “people of the Word” believe that the writings of the prophets and apostles are the written Word of God. This belief is a consequence of their belief in Jesus, the personal Word. After his vindicating resurrection Jesus sent his apostles to teach everything he had commanded them and gave them the Spirit of truth to remind them of these things. They

⁴ Barton notes that “People of the book” more accurately reflects the way in which people of Islamic and Jewish faith understanding their holy writings (*People of the Book*, 1).

⁵ Ringleben, “Die Bible,” 29. Emphasis added.

proclaimed the Word of God by speaking and writing (2 Thess. 2:15) so that sinful human beings would believe that Jesus is the Christ and have life in his name (John 20:31). Throughout the centuries the church has passed along this apostolic preaching and teaching in a collection of writings known as the "New Testament."

The modern approach to the Bible is missing this foundation in the theology of the Word. As a result, the debate over the Scriptures has failed to address a number of important questions about the canon, authority, and interpretation. These questions could be passed over as long as the Scriptures were assumed to be central to the life, witness, and reflection of the church. But when that assumption was exposed and criticized, previously held assumptions about the canon, authority, and interpretation came into question as well. When it came to the canon, the conception of the Scriptural writings as inspired assumed that they were canonical and therefore authoritative. When it came to interpretation, the conception of the Scriptural writings as inerrant assumed that a certain kind of interpretation (namely, literal) was inevitable. In the contemporary post-modern context these assumptions may no longer be taken for granted.

This fifth and final chapter is my attempt to demonstrate in very preliminary ways how a theology of Scripture that is grounded in the theology of the Word of God handles today's challenges. Rooted in the account of the Word of God that I offered in chapters 3 and 4, chapter 5 asks some basic and foundational questions about the canon, authority, and interpretation of the Scriptures. When it comes to the canon: what is the purpose of the New Testament canon in the first place? When it comes to authority: how does God exercise his authority through these particular writings? When it comes to interpretation: what does it mean to read the written Word of God? These are not the only questions that must be addressed in the theology of Scripture, for

the issues involved are innumerable. They provide an important start, however, and therefore chapter 5 should be seen as only the beginning of the discussion.

Canon

For a thousand years Christian theology has developed in a “Christendom” or “Constantinian” situation in which “church” and “world” are not clearly distinguished. This has meant that certain basic issues have been taken for granted. One such issue has been the “canon” of the Scriptures. As I noted in chapter 1, in modern times much has been argued about the *authority* and *interpretation* of the Scriptures, but until recently, the canon of the Old and New Testaments has largely been assumed.

Today, however, basic questions about the canon can no longer be ignored. Indeed, it is enough to mention a few names to raise questions: Dan Brown, Elaine Pagels, Bart Ehrman. They (and others) have challenged the identity of Jesus Christ, the development of early Christianity, and, of particular interest for this study, the formation of the New Testament canon. They have made urgent the canonical *crux theologorum*: why some and not others? Why were *these* particular writings included in the canon and others left out? Those who challenge the traditional canon answer this question by arguing that many “Scriptures” were wrongly excluded from the New Testament. Ehrman suggests, “Ancient Christians knew of far more Gospels than the four that eventually came to be included in the New Testament.”⁶ He asserts that these other writings had “equally impressive pedigrees”⁷ and equal claims to the truth about Jesus. They were left out of the canon, not because they were deficient or false, but because they supported positions that ended up on the losing side of ecclesio-political power struggles. Once advocates

⁶ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

of what would become “orthodoxy” gained control of the church, these “lost Scriptures” were marginalized, rejected, and destroyed.

This conception of the formation of the New Testament calls into question more than the usual issues associated with the biblical canon. It also suggests that the very idea of a New Testament has to be reconsidered. Once one starts questioning the canon so radically, there is no reason to stop with the suggestion that we should include other writings in the New Testament. We must not only ask, “Why some and not others?” but also, “Why are there any authoritative writings at all?”⁸ This question means that an adequate theology of Scripture must also deal with the question, “What is the purpose of the New Testament canon?” The appropriate answers to these questions are grounded in the mission that Jesus gave to his apostles and the church after his resurrection. They are found in the continuation of the economy of salvation into the first two centuries.

Before we answer these questions, however, there is an important dogmatic consideration that any contemporary theology of Scripture should also recognize. Modern theology has made an account of the canon hard to imagine properly, because, as John Webster has shown, modern theology has conceived of the canon—Old Testament and especially New Testament—wrongly.⁹ It has “mislocated” the canon in dogmatic theology, and this mislocation has been brought about by two powerful considerations. The first involves the migration of the theology of Scripture to the prolegomena of dogmatic theology. Transplanted out of its original soil (namely, “the saving

⁸ We will deal with the question of authority in the below.

⁹ John Webster, “The Dogmatic Location of the Canon,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 43 (2001):17–43.

economy of the triune God”¹⁰), the canon has become detached from the rest of the Christian faith. Webster explains, “Instead of being a consequential doctrine (consequential, that is, upon logically prior teaching about the provenience of God in God’s dealing with the creation), it shifts to become a relatively isolated piece of epistemological teaching.”¹¹ Webster is referring here to the doctrine of inspiration. Its treatment of the Scriptures in the prolegomena has forced inspiration to provide the epistemological warrant for the rest of the Christian confession as an *a priori* foundation for the other articles of faith.¹² This has resulted in an isolation of “*sola scriptura* from the other Reformation exclusive particles *solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, and *solo verbo*.”¹³

A second consideration contributing to the dogmatic mislocation of the canon comes from the other side of the modern debate. Webster notes that critical theologians often regard the formation of the canon as a creative act of the church solely within the realm of religious history (*Entstehungsgeschichte*). It had little to do with the providential direction of God and was merely another instance of ecclesiastical decision-making. In this conception the canon is “product, not norm.”¹⁴ This view is attractive, Webster admits, because it recognizes that the church did, in fact, make decisions about which books belong in the Bible. The result, however, is that the canon becomes nothing more than any other ecclesiastical decision. It is “(at best) an arbitrary or accidental factor in Christian religious history or (at worst) an instrument of political

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Webster does not discuss how the migration of Scripture to the prolegomena came about. Robert Kolb investigates this shift in dogmatic structure in his study of the ordering of Melancthon’s *Loci Communes* and the tradition that followed. “The Ordering of the *Loci Communes Theologici*: The Structuring of the Melancthonian Dogmatic Tradition” *Concordia Journal* 23 (October 1997): 317-337.

¹³ Webster, “Dogmatic Location,” 17.

¹⁴ Ibid., 22.

wickedness.”¹⁵ This view raises fundamental questions about the ability of the canon to exercise any meaningful authority in (and over) the church. “In the end,” says Webster, “the canon does not transcend us; we transcend the canon.”¹⁶

Webster helps clarify the task at hand. First, we must locate the canon in the dogmatic theology of the church in a way that allows for us to deal with questions about the composition, collection, and purpose of the New Testament canon. Second, we must answer these questions.

Locating the Canon Dogmatically

Webster shows that the question of the canon belongs neither in the prolegomena nor solely within the realm of religious history. But where *is* the proper dogmatic location of the canon? It is helpful to consider Webster’s own answer. He points to the fundamental Christian concepts of “Trinity, soteriology, pneumatology, and sanctification,” and he insists that the question of the canon ultimately belongs under the doctrine of God and divine revelation.¹⁷ In Barthian fashion Webster views revelation as God’s reconciling self-manifestation as Father, Son and Spirit:

As Father, God is the root or origin of revelation as saving self-manifestation: in him is grounded revelation’s sheer gratuity and sovereign freedom. As the incarnate, crucified and glorified Son, God is the agent through whom the saving history of God with us is upheld against all opposition and denial. As Spirit, God is the agent of revelation’s perfection, its being made real and effective in the community of the church as the reconciled assembly of the saints.¹⁸

With his starting point in God’s triune work of reconciliation Webster is able to appreciate and understand the process of canonization in terms of its historical *and* theological dimensions. The canon is not simply a “list or code,” but rather a “specification of those instruments where the church may reliably expect to encounter God’s communicative presence, God’s self-

¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹⁶ Ibid., 22.

¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

attestation.”¹⁹ Webster’s account does not “short-circuit” the historical processes involved in the canonization of the Scriptures, and neither does it naturalize the canon. Instead, he views the formation of the canon as a unique kind of churchly historical act. “There can be no recourse to denials of the element of human decision-making in the process of canonisation,” he explains. “What is needed, by contrast, is a theological account of the church’s action at this point.”²⁰

Webster begins his account by conceiving of the church as an “assembly around the self-bestowing presence of the risen Christ.”²¹ The church is, properly speaking, a hearing church before it is a speaking church, and it speaks only what it has heard from Christ himself. This hearing takes place within the prophetic presence and activity of Jesus Christ whose own “self-utterance” is the primary speech act from which all other speaking in the church derives. T. F. Torrance writes:

[I]n the apostles as the receiving end of His revealing and reconciling activity, Jesus Christ laid the foundation of the Church which he incorporated into Himself as His own Body, and permitted the Word which he put into their mouth to take the form of proclamation answering to and extending His own in such a way that it became the controlled unfolding of His own revelation within the mind and language of the apostolic foundation.²²

As Spirit-led hearers of this apostolic Word the church made what Webster calls “compliant judgments” about the canon. These judgments exhibit four distinct characteristics. First, canonical judgments are more properly understood as acts of confession rather than acts of selection. Early Christians confessed what they heard (namely, the *viva vox Jesu Christi*

¹⁸ Ibid., 29.

¹⁹ Ibid., 30.

²⁰ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 58.

²¹ Webster, “Dogmatic Location,” 35.

²² T. F. Torrance, “The Word of God and the Response of Man,” in *God and Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 151. Quoted in Webster, “Dogmatic Location,” 35.

mediated through the apostolic testimony) and this message preceded and imposed itself on the church.²³ As acts of confession the church's canonical decisions have "noetic but not ontological force, acknowledging what Scripture is but not making it so."²⁴ Second, canonical judgments are acts of submission. The authority exercised by the church in making canonical decisions was nothing more than its acknowledgment that it stands under the very Scriptures it canonized. Third, as acts of confession and submission, canonical judgments have a "backward reference." More than anything else, canonization *recognizes* the apostolicity of a writing. It *looks backward* to God's saving activity in Jesus Christ and to the witness of this salvation by Jesus' commissioned apostles. Fourth, canonical judgments in the church are a "pledging of itself to be carried by this norm in all its actions."²⁵ When the church canonized certain writings it agreed to be normed by them in its preaching and teaching. Taken together, Webster identifies these four characteristics to depict the church's act of canonization as "properly passive, a set a human activities, attitudes, and relations which refer beyond themselves to prevenient divine acts of speaking and sanctifying."²⁶

Webster's account of the canon is helpful in a number of ways. Most directly relevant, he improves upon the dogmatic mislocation of the canon in the doctrine of inspiration by relocating the canon within the context of God's triune economy of salvation. Moreover, his conception of the church as a "hearing community" takes into account the fact that God communicates with his creation through his Word. This explains more fully the nature of churchly judgments about the

²³ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 62.

²⁴ Webster, "Dogmatic Location," 38.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

shape of the canon and provides a way of taking seriously the historical decisions made by the church without relegating the canon to another piece of ecclesiastical tradition.

Webster's theological account of canonization is still more helpful, however, when compared to other contemporary accounts of the New Testament canon. Before exploring the direction that Webster puts us on, we will take a brief look at these advantages.

The Criteria Question

A central feature of many contemporary discussions about the New Testament canon is the *criteria* question. Which characteristics of a given writing warranted its inclusion in the canon? The answers that follow this question often focus on abstract criteria. Lee McDonald gives a typical response of this kind.²⁷ He suggests that in the process of developing the New Testament canon the church considered four key criteria: apostolicity, orthodoxy, antiquity, use.

Apostolicity meant: "If a writing was believed to have been produced by an apostle, it was eventually accepted as sacred scripture and included in the New Testament canon."²⁸

Apostolicity in this sense refers to the origin of a writing. The *orthodoxy* criterion meant that a writing had to conform to the rule of faith that governed the Christian confession in order to qualify for canonization. Bishop Serapion (c. 200), for example, was asked if the *Gospel of Peter* could be read during worship. Initially he agreed on the basis of its supposed apostolic origin. But later he reversed his decision on the basis of its false teaching: "I have now learnt, from what has been told me, that [the authors'] mind was lurking in some hole of heresy."²⁹ The *antiquity* criterion meant that, for a writing to be considered canonical, it must have been composed in

²⁷ Lee McDonald, "Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church: The Criteria Question" in *The Canon Debate*, 416–439.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 424.

²⁹ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.12.4. Quoted in McDonald, "Identifying Scripture," 428.

close chronological proximity to Jesus' life. McDonald writes, "For the church, the ministry of Jesus had become the defining moment in history. Consequently, the church's most important authorities were those closest to this defining moment."³⁰ The Muratorian Fragment, for example, spoke against the canonicity of the *Shepherd of Hermas* because it was not written during the apostolic age: "It cannot be read publicly to the people in the church either among the prophets, whose number is complete, or among the apostles, for it is after [their] time."³¹ McDonald explains, "The church excluded from the biblical canon any writings that it believed were written *after* the period of the apostolic ministry."³² The fourth criterion of canonicity that McDonald considers is *use*. In order for a writing to be judged canonical, it must have been used in the worship and educational life of the church. This is what Eusebius was getting at in his distinction between the *homologoumena* (agreed upon) and *antilegomena* (spoken against). The former were read as Scripture throughout the church of the fourth century, whereas the canonicity of the latter was questioned among some.

McDonald's account of the canon gives reasons that explain its present form, but it does not satisfactorily explain the development of the canon that took place during the first several centuries. Indeed, he approaches the criteria question retrospectively: he assumes the existence of a New Testament in the early church. The inadequacy of this can be seen when we take a close look at several of his criteria. The "antiquity" criterion assumes a chronological distance that did not exist in the early days of the church. Already in the first century the church was faced with the need to identify which *contemporary* writings faithfully presented the true apostolic Gospel. A similar problem exists for McDonald's conception of the "use" criterion. Certainly the

³⁰ McDonald, "Identifying Scripture," 431.

³¹ *Muratorian Fragment*, lines 73-74. Quoted in McDonald, "Identifying Scripture," 431.

³² *Ibid.*, 431. His emphasis.

writings that were canonized had been in use throughout the first few centuries, but McDonald's understanding follows Eusebius' fourth-century distinctions between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena*. This is anachronistic, for the historical observations made by Eusebius were based on the canonical decisions that had been made several centuries earlier.

Another inadequacy in McDonald's account is his conception of the "apostolicity" criterion. For him, the apostolicity of a writing is based on its *origin*. If a writing was believed to have been produced by an apostle it was eventually included in the New Testament. Although McDonald is correct in emphasizing that the apostles were sent to proclaim the Word of God, there are two problems with his conception of what makes a writing "apostolic." First, he does not account for canonical writings that were *not* written by apostles (e.g., Mark and Luke). Even if we extend the conception of "apostolicity" to include these writings under something like "apostolic supervision," there remains another problem. The equation of apostolic origin and canonicity would require that every writing produced by an apostle would have been included in the canon for that reason alone. It is hard to dispute, however, that some letters of Paul were not included in the New Testament (1 Cor. 5:9; Col. 4:16).

McDonald's account is not *dogmatic*, and so it would be misleading to speak of it as another instance of what Webster identifies as a "dogmatic mislocation" of the canon. But Webster's criticism does show that an account like McDonald's falls short because it does not account fully for the theological considerations that lie behind the development of the New Testament canon. Furthermore, McDonald's account operates with a conception of the New Testament that was unknown to the church of the first two centuries. Neither the apostolic authors nor the original recipients and readers conceived of the New Testament canon in the same way as the church of the fourth century.

We can overcome the inadequacies of McDonald's account of the canon by reconsidering what it means for a writing to be "apostolic." This requires two things: first, a fresh consideration of his first and second criteria (apostolicity and orthodoxy); second, an explanation of how the theology of the Word of God provides direction for the question of the canon. In other words, we need, as Webster suggests, a properly *dogmatic* account of the canon.

The Canon in Dogmatic Perspective

An appropriate starting point for a dogmatic account of the canon is a redefinition of what it means for a writing to be "apostolic." For this, Webster offers a more adequate explanation than McDonald:

Canonisation is recognition of apostolicity, not simply in the sense of the recognition that certain texts are of apostolic authorship or provenance, but, more deeply, in the sense of the confession that these texts, 'grounded in the salvific act of God in Christ which has taken place once for all,' are annexed to the self-utterance of Jesus Christ. The canon and the apostolicity (and so apostolic succession) of the church are inseparable here.³³

Webster notes that canonization has more to do with the Word Christ sent his apostles to proclaim than with the persons of the apostles themselves. He emphasizes the "presence of the risen Christ," the "self-utterance of Jesus Christ," the "*viva vox Jesu Christi*" mediated through the apostolic testimony. This is helpful for understanding how God works through his spoken and written Word, but it does not get us very far towards understanding how the early church identified *which writings* were apostolic. Despite his helpful account of the canonical decisions made by the early church, Webster begs *the* contemporary canonical question: why were some writings included in the canon and not others?

³³ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 64.

Lacking in Webster's account is a consideration of the "orthodoxy" criterion.³⁴ This criterion is the key to understanding apostolicity (and canonicity), however, and therefore a properly dogmatic consideration of the canon requires a closer look at the *content* of the Word that Jesus spoke through his co-missioned apostles. This requires a return to the economy of salvation that I examined in chapter 3.

The trinitarian economy of salvation begins with Jesus, the personal Word of God who was born of Mary and anointed with the Spirit at his baptism in the Jordan. Sent by the Father in the power of the Spirit, he proclaimed a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. This led to faith in some hearers but also to his rejection and crucifixion. After God vindicated his message and mission by raising him from the dead, Jesus sent his apostles (literally, "sent ones") to continue his mission by preaching and teaching his Word in his name. He gave them his Spirit and his authority to forgive sins and he promised to remind them of everything he had taught them by the Spirit of truth. It was their living and active *message* that separated the apostles from all others. Martin Luther explains the "apostolicity" criterion according to the content of the apostolic message:

Now it is the office of a true apostle to preach of the Passion and resurrection and office of Christ, and to lay the foundation for faith in him, as Christ himself says in John 15[:27], 'You shall bear witness to me.' All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them *preach and inculcate Christ*. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ.³⁵

Luther's insight was that apostolicity was actually a *dogmatic* criterion. The message of the apostles was not simply the Word of Christ in a subjective sense (a Word that Christ himself

³⁴ Here Barth's influence on Webster is obvious. To Barth the important thing is that God speaks. It does not matter so much what he says, because God's speaking is his self-revelation and reconciliation. Webster's emphasis on the "self-utterance of Jesus" and the "presence of the risen Christ" follows Barth's understanding of revelation as reconciliation.

³⁵ LW 35, 396. Emphasis added.

speaks, as Webster emphasizes). It was *also* the Word of Christ in an objective sense (a Word spoken about Christ, as Luther emphasizes). In terms of the canon, this makes the criteria question a question about *content*. The only way to determine which writings were truly apostolic was to examine their content to see if it conformed to the Spirit-led message that the apostles had proclaimed from the beginning. Ralph Bohlmann's study of the canon in the sixteenth century shows that Luther's understanding of apostolicity did not "by-pass the historic apostolate in favor of a dogmatic one, but rather invites the reader to focus on the *message*, instead of the *person*, of the apostle."³⁶

The message of the apostles, Luther rightly recognized, is focused on the cross. The apostles repeatedly emphasize the death and resurrection of Jesus as the center and foundation of their message. Paul summarizes his Gospel, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4; cf. Rom. 6:1-11, Phil. 2:6-10). Peter concludes his proclamation of the Gospel, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it" (Acts 2:23-24; cf. 1 Peter 3:18-22). When it came to identifying which writings were apostolic, the church looked to writings that faithfully proclaimed this Gospel that they had heard, believed, and been shaped by from the beginning. Ignatius sums up this cruciform understanding of the Scriptures: "To my mind it is Jesus Christ who is the original

³⁶ Ralph A. Bohlmann, "The Criteria of Biblical Canonicity in Sixteenth Century Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Reformed Theology" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1968), 116-117, note 56.

documents. The inviolable archives are his cross and death and his resurrection and the faith that came by him.”³⁷

The recognition of “Christ crucified” as *the* criterion of canonicity helps explain the standard by which the early church identified which writings were apostolic, but it does not answer several other important questions about the formation of the New Testament canon: What was the purpose of the New Testament in the first place? and Why were some writings included and not others? In order to answer these questions we must take a closer look at the ministry of the Word in the first two centuries. As New Testament scholar Larry Hurtado notes, “It has been clear for some time that the second century was a (indeed, perhaps *the*) crucial period in the development of the New Testament.”³⁸

Canons in the Early Church

In Jesus’ day there was already a collection of writings that ruled and normed the faith and life of God’s people: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Although there remains some dispute about exactly which books belonged in this collection and about which versions of these books were recognized as canonical,³⁹ there was clearly a collection of writings that the people of God recognized as the written Word of God. Jesus described this collection as “the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 5:17, 7:12, 11:13; Luke 16:16), “Moses and all the Prophets” (Luke 24:27), or

³⁷ *To the Philadelphians* 8.2. Quoted in Williams, *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation*, 53.

³⁸ Larry Hurtado, “The New Testament in the Second Century: Text, Collections and Canon” in *Transmission and Reception: New Testament Text-Critical and Exegetical Studies*, ed. Jeff. W. Childers and D. C. Parker (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2006), 3.

³⁹ Questions remain, for example, about the canonicity of apocryphal writings in the Roman Catholic canon. There are also questions about the differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint and the implications these differences have for the question of the canon. For an overview of the contemporary discussion about both of these (and other Old Testament canonical issues), see McDonald, *The Canon Debate*, 21–263.

"the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). Together they were acknowledged as "all the Scriptures" (24:27, 45), and Jesus insisted that they "cannot be broken" (John 10:35). The existence of an established canon in Jesus' day raises a fundamental question about the existence of a New Testament canon. If there was already an authoritative collection of Scriptures among the first Christians, what need was there for a "new" canon? If we can answer this question adequately, then we can also answer the question, "Why some, not others?"

Before answering these questions it is helpful to take a closer look at the way in which the term "canon" has been used in religious discussions. Eugene Ulrich points out that there are two important but different ways in which "canon" has been understood. The first definition is known as "canon 1" and Ulrich describes it as "the *rule* of faith that is articulated by the Scriptures."⁴⁰ This understanding of the canon refers to the general contours of the Gospel that Jesus sent the apostles to proclaim. It outlines God's plan of salvation and provides a boundary line that separates faithful Christian proclamation from false teaching. "Canon 1" matches the early church's conception of the *regula fidei*. At the end of the first century Clement of Rome wrote about the "glorious and venerable rule (*kanona*)."⁴¹ Irenaeus (c. 130–200) spoke of the "rule of truth,"⁴² Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) pointed to a "rule of faith,"⁴³ and Tertullian (c. 150–220) referred to the "rule" that was taught by Christ.⁴⁴ While the exact wording and specific details involved in these *regulae* varied, they shared a common understanding of the trinitarian Gospel of Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. Robert Wall explains, "These

⁴⁰ Eugene Ulrich, "The Notion and Definition of Canon" in *The Canon Debate*, 28.

⁴¹ 1 Clement 7 in *ANF* 9:231.

⁴² *Against Heresies* I.9.4 in *ANF* 1:330; I.22.1 in *ANF* 1:337.

⁴³ *Stromata* 6.15 in *ANF* 2:510.

⁴⁴ *On the Prescriptions of Heretics* 13 in *ANF* 3:249.

'rules' summarized the heart of Christian faith and served as theological boundary markers for Christian identity."⁴⁵

The second way in which the term "canon" has been used refers more directly to a list of distinctive writings. It is known as "canon 2," and according to Ulrich this is "the *list* of books accepted as inspired scripture."⁴⁶ Unlike "canon 1" which provides a boundary for what is apostolic, "canon 2" lists writings that the early church recognized as definitive instances of the apostolic proclamation. Ulrich notes that this second definition of the canon is usually in effect when it comes to discussions about the biblical canon:

Though the adjective 'canonical' is used legitimately in both senses, the noun 'canon [of Scripture]' is predominantly used in the second sense...In such cases, the proper meaning of the canon is the definitive list of inspired, authoritative books which constitute the recognized and accepted body of sacred scripture of a major religious group, that definitive list being the result of inclusive and exclusive decisions after serious deliberation.⁴⁷

With this distinction between "canon 1" and "canon 2" in mind, we return to the relationship between the personal Word of God and the question of the New Testament canon in the first century. Prior to the development of either the *regula fidei* or the New Testament, the church in its earliest years simply lived according to this Gospel that Jesus and his Spirit-led apostles preached and taught. Whether it was proclaimed by word of mouth or sent by letter (2 Thess. 2:15), the early Christians conformed their faith and life to the message of Christ crucified. At the same time, however, false teachers arose and introduced distortions, contradictions, and confusions to the church's message and mission (see Gal. 1:6-9). This made

⁴⁵ Robert W. Wall, "Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The 'Rule of Faith' in Theological Hermeneutics," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 89.

⁴⁶ Ulrich, "The Notion," 29.

⁴⁷ Ulrich, "The Notion," 29.

it necessary for the church to identify a standard by which it could judge and regulate faithful preaching and teaching. As the first century ended and the second century began both “canon 1” (in the sense of a *rule* of faith) and “canon 2” (in the sense of a *list* of writings) arose to serve this purpose.

“Canon 1” provided a boundary for separating the true proclamation of the Word from false teachers who proclaimed a different “gospel.” It was an outline, a roadmap of the basic components of the trinitarian economy of salvation. Preaching and teaching that upheld and was consistent with the features of God, Christ, and the Spirit in the *regula fidei* were recognized as “apostolic.” They were apostolic not simply or even primarily because of their relation to the *persons* of the apostles, but because they conformed to the apostolic message. This *regula* was passed along in and gave shape to the early church’s confessions of faith, hymns, and liturgical practices, and it was central to the form, content, and function of the church’s official creeds. “Canon 2” also provided a boundary between true and false preaching and teaching, but in a different way. Rather than outlining the general boundaries for faithful preaching and teaching, this canon arose as a list of writings that were recognized as clear and paradigmatic expressions of the Gospel that the apostles were sent to proclaim. The church recognized these writings as faithful and definitive versions of the apostolic proclamation of Christ, the doctrine based on his life, death, and resurrection, and the warnings and exhortations for his disciples.

This answers our first question: what is the purpose of the New Testament? The New Testament was gathered together to *regulate* the preaching and teaching of the church by *preserving* definitive versions of the Word that was spoken and written by the Spirit-led apostles of Jesus Christ. This also begins to answer our second question: why some and not others? The writings that were included in “canon 2” were recognized as definitive versions of the apostolic

proclamation by virtue of their faithfulness to the Gospel of Christ crucified. This is what it means for apostolicity to be a *dogmatic* criterion of canonicity. Writings that proclaimed a message that conflicted with this apostolic Gospel were recognized by the early church as distortions and imposters. This includes Gnostic gospels that proclaim a different Christ, "a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6). These writings did not present Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, born of Mary; as the one crucified and risen on the third day; as the one who ascended into the heavens and who will return in glory to judge the living and the dead. Their deviation from the recognized apostolic message summarized by Paul as "Christ crucified" meant their disqualification from canonical consideration.

Collections within the Collection

Agreement with the Gospel of Jesus Christ was *the* criterion by which a writing was judged apostolic in the early church. This helps explain why Gnostic gospels were not (and cannot today be) included in the New Testament canon. But this does not fully answer why some were canonized and others were not. In order to complete our answer we must take a closer look at how these specific books were identified by the church of the first- and second-century which heard, believed, and was shaped by the Gospel. These first generations of Christians were in the unique position of identifying which writings belonged in the developing New Testament canon.

There are a variety of ways in which scholars have tried to discover which writings were recognized in the early church as apostolic. Traditionally, much weight has been placed on lists. The Muratorian Fragment, Eusebius' historical observations, and the great uncials have been central components of this discussion. The problem with each of these sources is that they come

from the fourth and fifth centuries (with the possible exception of the Muratorian Fragment⁴⁸). They do not get us back to the crucial second century, and therefore they are not as useful as has often been thought. A second way in which scholars have tried to identify which books were recognized as genuinely apostolic in the early church has been to examine the citations of the early fathers.⁴⁹ It was thought that we could know which writings the fathers recognized as apostolic by examining how they cited early texts. The problem with this approach is twofold. First, it is difficult to determine with certainty what counts as a citation. An allusion to a text is different from a loose citation, which is different still from an exact quotation. Second, the significance of a citation is difficult to measure. The citation of a text—even an exact quotation—does not necessarily mean that the text cited was recognized as genuinely apostolic and canonical. Hurtado explains, “It is dubious to take the form of citations as direct evidence of the state of the texts being cited.”⁵⁰

In recent years scholars have begun to investigate another way of identifying which writings were recognized as apostolic in the early church. Instead of looking at lists or citation practices, more attention has been given to the way in which known apostolic texts were collected and circulated. Prior to taking the shape of a larger “New Testament” collection of writings, it has been noted that several smaller collections existed in the first several centuries. “In a sense,” says Hurtado, “the New Testament is a collection of prior collections.”⁵¹ Today’s

⁴⁸ Traditionally it had been thought that the Muratorian Fragment was a second century document, but that view has recently been challenged. Cf. Geoffrey Mark Hahneman, “The Muratorian Fragment and the Origins of the New Testament Canon,” in *The Canon Debate*, 405–415.

⁴⁹ Cf. Hurtado, “The New Testament,” 15–19.

⁵⁰ Hurtado, “The New Testament,” 17.

New Testament can be divided into three distinct collections: the four gospels, the letters of Paul, and the catholic (or general) epistles. Hurtado explains:

We know that at some point the four canonical Gospels came to be thought of as complementary renditions of the gospel story of Jesus, and came to form a closed circle enjoying distinctive regard in many Christian circles. We know also that collections of Pauline epistles were circulating, probably from the late first century and were likewise treated as scripture in at least some circles.⁵²

J. K. Elliott suggests that these smaller collections functioned canonically by drawing boundaries around books that were unquestionably apostolic. He writes, "When each book circulated as a separate entity, obviously there was no limit to the number of texts that could be received. When certain, approved, texts were gathered into small collections this had the effect of ostracizing and isolating texts which were not deemed suitable for inclusion."⁵³

The earliest collection of known apostolic writings was a collection of Paul's letters. Already at the end of the first century Christians recognized his letters as Scripture (see 2 Peter 3:16⁵⁴). David Trobisch argues that Paul kept a collection of his letters during his own lifetime,⁵⁵ and this seems to be consistent with Paul's request that Timothy bring along his "books" and "parchments" (2 Tim. 4:13). Gamble writes, "It would correspond better with the circumstances and methods of the Pauline mission if the earliest edition of Paul's collected letters had been

⁵¹ Hurtado, "The New Testament," 21.

⁵² Hurtado, "The New Testament," 19. The catholic epistles did not circulate as a firm collection until the fourth century. Harry Gamble notes that, of the catholic epistles, only 1 Peter and 1 John appear to have been known and used widely during the second century. 1 Peter was known and used by Papias, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Origen; 1 John was known and used by Papias, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. "The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Questionis" in *The Canon Debate*, 287.

⁵³ J. K. Elliott, "Manuscripts, the Codex, and the Canon," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 63 (1996), 106.

⁵⁴ The dating of 2 Peter is disputed. Most scholars date it between 60–150 A.D. Richard Bauckham suggests that it was written around 100 A.D. *World Bible Commentary: Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1983), 158.

⁵⁵ See David Trobisch, *Die Entstehung der Paulusbriefsammlung: Studien zu den Anfängen christlicher Publizistik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989).

based on copies retained by Paul and preserved after his death by his associates.”⁵⁶ This means that a collection of Pauline letters would have been in circulation before 100 A.D.⁵⁷ Stanley Porter concludes, “There is reasonable evidence to see the origin of the Pauline corpus during the latter part of Paul’s life or shortly after his death, almost assuredly instigated by a close follower if not by Paul himself, and close examination of the early manuscripts with Paul’s letters seems to endorse this hypothesis.”⁵⁸ The existence of a first-century Pauline collection is important for the question of the canon because it shows that Paul’s Gospel was widely agreed upon by the earliest Christians. The idea that there were many different and conflicting “gospels” in the early church is not consistent with the church’s practice of gathering and circulating the Pauline corpus.

In addition to the Pauline collection, another collection of apostolic writings arose early in the second century. Known as “gospels,” these writings reported the events of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and promise to return. Various pieces of evidence suggest that this collection consisted of four (and only four) accounts from early on. Martin Hengel highlights the application of superscriptions to the four gospels (“The Gospel according to...”) ⁵⁹ and the existence of commentaries on the four gospels before the time of Irenaeus (around 180 AD).⁶⁰ It has also been noted that the four canonical gospels appeared together in the form of a codex, and that they never appeared in a codex together with other gospels. Elliott explains, “The Gospels

⁵⁶ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 100.

⁵⁷ Hurtado, “The New Testament,” 21.

⁵⁸ Stanley Porter, “When and How Was the Pauline Canon Compiled? An Assessment of Theories” in *The Pauline Canon*, ed. Stanley Porter (Boston: Brill, 2004), 126–127.

⁵⁹ Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 48-56.

⁶⁰ Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 57-60. Hurtado notes that no commentaries were written in the second century on any books that did not eventually become included in the twenty-seven book New Testament we have today (“The New Testament,” 25).

that were rejected from that fourfold collection were never bound together with any or all of those four. There are no manuscripts that contain say Matthew, Luke and Peter, or John, Mark and Thomas. Only the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were considered as scriptural and then as canonical.”⁶¹ By the time of Irenaeus, the existence of a fourfold collection of gospels had already received general acceptance in the church. Hengel notes, “[Irenaeus] certainly did not invent this collection himself; it had already existed for quite a long time in the mainstream of the church, largely recognized and used in worship.”⁶² Together with the Pauline epistles (and 1 Peter and 1 John), the four gospels were recognized as definitive versions of the apostolic preaching and teaching by the middle of the second century.⁶³

We have already answered why writings that deviated from the apostolic gospel were not included in the New Testament canon. But what about other first-century writings that were consistent with the true apostolic message? Why were there four gospels, and not five, or one? Why were these particular letters of Paul collected, and not his letter to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16; see also 1 Cor. 5:9)? We can speculate about these questions, but answers will probably always be speculation. This is not a difficulty, however. As I noted above, the New Testament was gathered together to *regulate* the preaching and teaching of the Word that Christ gave to the church. The church did this by *preserving* definitive instances of this apostolic message. The early Christians did not seem interested in preserving a comprehensive or exhaustive list that included *every* faithful apostolic writing. It seems more like a “good enough” collection that remained somewhat fluid or “open” (similar to the composition of the *regula fidei* that exhibited

⁶¹ Elliott, “Manuscripts,” 107.

⁶² Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 10.

⁶³ Hurtado, “The New Testament,” 20.

some flexibility). Writings that had already been collected and were already in circulation among the first Christians were obvious candidates for inclusion.

Up to this point I have said little about Eusebius' fourth-century distinctions between writings that were read and recognized as Scripture throughout the church (*homologoumena*) and those that were questioned in some places (*antilegomena*). Neither have I directly mentioned Athanasius' festal letter of 367 A.D. (the first known list that corresponds exactly to the twenty-seven books that are found in today's New Testament)⁶⁴ or the Third Council of Carthage in 397 A.D. (the first church council on record for listing the contents of the New Testament canon).⁶⁵ These are important developments in the history of the canon. They help us understand the New Testament as we know it today. But they do not help us understand the formation of the New Testament canon in the first and second century. In the fourth century the existence of a New Testament was a matter of fact. The questions that occupied Eusebius, Athanasius, and the Third Council of Carthage had to do with the exact contents of the New Testament that was already in existence. Distinctions between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena* shed light on how writings whose canonicity was uncertain were recognized, but they do not explain why there was a New Testament canon in the first place.

In the first and second century it was not obvious that there would be a New Testament. Paul and the apostles recognized that they were speaking (and writing) the Word of God (see 1 Thess. 2:13), but they probably did not envision a New Testament canon as we know it today (or as the church of the fourth century knew it), and neither did they need it. The apostles simply proclaimed the Gospel that they had been given to proclaim, and the church heard, believed, and

⁶⁴ See Bruce, *The Canon*, 208-210.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 232-233.

was shaped by this proclamation. Early on the church decided to gather and circulate definitive versions of the apostolic message, and when faced with the need to identify a true and faithful standard for judging and regulating the preaching and teaching of the church, these writings were obvious candidates. These initial decisions and developments (to write, collect, and circulate) that took place in the first and second centuries provide the foundation for answering questions about the canon in subsequent centuries—whether they arise in the fourth, sixteenth, or twenty-first century.⁶⁶

Summary

There are two fundamental canonical questions that an account of the theology of Scripture must address: What is the purpose of the New Testament canon? and Why were some writings included and not others? The answers to these questions are found in the trinitarian economy of salvation that was accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This economy continued as the risen Christ sent his apostles and the church with the Spirit to continue his proclamation of the Word for the salvation of the world. It was in this context that the New Testament canon arose.

The development of the New Testament canon in the second century, along with the *regulae fidei*, testifies to the church's message: Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary and baptized in Jordan, preached and did signs and wonders, for which he brought about repentance and faith but also rejection and crucifixion, and on the third day was raised from the dead and ascended into the

⁶⁶ It may be asked whether a New Testament canon was necessary at all, and whether the *regulae fidei* could have sufficiently served to regulate the church's preaching and teaching. This is a valid question. It moves beyond the question of the purpose of the New Testament and asks a more involved question about *why* the New Testament developed. A sufficient answer would include a comprehensive examination of the historical developments that took place in the in the first four centuries. That is beyond the scope of this project. The point that I am trying to make is that the New Testament that *did* develop served to regulate the church's preaching and teaching by preserving definitive versions of the apostolic proclamation.

heavens with the promise to return in glory. As a witness to this Gospel, the New Testament (together with the *regula fidei*) served to *regulate* the church's preaching and teaching. It did this by *preserving* definitive versions of the pure apostolic preaching and teaching of the Word. This explains why some writings have been canonized, not others. Writings like the Gnostic gospels testified to a different Christ. They did not present Jesus as the incarnate Son of God who was born of the virgin Mary; as the one crucified and raised on the third day; as the one who ascended into heaven and will return in glory. Rather than being recognized as definitive versions of the one true Gospel, it was false teaching like theirs that led to the identification of a New Testament canon in the first place. Already in the first century the church recognized a collection of Paul's letters as the standard for apostolic preaching and teaching, and by the middle of the second century a fourfold collection of gospels was recognized throughout the church. These canonical collections show that there was widespread agreement about the content of the Gospel among the earliest Christians.

Recent challenges to the formation of the New Testament canon reflect the scandal of particularity. Why this Jesus? In dealing with this question, I have tried to emphasize that this problem belongs first of all to Jesus himself. His claims to be the Son of God and Christ led to his rejection and crucifixion, and belief in him on *these* terms comes only because he was raised from the dead. Or, in the language of Wolterstorff, Jesus is *the* Deputy of God who claimed to speak for God with his authority. Some believed this claim, but others rejected it and crucified him. It was this claim that God vindicated by raising him from the dead. This is also the message that the church proclaimed and preserved in the writing, collection, and canonization of writings that we now call the "New Testament." When it became necessary to identify a standard for regulating its preaching and teaching, the church turned naturally the writings that had already

been collected and circulated. In later centuries the validity of some of these writings became the object of scrutiny, and at this time distinctions between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena* became important.

Still, it seems that there could have been other legitimate, that is, orthodox, candidates. What about them? When the purpose of the canon is seen as *regulative*, it becomes apparent that it was not necessary to include *every* faithful apostolic writing. The list of definitive versions only had to be “good enough” rather than exhaustive, and its composition could remain somewhat flexible.⁶⁷

In his criticism of the Council of Trent, Martin Chemnitz maintained, “The church does not have such power, that it can make true writings out of false, false out of true, out of doubtful and uncertain, certain, canonical and legitimate.”⁶⁸ This criticism is still appropriate today. Writings that were not identified as definitive versions of the apostolic Word during the pivotal first and second centuries (e.g., Ehrman’s “lost scriptures”) cannot be seriously considered as canonical today because they testify to a different gospel. Chemnitz’s words also apply, however, to defenders of the traditional canon who are guilty of “short-circuiting” the historical processes involved in the formation of the New Testament canon. This is seen most obviously in the widespread disregard for the questions that existed in the early church about the canonicity of several of the New Testament books. Throughout the church Bibles continue to roll off the press without mention of the historical uncertainties surrounding Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. If the church is to take seriously the history behind the canon, it must

⁶⁷ This conception of the canon rules out the possible inclusion of a hypothetical letter or gospel that might be discovered in the future—even if its apostolic authenticity could be proved beyond “reasonable doubt.” There is simply no need for any further canonical writings.

⁶⁸ Chemnitz, *Examination*, 181.

acknowledge that these writings were not universally recognized as definitive versions of the apostolic Gospel in the first several centuries.

Authority

The authority of the Scriptures has stood at the center of the modern “battle for the Bible.” Proponents of the doctrine of inspiration have gone to great lengths to argue that the Scriptures are the inspired and inerrant Word of God and therefore the final authority in the church. Robert Preus explains, “The importance of the authority of Scripture to the orthodox Lutheran teachers of the seventeenth century cannot be overstated.”⁶⁹ The foundation for their defense of the authority of the Scriptures is Paul’s description of the Scriptures as *theopneustos* (2 Tim. 3:16) and 2 Peter’s statement that the prophets were “carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). Biblical authority in this view is based “upon its divine origin, upon its inspiration,”⁷⁰ and it is often equated with the historical truthfulness of the Scriptures. The logic goes something like this: (a) the Bible is authoritative because it is inspired by the Holy Spirit; (b) because it is inspired it is historically true; (c) its authority, therefore, stands or falls with its historical truthfulness. So Lindsell argues, “The authority of the Bible is viable only if the Bible itself is true. Destroy the trustworthiness of the Bible, and its authority goes with it. Accept its trustworthiness and authority becomes normative...Infallibility and authority stand or fall together.”⁷¹ On the other side of the modern debate consistent critics have concluded that the Bible is not the Word of God. It is neither inspired nor inerrant; many of its stories are fictional;

⁶⁹ R. Preus, *Inspiration*, 93.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷¹ Lindsell, *Battle*, 39.

and its commands do not apply to people of all times and places. The Bible remains useful, but it is no more authoritative than any other human composition.⁷²

Although many nuances and qualifications apply, the modern debate over biblical authority has not gone much further than this. Theologians continue to disagree about inspiration and inerrancy, and they continue to debate whether or not the Bible is authoritative. But in the process they have spent little time unpacking *how* the authority of the Scriptures is exercised in the economy of salvation.⁷³ In order to understand the authority of the Bible, we need to begin by considering the concept “authority” itself.

Authority as a Functional Concept

In chapter 1 we investigated David Kelsey’s study of the authority of the Scriptures in modern theology. He notes that authority is a functional and relational concept. “If scripture is authority,” he suggests, “it is always authority *for* somebody or somebodies, and authority for them *in regard* to something else.”⁷⁴ Stephen Fowl notes the relational aspect of biblical authority: “The authority of Scripture, then, is not so much an invariant property of the biblical texts, as a way of ordering a set of textual relationships. To call scripture authoritative also establishes a particular relationship between that text and those people and communities who treat it as authoritative.”⁷⁵ This means that (contra Lindsell) the authority of the Scriptures do *not* stand or fall with inspiration and inerrancy. Rather, authority is inherent in the description of a writing as “Scripture.” Kelsey explains:

⁷² See Borg, *Reading the Bible*, 26.

⁷³ Armin Wenz notes that this question is fundamental to the authority of the Scriptures: “Strittig ist nicht ob, sondern, ‘wie’ die Schrift ‘Autorität sei und normierende Kraft gegenüber allen christlich-theologischen Aussagen besitze’” (*Das Wort Gottes*, 11).

⁷⁴ Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, xi.

⁷⁵ Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 6.

“Authoritative” is part of the meaning of “scripture”; it is not a *contingent* judgment made about “scripture” on other grounds, such as their age, authorship, miraculous inspiration, etc... To call certain texts “scripture” is, in part, to say that they ought to be *used* in the common life of the church in normative ways such that they decisively rule its form of life and forms of speech. Thus part of what it means to call certain texts “scripture” is that they are authoritative for the common life of the church. It is to say of them that they *ought* to be used in certain ways to certain ends in that life.⁷⁶

Kelsey demonstrates that as long as Christian communities continue to read the Bible as *Scripture* (whether or not they regard it as the inspired and inerrant Word of God), it will continue to function authoritatively.

Kelsey’s book helps us identify the problem with modernity’s conception of biblical authority. His own account, however, is inadequate in other ways. Rather than grounding the function of the biblical authority in the work of God through his Word, Kelsey grounds biblical authority solely on its function in the church. He writes:

Scripture’s authority specifically for theology, we said, is a function of its authority for the common life of the church. Its authority for the common life of the church consists in its being used in certain *rulish* and normative ways so that it helps to nurture and reform the community’s self-identity and the persona identities of her members... In short, the doctrine of “scripture and its authority” is a postulate of practical theology.⁷⁷

For Kelsey the authority of the Scriptures is an issue of the *church’s* use of these particular writings rather than *God’s* use of them. He explains:

Part of what it means to call a community of persons “church,” according to some concepts “church,” is that use of “scriptures” is essential to the preservation and shaping of their self-identity; part of what it means to call certain writings “scripture” is that according to certain concepts “church” they ought to be used in the common life of the church to nourish and reform it.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 97-98.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

It is this conception of the relationship between biblical and ecclesiastical authority that Webster has in mind when he describes the “post-critical” view of the authority of the Scriptures. He writes,

In such proposals, definition of the character, purpose and interpretation of Scripture is regarded as inseparable from the place occupied by Scripture in the life and practices of the Christian community. Scripture is thus neither a purely formal authority to be invoked in theological deliberation, nor a collection of clues to help us reconstruct its religious and cultural background, nor a symbolic deposit of experience; it is a book of the church, a community text best understood out of its churchly determinism.⁷⁹

The problem with conceiving of the Scriptures primarily as “a book of the church” is that, in the end, the authoritative function of the Scriptures amounts to little more than one instance of ecclesiastical authority. Webster criticizes this view:

Accounts of Scripture as the church’s book may contain dogmatic problems. They may be vitiated by a broadly immanentist ecclesiology, one which accords great significance to the church’s social visibility, which gives prominence to anthropological concepts such as “practice” and “virtue,” but which lacks much by way of the instability of a thoroughly eschatological concept of the church. Indeed, such accounts can sometimes take the form of Ritschlian social moralism, in which the centre of gravity of a theology of Scripture has shifted away from God’s activity toward the uses of the church.⁸⁰

Webster recognizes that the modern battle over the Bible has not dealt sufficiently with the function of biblical authority, and he also sees the problem with conceiving of biblical authority solely within the realm of ecclesiastical practice. He suggests that we return to the doctrine of God—specifically, to the doctrine of the Word of God—and unpack the concept of biblical authority in terms of God’s authoritative work through his Word. He concludes, “Scripture is not the word of the church; the church is the church of the Word.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 43.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

Divine Authority in the Divine Economy

Among those who recognize the functional and relational aspects of biblical authority is N. T. Wright.⁸² He suggests that biblical authority begins with the authority that God exercises among his people: "The phrase 'authority of scripture' can only make Christian sense if it is a shorthand for 'the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture.'"⁸³ Wright recognizes that biblical authority is most properly understood, not as an ontological property of the biblical writings or as an instance of ecclesiastical authority, but as an activity of the triune God. In other words, the authority of the Scriptures is grounded in the work of the Father through his Son and his Spirit. Wright explains:

All authority is from God, declares Paul in relation to governments (Romans 13:1); Jesus says something very similar in John 19:11. In Matthew 28:18, the risen Jesus makes the still more striking claim that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to *him*, a statement echoed elsewhere, for instance in Philippians 2:9-11. A quick glance through many other texts in both Old Testament (e.g. Isaiah 40-55) and New (e.g. Revelation 4 and 5) would confirm this kind of picture. When John declares that "in the beginning was the word," he does not reach a climax with "and the word was written down" but "and the word became flesh"... Since these are themselves "scriptural" statements, that means that scripture itself points—authoritatively, if it does indeed possess authority!—away from itself and to the fact that final and true authority belongs to God himself, now delegated to Jesus Christ.⁸⁴

As Wright notes, the proper starting point for all thinking about authority in the church is the authority of God that he exercises through his Son, the personal Word. In Jesus' life and ministry God acted authoritatively to forgive, teach, and heal; and in Jesus' death and resurrection God exercised his authority over sin, death and the power of the devil.

Wright begins his account of the authority of the Scriptures with the God who acts to rescue his people and to renew his creation in the face of radical evil by establishing his kingdom

⁸² Wright, *Scripture*, 24.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* His emphasis.

within his fallen creation. He suggests that the primary means by which God accomplishes this saving work is the Scriptures. Through these writings the children of Israel discovered who God was and how his purposes were achieved. They were the means by which the kingdom of God was “breaking into the world, and to Israel’s life, in judgment and mercy.”⁸⁵ Standing behind this work of God through the Scriptures is an “elusive but powerful idea of God’s ‘word.’”⁸⁶ The Word of God is not a synonym for the prophetic writings, but rather a “strange personal presence, creating, judging, healing, recreating.”⁸⁷ He explains:

This view of YHWH’s ‘word’ in the Old Testament is very instructive. It is as though, to put it one way, ‘the word of YHWH’ is like an enormous reservoir, full of creative divine wisdom and power, into which the prophets and other writers tap by God’s call and grace, so that the word may flow through them to do God’s work of flooding or irrigating his people. Or, to put it another way, the creator God, though utterly transcendent over and different from the world which he has made, remains present and active within that world, and one of the many ways in which this is so is through his living and active word.⁸⁸

Wright summarizes the entire Old Testament narrative from Abraham to the post-exilic period as the story of Israel who “heard God’s word—in call, promise, liberation, guidance, judgment, forgiveness, further judgment, renewed liberation and renewed promise.”⁸⁹

In the person of Christ God brought this saving work to a completion. Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophetic writings, and through him God performed the same work that he had been doing through the Scriptures of old. “The work that God had done through Scripture in the Old Testament,” says Wright, “is done by Jesus in his public career, his death and resurrection,

⁸⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 29.

and his sending of the Spirit.”⁹⁰ It is in this sense that John describes Jesus as the Word of God made flesh. When Jesus “fulfilled” the Scriptures (e.g., Mark 14:49), he did much more than fulfill isolated verses. Instead, he brought to completion the entire “storyline” of God’s authoritative work among his people. Jesus is the “living embodiment of Israel’s God, the God whose Spirit had inspired the scriptures in the first place.”⁹¹ When it comes to the apostolic church, Wright highlights the fact that the apostles proclaimed the Word before a single New Testament book was ever written. This Word can be summarized as the “story of Jesus (particularly his suffering and death), told as the climax of the story of God and Israel.”⁹² He concludes, “The early church was centrally constituted as the people called into existence, and sustained in that existence, by the powerful, effective and (in that sense and many others) ‘authoritative’ word of God, written in the Old Testament, embodied in Jesus, announced to the world, taught in the church.”⁹³

There is much that is helpful in Wright’s account of the authority of the Scriptures. Like Webster, he recognizes that the people of God have always been constituted by the Word that God speaks—that Christians are most properly understood to be people who hear the voice of the God who speaks.⁹⁴ He points out that God exercises authority through his Word, and that this comes to a climax in Jesus, the personal Word of God. He notes that the message of Jesus’ death and resurrection was the message proclaimed by the apostles and that through this message God brings his authoritative Word to the entire world. He summarizes: “The apostolic writings, like

⁹⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 36.

⁹³ Ibid., 37.

⁹⁴ Luther describes Christians as “little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd” (*SA III.12*).

the 'word' which they now wrote down, were not simply *about* the coming of God's kingdom into the world; they were, and were designed to be, part of the *means whereby* that happened."⁹⁵

Despite these helpful contributions, Wright's account falls short in its conception of the Word of God. Wright recognizes that the Word of God stands behind the authority of the Scriptures, but he does not distinguish between the various forms of the Word of God in the biblical narrative. This is apparent when he speaks about the work that God accomplishes among his people through the Scriptures. He says that God used the Scriptures among Israelites to perform works of judgment and mercy, to equip them for service, and to shape them according to his will. It is true that God did all of these things through the prophetic writings. But before a single Scripture was written (and after they were written) God was accomplishing these things through the Word that he *spoke* through his deputized prophets. There is also a lack of clarity in Wright's suggestion that the incarnation is a continuation of the work that God had been doing through the Old Testament Scriptures.⁹⁶ By speaking of Jesus as a continuation of the Scriptures (rather than speaking about the Scriptures in terms of the work that God accomplishes in Christ), Wright gives dogmatic priority to the written Word over the personal Word—as if Jesus were one form of the Scriptures.⁹⁷

The problem with Wright's account is that he focuses almost exclusively on the story that is told by the Scriptures. He notes that the people of God understood themselves in terms of the story of God's in-breaking kingdom; he emphasizes that this story reaches its climax in Jesus; he conceives of salvation as being incorporated into and transformed by this story. This is good, as

⁹⁵ Wright, *Scripture*, 38. His emphasis.

⁹⁶ This may be the reason Wright does not mention the role of the Word of God in creation.

⁹⁷ I realize that Wright's book is about Scripture and not Jesus—but perhaps that is part of the problem. I am arguing that any theological account of Scripture should begin (and end) with God's saving work through the personal Word of God. That is, a theological account of the Scriptures must be cruciform.

far as it goes. But the Word of God in Wright's account of the story remains unnecessarily "strange" and "elusive."⁹⁸ He speaks about the power of the Word to change lives, but he remains vague about how God actually makes these changes. In order to provide some clarity and completion to Wright's account of the authority of the Scriptures, it is helpful to take a closer look at the authority of the Word of God in the divine economy. This begins with a look at the authority God exercised through his personal Word, Jesus Christ.

Authority to Save and Authority to Teach

Of all the people who encountered Jesus during his earthly ministry, it may have been a soldier who best understood the authority that God exercises through his Word. In Matthew 8 we read about a centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant who had been suffering terribly. Jesus told him that he would come to his home, but the centurion stopped him. "Lord," he said, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it" (Matt. 8:8-9). Jesus responded to the centurion by addressing the crowd who was listening, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith" (Matt. 8:10). He concluded to the centurion, "Go; let it be done for you as you have believed," and Matthew reports that the servant was healed at that very moment (Matt. 8:13).

As the centurion correctly understood, Jesus has the ability to accomplish his will simply by speaking. He demonstrated this ability throughout his life and ministry. We might summarize the various ways in which Jesus does this authoritative work by speaking of two kinds of authority of the personal Word of God. First, the personal Word exercised authority over sin,

⁹⁸ Wright, *Scripture*, 28.

death, and the power of the devil. He did this by forgiving sins (Matt 9:6; Luke 5:24), casting out demons (Mark 3:15; Luke 4:36), healing the sick (Matt. 4:23), and raising the dead to life (Mark 5:35–42; John 11:1–44). Through these actions Jesus demonstrated that he had “authority to save.” Second, Jesus also exercised his authority through his teaching. Throughout his ministry he spoke authoritatively as he taught and proclaimed the truth about God and the expectations that God has for his people. The crowds recognized his teaching authority: “And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt 7:28–29; cf. also Mark 1:22, 29; Luke 4:32). By acting with these two kinds of authority—authority to save and authority to teach—the personal Word of God accomplished the will of his Father in the power of the Spirit. In chapter 4 we considered Uuras Saarnivaara’s study of Luther’s understanding of the written and spoken Word of God. These categories are helpful as we speak about the authority of the Word of God because Jesus’ “authority to save” and “authority to teach” correspond to these two forms of the Word.

Throughout his ministry Luther emphasized the importance and effectiveness of the spoken Word of God. It is this form of the Word that God has sent preachers to proclaim in his name (Rom. 10:17), and this proclamation consisted primarily of calling to repentance and speaking forgiveness in the power of the Spirit (Luke 24:47; Matt. 18:18; John 20:23). Saarnivaara quotes Luther:

There is no other way to have sins forgiven than through the Word... The Lord, our God, has not promised to forgive our sins through any work that we do, but He has connected it with the unique work of Christ who has suffered and risen from the dead. This work he has, through the word, placed in the mouth of the apostles and the ministers of the Church, and in the cases of emergency of all Christians, to the end

that they through it would distribute and proclaim the forgiveness of sins to those who desire it.⁹⁹

Saarnivaara describes the spoken form of the Word as the “means-of-grace-word.” It is the Word through which God works to forgive sins and grant life and salvation. The proclamation of this “means-of-grace-word” is the first and most important mark of the church for Luther, which is why he describes the church as a “mouth-house” rather than a “pen-house.”¹⁰⁰ The church’s mission is to preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments, and absolve repentant sinners. Through these speaking actions the church fulfills its “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18) that Jesus gave to his people. In addition to the spoken Word, Luther emphasized that the Scriptures were the written Word of God. They teach the truth about God and his expectations for his people. Luther writes in his commentary on Genesis, “When we hear that God says something, we must simply hold to it, so that we believe it without any argument and bring our reason into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”¹⁰¹ Although Luther occasionally spoke of the Scriptures themselves as a “means-of-grace-word,”¹⁰² he did not look to the written Word as the means by which God normally accomplishes his saving work. Instead, the Scriptures are primarily the “revelation-word.” They guide and rule the teaching and preaching of the church as “the highest norm and standard of our faith and life.”¹⁰³

The key to Luther’s understanding of the Word of God is that both the written and the spoken Word function authoritatively, but in different ways. Saarnivaara explains,

Luther gives both to Scripture (and the written word in general) and the oral testimony and preaching of the word their proper places in the Christian Church: the

⁹⁹ Quoted in Saarnivaara, “Written and Spoken,” 167.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Saarnivaara, “Written and Spoken,” 170.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 172-174.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 167.

written word of God is primarily a “revelation-word,” which is the norm and standard of all faith, life, and teaching. The spoken word (in preaching, absolution, and sacraments) is the actual “means-of-grace-word,” through which God forgives sins, works faith, and imparts his Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁴ Luther never says that Scripture has the office or ministry of reconciliation, or that Christ has given the power of the keys to the written Word; neither does Scripture itself contain any such statement. The ministry of reconciliation and the power of the keys are given to the living Christians of each generation, not to Scripture. God may work faith through the written word, namely faith in Him and His truth and promises, so that the penitent sinner can seek the Gospel in the Church from the ministry of reconciliation and be justified in believing it. In Luther’s view, Scripture is not given for the purpose that a person by means of it, independently from the Church, might care for the salvation of his soul.¹⁰⁵

In Luther’s view the Scriptures normally function as the “revelation-word” and the proclamation of the Gospel normally functions as the “means-of-grace-word.” These two forms of the Word must be distinguished, but they cannot be separated. Saarnivaara summarizes, “The proclamation of the word (in sermons and personal absolution and counseling) and the administration of the sacraments are inseparably connected with the Scriptures. Only a scriptural teaching, preaching, and consolation leads men to the knowledge of Christ and salvation in Him.”¹⁰⁶

The spoken and written forms of the Word of God correspond to the two kinds of authority exercised by personal Word of God. The personal Word of God exercised “authority to save” throughout his ministry, and this authority corresponds to the spoken Word of God. He gave this authority to his disciples as he sent them to forgive sins (Matt 18:18; John 20:23) and to proclaim the Gospel that is the power of salvation (Luke 24:47; Rom. 1:16). He continues to exercise this kind of authority as his people speak the “means-of-grace-word” throughout the world for the forgiveness of sins and salvation. The personal Word of God also exercised “authority to teach” throughout his ministry, and this authority corresponds to the written Word of God. He gave his

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 174.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 169.

authority to his disciples to teach everything that he had commanded them (Matt. 20:18) and sent them his Spirit of truth to guide their remembrance of all that he had said (John 16:13). The personal Word continues to exercise this authority as his people read and obey the written Word of the apostles. This written Word is completely reliable and true, and it serves the spoken Word as its final rule and norm.

It is in this context that the Reformation slogan *sola scriptura* is best understood. The primary function of the written Word of God is to provide the rule and norm for the church's preaching and teaching. This is what it means for the Scriptures to have "authority to teach." As Webster notes, the written Word of God means the end of "free speech" in the church.¹⁰⁷ Preachers are not at liberty to proclaim their own ideas about God. They are bound to preach and teach in conformity with the definitive versions of the Word proclaimed by the apostles. When there are disagreements about what it is that the church believes, teaches, and confesses, the final judge for what is truly apostolic is the written Word. As Paul warns the Romans, "Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught" (Rom. 16:17; cf. 1 Tim. 6:3–4). *Sola scriptura*, explains Reinhard Slenczka, refers to the written Word's role as "eine Appellationinstanz im innerkirchlichen Autoritätenkonflikt."¹⁰⁸ As the definitive version of the apostolic message, the Scriptures are the only judge for sorting out disagreements in the church.¹⁰⁹ Thus the Formula of Concord declares, "We confess our adherence to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments, as to the pure,

¹⁰⁷ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 65.

¹⁰⁸ Reinhard Slenczka, "Schrift—Tradition—Kontext" in Theodor Schober, ed. *Grenzüberschreitende Diakonie: Paul Philippi zum 60. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: Verlagswerk der Diakonie), 45. His emphasis.

¹⁰⁹ The seventeenth-century dogmaticians noticed this kind of biblical authority at work in the biblical narrative itself. R. Preus explains, "The reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah were both brought about by a return to the Word of God as the only norm of doctrine and life. Both Christ and his disciples appealed to the written Word in times of controversy (Matt. 4:4; 19:4; 22:29; Mk. 9:12; Lk. 10:26; 24:26; Acts 3:22; 7:2; 13:33; 26:22)" (*Inspiration*, 118).

clear fountain of Israel, which alone is the *one true guiding principle*, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated.”¹¹⁰

With the theology of the Word of God as our foundation, we might summarize the relationship between the authority of spoken Word and the authority of the written Word in this way:

The Gospel was the “power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16) even before holy men of God committed it to writing. To say that the Scriptures are the authority for *the way we express* the Gospel is not to say that the Gospel derives its authority or power from the Scriptures. The *normative* authority of Scripture does not make the Gospel the living Word of God (1 Peter 1:23-25), but the formal principle, Holy Scripture, *does* tell us authoritatively what Gospel truly is *God’s* living Word and pronounces a curse upon anyone who preaches a different gospel (Gal. 1:8-9).¹¹¹

The Old Authority and the New

The primary authoritative function of the written Word of God is to provide the rule and norm for faith and life. It has “authority to teach” and as such it is the final standard by which all Christian preaching and teaching is to be judged.¹¹² It is in this sense that *sola scriptura* is properly understood. But as we observed in the previous section on the canon, the Scriptures are not a single book. They are a collection of books—and a collection of collections at that. This is most clearly seen when the basic division between the Old and New Testament is taken into consideration. These two collections of the written Word of God differ in fundamental ways, including the way in which they function authoritatively. Wright observes, “Our relationship to the New Testament is not the same as our relationship to the Old, and...we can say this with no

¹¹⁰ *FC SD*, Basis, Rule and Guiding Principle, 3. The norming function of biblical authority is not limited to Protestant theologians. J. D. G. Dunn points out that Josef Ratzinger holds a similar view of biblical authority in his commentary on Vatican II. “Has the Canon a Continuing Function?” in *The Canon Debate*, 574 (note 42).

¹¹¹ “Gospel and Scripture: The Interrelationship of the Material and Formal Principles in Lutheran Theology,” A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972): 17.

¹¹² As I noted above, the written Word also has “authority to save” insofar as it kills and makes alive. God normally exercises his “authority to save,” however, through the spoken Word.

diminution of our commitment to the Old Testament as a crucial and non-negotiable part of 'holy scripture.'¹¹³

The key to understanding the difference between the authority of the Old Testament and the authority of the New Testament is to view them in terms of their relationship to the personal Word of God. All authority belongs to him (Matt. 28:18), and therefore the authority of both collections of biblical writings is relative to Jesus. A consideration of Jesus' own biblical practice shows how this works itself out. The personal Word of God recognized the writings of the prophets as the written Word of God and submitted to them as the standard for faithful living throughout his lifetime. But he also claimed to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17), and he insisted that they testify to himself (John 5:39). In his life, death, and resurrection Jesus was establishing a new covenant with the people of God (cf. Luke 22:20; 2 Cor. 3:6), and this new covenant involved a relativization of the Law that God had given through Moses. Wright observes,

The ancient Jewish purity laws are seen as no longer relevant to a community in which Gentiles are welcome on equal terms (Mark 7; Acts 15; Gal. 2). The Temple in Jerusalem, and the sacrifices that took place there, were no longer the focal point of God's meeting with his people (Mark 12:28-34; Acts 7; Romans 12:1-2; Heb. 8-12)...The sabbath is no longer mandatory (Rom. 14:5-6), and indeed if people insist on such observances they are cutting against the grain of the gospel (Gal. 4:10). There is now no holy land: in Paul's reinterpretation of the Abrahamic promises in Romans 4:13, God promises Abraham not just one strip of territory but the whole world, anticipating the renewal of all creation as in Romans 8. Perhaps most importantly, the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile has been abolished (throughout Paul, and summarized in Ephesians 2:11-22).¹¹⁴

In the power of the Spirit Jesus explained the terms of this new covenant in his own proclamation of the Word. When he sent his apostles with his Spirit to continue his teaching, he gave them the responsibility of continuing this work by teaching everything that he had commanded them. Their preaching and teaching set forth his expectations for living in the new

¹¹³ Wright, *Scripture*, 92.

covenant, and with the development of the New Testament canon, the apostolic Scriptures became the definitive version of this new covenant.

But what does this mean for the Old Testament? In accordance with Jesus' own biblical practice, Christians are bound to live according to the Law that God had given through Moses only insofar as Jesus (and his apostles) continue to teach it. This is what it means for the authority of the Old Testament to be relative to Jesus. This does not mean that the prophetic writings no longer function authoritatively in the church. To the contrary, these writings continue to play an important role in the economy of salvation because they provide the context for God's saving work through Christ. Luther suggested that the writings of the prophets were the "swaddling clothes" and "manger" in which Christ is wrapped. His description of the relationship between Christ and prophetic writings helps explain the authority of the Old Testament in the church after Christ:

It is here [in the Old Testament] that people like us should read and study, drill ourselves, and see what Christ is, for what purpose he has been given, how he was promised, and how all Scripture tends toward him. For he himself says in John 5 [:46], "If you believed Moses, you would also believe me, for he wrote of me." Again [John 5:39], "Search and look up the Scriptures, for it is they that testify of me." This is what St. Paul means in Romans 1 [:1, 2], where in the beginning he says in his greeting, "The gospel was promised by God through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures." This is why the evangelists and apostles always direct us to the Scriptures and say, "Thus it is written," and again, "This has taken place in order that the writing of the prophets may be fulfilled," and so forth. In Acts 17 [:11], when the Thessalonians heard the gospel with all eagerness, Luke says that they studied the Scriptures day and night in order to see if these things were so. Thus when St. Peter wrote his epistle, right at the beginning [1 Peter 1:10–12] he says, "The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them; and he bore witness through them to the sufferings that were to come upon Christ and the ensuing glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 41.

themselves but us, in the things which have now been preached among you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things which also the angels long to behold.”¹¹⁵

Luther recognized that the writings of the Old Testament were the written Word of God, but he read them in light of their fulfillment in Christ. Because they provide the context for understanding the identity and work of the personal Word of God, the Old Testament writings remain authoritative for the Christian faith. They provide a normative framework for understanding God and his creation, beginning with the creation of all things up to the redemption of all things in his Son. Without them it is simply impossible to understand the life and mission of the personal Word of God. As Elizabeth Achtemeier writes, “Jesus Christ is, in the New Testament, the Word of the Old made flesh—the new promised action of God (Isa. 43:19) that nevertheless gathers up the promises of the Old Testament and brings them to their final interpretation and conclusion.”¹¹⁶

Summary

Throughout the modern debate theologians have argued over the authority of the Scriptures. Rather than examining *how* the Scriptures function authoritatively, they have focused their attention on debating *if* the Scriptures are authoritative. As a result, false dichotomies on both sides have controlled the discussion. Many proponents of the doctrine of inspiration have argued that *either* the Bible is inspired, inerrant, and authoritative *or* its authority is lost. Kelsey’s examination of the function of biblical authority helps dispel this false dichotomy. Critical theologians, on the other hand, have set up their own false dichotomy by pitting the Scriptures against some other conception of the Word of God (e.g., the Gospel, Christ, or an existential “I-

¹¹⁵ Luther, *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, LW 35:122.

¹¹⁶ Elizabeth Achtemeier, “The Canon as the Voice of the Living God” in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, 125. By now it is clear that the authority of the Old and New Testaments is bound up with their interpretation. Achtemeier’s observation points us toward the final section in this chapter.

Thou” encounter). They have argued that *either* the Scriptures are authoritative *or* the Word of God is authoritative. Carl Braaten, for example, says, “The ultimate authority of Christian theology is not the biblical canon as such, but the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness—the ‘canon within the canon.’ Jesus Christ himself is the Lord of the Scriptures, the source and scope of its authority.”¹¹⁷ This kind of separation of the Scriptures from Christ and the Gospel is foreign to the biblical narrative and inconsistent with Jesus’ own understanding of the written Word of God.

In contrast to both sides of the modern debate over biblical authority, I have tried to ground the authority of the Scriptures in the authority of God. More precisely, I have argued that biblical authority is grounded in the personal Word of God who received all authority from the Father (Matt. 28:18). Throughout his ministry Jesus exercised “authority to save” by forgiving sins, casting out demons, healing the sick, and raising the dead. He also exercised “authority to teach” by proclaiming the truth about God and his expectations for his human creatures. Both kinds of his authoritative work were vindicated in his resurrection. This personal Word of God commissioned his apostles with his Word and his Spirit to continue his mission of speaking with authority. He gave them “authority to save” (Matt 18:18; John 20:23) and “authority to teach” (Matt. 28:19; John 16:13), and subsequent generations of Christians have looked to their writings as definitive versions of what to preach and teach in the church. This written Word of God serves the spoken Word of God, and this is what it means for the Scriptures to be the only rule and norm for Christian faith and life.

This account of the authority of the Scriptures also recognizes that the authority of both the Old and the New Testaments is relative to Jesus. The prophetic writings testify to him (John

¹¹⁷ *Christian Dogmatics* Vol. 1, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 61.

5:39) and remain veiled without him (2 Cor. 3:14–16). At the same time, Jesus' identity is rooted in the Old Testament narrative as the prophets foretold his life, death, and resurrection. Without the prophetic Scriptures we would understand neither the identity nor the mission of the personal Word of God and without Jesus we would not understand the writings in the Old Testament. Through his life, death, and resurrection, however, Jesus established a new covenant that would fulfill the writings of the prophets. The details of this covenant were given by Jesus to his Spirit-filled apostles to proclaim everything he had commanded them. The written form of their proclamation, as it has been collected and circulated in the New Testament canon, is the final rule and norm for preaching and teaching in the church.

Interpretation

The question of the biblical canon answers which writings are properly recognized as Scripture. The question of biblical authority answers how the Christian faith and life is ruled and normed by these particular writings. Standing behind both of these questions, however, is the interpretation of the Scriptures. These were written so that they might be read and inherent in reading is interpretation. Stephen Fowl explains, "Accepting that scripture is the standard for their faith, practice, and worship does not get Christians out of the hard tasks of scriptural interpretation."¹¹⁸

In the first chapter I criticized the modern attitude toward biblical interpretation as individualistic and objectivistic. I noted that the primary difference between theologians on the two sides of the modern debate is their disagreement about the truthfulness of the writings that they interpreted. But if the Scriptures are the written Word of God, it follows that biblical interpretation is unlike any other act of literary interpretation. This means that the theology of

¹¹⁸ Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 2.

Scripture must provide a theological account of what it means to interpret the Bible. Much like I argued in the previous sections concerning the canon and authority of the Scriptures, it seems that biblical interpretation is best understood when it is approached within the context of a cruciform theology of the Word of God.

Before we get to that, however, we need to understand the post-modern hermeneutical context. Contemporary theology has witnessed an explosion of interpretive strategies and theories, and many are concluding that “theology simply *is* hermeneutics.”¹¹⁹ Because of the scope of the hermeneutical question in contemporary Christianity we will begin by surveying the current state of biblical interpretation.

The Post-Modern Challenge

Stephen Fowl’s *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* provides a helpful summary of the current state of the post-modern hermeneutical context. Fowl identifies three different “stories” or “accounts” of biblical interpretation. He calls the first “determinate interpretation.” The goal of interpretation in this account is “to produce, uncover, or illuminate the meaning of the biblical text.”¹²⁰ Proceeding on the assumption that the meaning of the text is located within the text itself, a determinate view of interpretation treats the biblical text as a problem that needs to be solved. Fowl explains, “One might even say that the aim of this type of interpretation is to render interpretation redundant by making the meaning of the biblical text clear to all reasonable people of good will.”¹²¹ Benjamin Jowett, one of the pioneers of determinate interpretation, provides an example of this view: “The true use of interpretation is to

¹¹⁹ Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, xiv.

¹²⁰ Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 32.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

get rid of interpretation and leave us alone in company with the author.”¹²² Theologians who approach the Scriptures from this perspective attempt to discover a stable and secure meaning of a biblical text by stripping away all interpretation and arriving at *the* meaning. Once this meaning has been uncovered, the difficult work of biblical interpretation is complete and the interpreter may move on to another text. This conception of what it means to interpret the Bible has been prominent in the modern battle for the Bible.

In reaction to this “determinate” account of biblical interpretation, post-modern interpreters have offered an opposing account of biblical interpretation. Fowl labels this account “anti-determinate” interpretation. It goes something like this: “Nobody’s interpretation is better than anyone else’s; everyone has a right to his/her own interpretation; it is rude and not inclusive to fail to accept someone’s interpretation as true for that person.”¹²³ In contrast to the determinate view of interpretation that locates the meaning solely in the *text*, anti-determinate readings locate the meaning solely in the *reader*. The aim of anti-determinate interpretation is to “upset, disrupt, and deconstruct interpretive certainties,”¹²⁴ and Fowl identifies deconstructionism as a representative of this kind of interpretation. Deconstructive interpretation is an on-going process that is characterized by a two-sided approach to interpreting the text. It begins by identifying the dominant reading of text—one that is generally agreed upon as right and true. Rather than accepting the consensus, the deconstructive interpreter challenges the traditional reading by highlighting a perspective that has been obscured by the dominant interpretation. From this new perspective the interpreter re-interprets the meaning of the text. Anti-determinate interpretation

¹²² Quoted in Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 33 (note 1).

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

disallows mastery of the text because the anti-determinate reader continually turns the dominant reading on its head.

Fowl points out that there are problems with both determinate and anti-determinate accounts of interpretation. The problem with the determinate account of biblical interpretation is its assumption that it is possible to get behind interpretation, to escape one's own perspective. Because there is no such thing as purely objective interpretation, determinate interpretation is a practical impossibility. The meaning of a text does not reside entirely within the text itself.¹²⁵ The problem with anti-determinate interpretation is that there is no end to the deconstructive possibilities. As soon as the dominant reading becomes subverted by the deconstructionist, the deconstructed reading itself becomes subject to deconstruction. The result is a text with no limit to possible meanings, and therefore it becomes a text without meaning. Just as the meaning of a text does not reside entirely within the text, neither does it reside entirely within the reader.

In contrast to determinate and anti-determinate interpretation, Fowl offers an account of biblical interpretation that he calls "underdetermined interpretation." Rather than making absolute claims about the certainty of a text's meaning (determinate interpretation), and rather than reducing the meaning of a text to its context (anti-determinate interpretation), Fowl suggests that "theological convictions, ecclesial practices, and communal and social concerns should *shape and be shaped* by biblical interpretation."¹²⁶ He explains, "Biblical interpretation will be

¹²⁵ Several biblical examples help make this point. In Acts 8 we read about an encounter between Philip and an Ethiopian eunuch who was reading the prophecy of Isaiah. When Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading the eunuch said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (8:31). Philip responded by explaining to him the good news about Jesus. Paul explains the theology behind this encounter: "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. 'For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:12-16).

¹²⁶ Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 60.

the occasion of a complex interaction between the biblical text and the varieties of theological, moral, material, political, and ecclesial concerns that are part of the contexts in which they find themselves.”¹²⁷ According to Fowl “underdetermined interpretation” appreciates the fact that the Scriptures were written within the context of the community of believers. Instead of trying to specify how this kind of interpretation will work in advance, Fowl devotes the majority of his book to displaying how these kinds of interactions play out in the interpretation of specific biblical texts.

The value of Fowl’s account of biblical interpretation is that he meets the post-modern challenge head-on. He identifies the naiveté of a determinate account of biblical interpretation and also recognizes the implications of the deconstructive approach. The meaning of a biblical text resides neither solely within the text, nor solely within the reader. Fowl only gets us so far, however, because he does not offer boundaries for faithful “underdetermined” interpretation.¹²⁸ In order to provide more concrete guidance for biblical interpretation, I am offering the following suggestions as initial steps toward an “underdetermined” account of biblical interpretation that is grounded in a cruciform theology of the Word of God.

The Scriptures as the Image of the King

A theological account of biblical interpretation that is grounded in the theology of the Word of God begins by recognizing that the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures are centered around the personal Word of God. The life, death, and resurrection of this Word had been foretold for centuries by the prophets. He began his ministry in the power of the Spirit by

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ He admits in the introduction that this is not his goal. After briefly identifying the “Rule of Faith” as a boundary setter for proper biblical interpretation he writes, “The arguments of this book are not as much concerned with establishing boundaries as with making constructive use of the interaction of Christian convictions, practices, and scriptural interpretation” (*Engaging Scripture*, 8).

claiming to fulfill the prophetic proclamation (Luke 4:16-19) and, like the prophets before him, he preached a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. Jesus' claim to speak in the name and with the authority of the Father led to faith in some, but also to his rejection and crucifixion, which itself was promised by the prophets (Luke 24:25-27). After his vindicating resurrection, his followers believed him and the Scriptures he claimed to fulfill (John 2:22), and by virtue of their commission to proclaim the Gospel of Christ crucified they continued Jesus' preaching and teaching under the direction of the Spirit of truth. The interpretation of these prophetic and apostolic writings in the church occurs within the continuation of the divine economy of salvation.

Early in the first book of *Against Heresies* Irenaeus depicts biblical interpretation in a way that is consistent with that recognizes this account of the Word of God. He begins by criticizing the way in which the Valentinians interpreted the Scriptures. According to Irenaeus, the Valentinians were guilty of perverting the Scriptures "to their baseless fictions."¹²⁹ The problem was not that they denied that the Scriptures were the written Word of God. Rather, they were mistaken for interpreting them in such a way as to distort the original message of the prophets and apostles. He explains,

They endeavor to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles, in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support. In doing so, however, they disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth. By transferring passages, and dressing them up anew, and making one thing out of another, they succeed in deluding many through their wicked art in adapting the oracles of the Lord to their opinions.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ *Against Heresies* I.8.1 in *ANF* 1:326.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

As Irenaeus saw it, the problem with the Valentinians was that they disregarded “the order and the connection of the Scriptures.” They were at fault for “transferring passages, and dressing them up anew,” and as a result many were “deluded.” Irenaeus describes their approach to biblical interpretation by using a simple illustration:

Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skillful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should re-arrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and should then maintain and declare that *this* was the beautiful image of the king which the skillful artist constructed, pointing to the jewels which had been admirably fitted together by the first artist to form the image of the king, but have been with bad effect transferred by the latter one to the shape of a dog, and by thus exhibiting the jewels, should deceive the ignorant who had no conception what a king’s form was like, and persuade them that that miserable likeness of the fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king.¹³¹

Irenaeus’ description of the Scriptures as an image of a king is helpful for understanding the boundaries for faithful biblical interpretation. The gems in the picture of the king are like the many passages in the Bible. When viewed as they were arranged by the Spirit-led prophets and apostles they paint a beautiful picture of a king. But when taken out of context and read in ways that depart from their original order, they make up a picture of a fox—and a “poorly executed” fox at that.¹³²

Irenaeus’ comparison of the Scriptures with the mosaic of a king raises an important question. If the Scriptures paint a single image, what is this image? What does the “king” look like? It is here that “canon 1” (the *regula fidei*) comes into play. This is Irenaeus’ description of the “king”:

¹³¹ Ibid. His emphasis.

¹³² Irenaeus’ caution against reading individual passages of out context is particularly applicable today—especially among those who affirm that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God. Single passages of Scripture are frequently used as isolated truisms to support ideas that have very little to do with Christ and the Gospel.

The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father “to gather all things in one,” and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that...He should execute just judgment towards all.¹³³

The image of a king is an appropriate analogy for the Scriptures because the heart of the biblical message is the Christ, the trinitarian King who became a man, died, rose, and will return to judge all people. If an interpretation of the Scriptures goes against this rule, Irenaeus argues, the image of the King has been distorted and the interpretation is false. This matches the view of Ignatius that we considered earlier: “To my mind it is Jesus Christ who is the original documents. The inviolable archives are his cross and death and his resurrection and the faith that came by him.”¹³⁴

Both Ignatius and Irenaeus emphasize that the Scriptures present a picture of the death and resurrection of Christ. In this way they reflect Jesus’ own understanding of the Scriptures. As he understood the writings of the prophets, they testified to himself (John 5:39) and foretold his suffering and death (Luke 24:24, 47). The writings of his apostles provided a reliable account of his life, death and resurrection (Luke 1:1–4) so that we might believe in him and have life (John 20:31). Within the gospels themselves it is Jesus’ passion that stands at the center;¹³⁵ and in his letters Paul similarly focused on Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. He writes to the Corinthians:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with

¹³³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I.10.1. in *ANF* 1:330.

¹³⁴ Williams, *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation*, 53.

¹³⁵ Wingren writes, “The cross and the resurrection dominate the four gospels, even quantitatively” (*Theology in Conflict*, 120).

the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:1–4).

To the Philippians he paints a similar picture:

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5–10).

Peter describes the personal Word of God in terms of his suffering and death in both his preaching (cf. Acts 2:22–36; 3:13–22; 10:39–42) and his writing (1 Peter 1:18–21; 2:21–25; 3:18–22). Williams summarizes Peter’s message: “Jesus Christ was killed, raised from the dead, and exalted as Lord and Judge.”¹³⁶

When the biblical interpreter recognizes the centrality of the personal Word in the written Word, the cruciform nature of biblical interpretation becomes clear. To return to Irenaeus’ illustration of the mosaic of jewels, the individual gems that make up the image of the king must be viewed as parts of a greater whole. All of them contribute in some way to the overall picture of the king. So it is with the Scriptures. The writings of the prophets and apostles paint a picture of Christ, the Son of God and Savior of the world. This Son was born of Mary and baptized in the Jordan; in the power of the Spirit he preached and taught and did miraculous signs; he claimed to be one with the Father and to speak words of forgiveness, and for this reason many rejected and crucified him. Vindicated by the Father through his resurrection, Jesus sent his apostles and their associates (the church) to continue his ministry in his name until he returns in

¹³⁶ Williams says that the “standard or rule” of the biblical message is grounded in “the redemptive death of Christ.” *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 59.

glory. It is this picture of Jesus that the Scriptures present. As Luther writes, “I, poor little creature, do not find anything in the Scriptures but Jesus Christ and him crucified.”¹³⁷

While many passages in Scripture have an indirect relationship to his death and resurrection—especially in the Old Testament—they must always be viewed in relation to the divine economy of salvation that was accomplished in the personal Word of God. Every interpretation of the Scriptures must contribute in some way to the image of this King, and it would be impossible to read any Scripture apart from the Gospel of Christ crucified.¹³⁸ It is this focus on the personal Word of God in the Scriptures that leads Luther to insist, “Christ is the Lord and not the servant...And the Scripture must be understood in favor of Christ and not against him...If our opponents attempt to use the Scripture against Christ we assert the authority of Christ against Scripture.”¹³⁹ This is another way of highlighting the fact that the Scriptures were written so that we might believe in Jesus and have life in his name (John 20:31). As Telford Work puts it: “Scripture surrounds the cross of Christ on all sides.”¹⁴⁰

Reading the Written Word of God

The recognition that the Scriptures present an image of Christ the crucified does not remove the difficulty of faithful biblical interpretation. If the Scriptures are, indeed, the written Word of God, then it follows that they are unlike any other writings. Colin Gunton suggests that to read the Bible is to engage in a conversation.¹⁴¹ It is admittedly a one-sided conversation, for God is the one who speaks through his deputized prophets and apostles, but it is a conversation

¹³⁷ Quoted in Prenter, *More About Luther*, 66.

¹³⁸ Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 58.

¹³⁹ Luther, *LW* 34:112.

¹⁴⁰ Work, *Living and Active*, 190.

¹⁴¹ Colin Gunton, “Using and Being Used: Scripture and Systematic Theology,” *Theology Today* 47 (1990), 248–259.

nonetheless. As a participant in this conversation, the reader (or better, the hearer) of the Scriptures stands in a “position of passivity.”¹⁴² It is in this “position of passivity” that the active work of biblical interpretation takes place.

Because the written Word of God is not simply another instance of human literary composition, the act of reading the Bible is not simply another instance of human literary interpretation. To read the Scriptures is to participate in the economy of salvation, and this requires a theological description of the act of biblical interpretation. John Webster recognizes this need and responds by offering a “dogmatic depiction of *faithful reading in the economy of grace*.”¹⁴³ He unpacks three ways of understanding the act of reading the Scriptures, and together he offers them as a “theological anthropology of the reader.”¹⁴⁴

(1) Faithful reading of Holy Scripture in the economy of grace is an episode in the history of sin and its overcoming.

Webster begins his account of biblical interpretation by emphasizing that reading the Scriptures is unlike any other reading. The reader of the Scriptures is involved in the story that it tells—but not in the sense of getting “caught up in” a well-written novel. God addresses the reader of the Scriptures who, because of his or her sin, is estranged from him. He explains, “We do not read well, not only because of technical incompetence, cultural distance from the substance of the text, or lack of readerly sophistication, but also and most of all because in reading we are addressed by that which runs clean counter to our will.”¹⁴⁵ This means that it is impossible to read the written Word of God as a neutral observer. “Reading Scripture,” Webster says, “is thus best understood as an aspect of mortification and vivification: to read Scripture is

¹⁴² Gunton, “Using and Being Used,” 250.

¹⁴³ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 86. His emphasis.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

to be slain and made alive.”¹⁴⁶ When sinful human beings read the commands of God in his written Word, they become aware of the fact that they fail to measure up to his standard of faith and life. Faithful reading in this context can only occur “as a kind of brokenness, a relinquishment of willed mastery of the text.”¹⁴⁷ It requires a “hermeneutical conversion” that is brought about through the work of the Spirit operating through the Word.

This means that faithful reading of the Scriptures is always understood in soteriological and pneumatological terms: “Through the incarnate Word, crucified and risen, we are made capable of hearing the gospel, but only as we are at one and the same time put to death and raised to new life. Through the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ we are given the capacity to set mind and will on the truth of the gospel and so read as those who have been reconciled to God.”¹⁴⁸ As one who has been slain and made alive, the reader of the Scriptures emerges as one who has been restored to read responsibly, open to what God has said and continues to say in his Word. Such a reader approaches the text with a “focused attentiveness” to what it says and engages in a “deliberate directing of attention to the text and an equally deliberate laying aside of other concerns.”¹⁴⁹ Faithful reading is achieved as the Christian maintains the proper balance between “fear and trembling” before the Almighty and expectant confidence that the Holy Spirit will illuminate the reader to understand the written Word.

(2) Faithful reading of Holy Scripture in the economy of grace is a faithful reading of the clear Word of God.

In this section Webster attempts to provide some theological precision to two standard features of the doctrine of inspiration: biblical perspicuity and the idea that the Scriptures are

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 88.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 89.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 90.

self-interpreting. He acknowledges that, on one level, these concepts are protests against the “authority of interpretive traditions or élites.”¹⁵⁰ But he cautions against viewing them with the kind of individualism and objectivism that characterizes much modern biblical interpretation. He explains, “To reject the *a priori* authority of traditions and interpretations is quite different from giving free rein to the individual interpreter, making exegesis into yet another kingdom rule by unformed intellectual conscience.”¹⁵¹ Rather than the allowing for the kind of individualism that governs the modern approach to the Scriptures, Webster envisions faithful reading of the Bible as a collective work of the body of Christ to whom the Scriptures were written in the first place.

In order to unpack his understanding of what it means for the Scriptures to interpret themselves, Webster speaks of understanding the Bible as a work of the triune God. “Scripture is self-interpreting and perspicuous,” he says, “by virtue of its relation to God.”¹⁵² Through the Scriptures God addresses the reader and thereby mortifies and brings the reader to life. This can only make sense when it is seen in a soteriological context—“that is, in relation to God’s act as Word and Spirit and the creature’s act of faith.”¹⁵³ For this reason the Scriptures do *not*, properly speaking, interpret themselves. As the written Word of the living God, God himself is the active agent in biblical interpretation. Faithful reading of the Scriptures occurs when “*God* who as Word interprets himself through the Spirit’s work.”¹⁵⁴

Biblical perspicuity, then, should not be regarded as an inherent property of the Scriptures that exists apart from the act of reading. Rather, “Scripture is clear because of the Spirit’s work in which creaturely acts of reading are so ordered towards faithful attention to the divine Word

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 94.

that through Scripture the light of the gospel shines in its own inherent splendour.”¹⁵⁵ Perspicuity is the gift and work of God through his Word and in his Spirit—not “the product of exegetical prowess or technique.”¹⁵⁶ This does not remove the necessity for doing the hard “natural” work of reading the text with appropriate skills and tools. But “the mere technical deployment of these skills is insufficient, and may, indeed, mislead.”¹⁵⁷ Webster summarizes, “Scripture’s clarity is neither an intrinsic element of the text nor simply the fruit of exegetical labor; it is that which the text *becomes* as it functions in the Spirit-governed encounter between the self-presenting saviour and the faithful reader. To read is to be caught up by the truth-bestowing Spirit of God.”¹⁵⁸

(3) Faithful reading of Holy Scripture in the economy of grace is not the work of masters but of pupils in the school of Christ.

“One of the chief fruits of the Spirit’s conversion of the reader,” Webster explains, “is *teachableness*, a teachableness which extends into the disposition with which Scripture is read. To read Scripture as one caught up by the reconciling work of God is to abandon mastery of the text, and, instead, to be schooled into docility.”¹⁵⁹ To “abandon mastery” of the text is not to forsake confidence in confessing what God has spoken through his prophets and apostles. Nor is it to give up the hard work of struggling with the intricacies of the text. It is rather a humble disposition toward the entire practice of biblical interpretation. It recognizes that the written Word of God is, in fact, a form of the Word of *God*. Webster finds this attitude in Zwingli’s approach to biblical interpretation, who writes, “It is not for us to sit in judgment on Scripture

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 95. His emphasis. It is important to note that, unlike Barth, Webster is not saying here that Scripture becomes the *Word of God*. It becomes *clear* to the one who reads it through the power of the Holy Spirit (and often through the help of Christians who have been sent to proclaim it; cf. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26–35).

¹⁵⁹ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 101. His emphasis.

and divine truth, but to let God do his work in and through it, for it is something which we can learn only of God. Of course, we have to give an account of our understanding of Scripture, but not in such a way that it is forced or wrested according to our own will, but rather so that we are taught by Scripture."¹⁶⁰

It is as "pupils in the school of Christ" that Webster suggests we must judge whether or not critical tools and methods of investigation are appropriate for biblical interpretation. Rather than arguing for or against any particular method, Webster considers the assumptions that modern scholars make about the nature of biblical interpretation. He notes a glaring deficiency of the "teachableness" in the disposition of those who stand on the critical side of the debate. Rather than listening to what God says in his written Word, they judge for themselves whether or not God actually could have said and done such things. At its root, notes Webster, this is an "anthropological problem." It "concerns the way in which an intellectual activity such as reading is understood. At the heart of that problem is a sense—often implicit but nevertheless real—of the sublimity of reason, expressed as a competence and adequacy, for which the term 'mastery' is hardly too strong."¹⁶¹ Unlike the faithful reader of the Scriptures who defers to these writings as the written Word of God, critical interpreters presume the ability to transcend God's self-communication in the Scriptures and become the final judge of what God did or not did not say and do.

Summary

In these thoughts about the interpretation of the Scriptures (even more so than in the previous sections on canon and authority), it is clear that this project is only the first step toward

¹⁶⁰ H. Zwingli, *On the Clarity and Certainty or Power of the Word of God*. Quoted in Webster, 102.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

a comprehensive theology of Scripture. There are many complex hermeneutical questions that I have not even begun to address, and there remains much that needs to be said about faithful biblical interpretation.

In this final section I have argued that there are two ways in which the threefold form of the Word of God provides direction for a faithful account of “underdetermined” biblical interpretation in our contemporary context. First, Irenaeus reminds us that the written Word of God presents an image of Christ, the personal Word of God who was crucified and raised for our salvation. It is an intricate and extensive image, to be sure. But more than anything else, the Scriptures were written so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ and have life in his name (John 20:31). This understanding of the function of the Scriptures in the economy of salvation must underscore all acts of faithful biblical interpretation. The key question that must be asked when interpreting any biblical text is how it fits into God’s mission to save sinners through his Spirit-filled Word. Second, interpreting the Scriptures is most appropriately understood as listening to the Word that God has spoken through his prophets and apostles. Rather than presuming to exercise mastery over the biblical text (something which has been done by both sides of the modern debate), this view of biblical interpretation leads to a certain amount of humility.¹⁶² This humble disposition should not be confused with relativism. Instead, it recognizes that the Scriptures are the written Word of *God*, and this requires, at the very least, a “hermeneutic of trust.”¹⁶³ The use of any method or tool of interpretation that puts the interpreter in a position of judgment over the Scriptures is incompatible with it as the written Word of God.

¹⁶² Robert Rosin recalls the old rule, “Wenn zur Theologie kommt, eine gewisse Bescheidenheit gehört dazu” (When it comes to theology, a certain amount of modesty is called for). “Reformation Christology: Some Luther Starting Points,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 71 (2007): 58.

¹⁶³ Wright, *Scripture*, 100.

In the last words he wrote before his death, Luther displays the kind of humble disposition that is necessary for faithful interpretation of the written Word of God. After spending his entire thirty-four year career lecturing on the Scriptures, and after preaching more than two thousand sermons (approximately two per week),¹⁶⁴ Luther understood that he always remained a “pupil in the school of Christ.” He writes:

No one is able to understand Vergil in *Bucolics* unless he has been a shepherd for five years. No one is able to understand Vergil in *Georgics* unless he has been a farmer for five years. No one is able to understand Cicero in his letters (as I teach) unless he has worked under a distinguished government for twenty years.

Know that no one has sufficiently tasted the sacred Scriptures unless he has governed churches for one hundred years with the prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, John the Baptist, Christ and the apostles. Do not lay a hand on this divine Aeneid; rather, bow before its feet.

We are beggars; this is true.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Lotz, “Proclamation,” 344.

¹⁶⁵ Luther, WA *Tischreden* 5:168. (No. 5468). My translation.

CONCLUSION

In the chancel of the *Stadtkirche* in Wittenberg, Germany there is an altarpiece made by Lucas Cranach the Elder. The top half of this altarpiece contains a triptych depicting three events in the Christian life in sixteenth-century Germany: baptism, the Lord's Supper, and confession. Underneath them all, serving visually as their foundation, Cranach portrays a scene that sums up the theology of Scripture that I have been trying to articulate in this dissertation. Mark Edwards describes it:

Luther stands in the pulpit with his left hand laid upon an open book of scripture and with the right gesturing to a central crucifix. The Wittenberg congregation faces the crucifix (and Luther) and responds in prayer. The crucifix to which Luther gestures and the congregation responds appears, as it were, within quotation marks. It represents the *message* drawn from scripture, not the utterance that conveys that message—and that message, Luther insisted, whether drawn from the Old Testament or the New, always points to Christ crucified. The good news of the crucified Christ as Luther understood it, and as depicted by Cranach, is both present and removed. It is present as the content of all scripture (it does not matter where scripture is opened under Luther's left hand) and it is the (pictorially literal) undergirding for the sacraments depicted in the surmounting triptych. It is simultaneously removed in the *theologia crucis* and *deus absconditus* of Luther's theology and in the uncertain mooring, unworldly lighting and aesthetic blandness of Cranach's painting. These images and actions are but visible, embodied signs of an invisible promise—"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."¹

This foundational scene in Cranach's altarpiece illustrates a cruciform account of the threefold form of the Word of God. The personal Word of God is at the center. The preacher proclaims the spoken Word of God by pointing to the crucified Christ. The written Word of God provides the

¹ Mark Edwards, "The Power of a Picture: How Protestants Imaged the Gospel," *Christian Century* (January 25, 2005): 31–32.

content for and serves the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ crucified. It does not matter where in the Scriptures Luther has placed his hand, for the Scriptures as a whole testify to Jesus.

I began this project with a sense of discomfort about the assumptions, concepts, and categories that have governed the modern debate over the Scriptures. The liberal rejection of the reliability and authenticity of the Scriptures, when followed to its logical conclusions, leads to “a different Gospel” (Gal. 1:6). The doctrine of inspiration defends the traditional Christian belief that the Scriptures are the Word of God, but in a way that isolates them from the trinitarian and soteriological narrative in which they were written. My dissatisfaction with the modern debate led me in the same direction that it led Karl Barth: back to the Word of God. In the biblical narrative the Word of God is, first and foremost, Jesus Christ. He is the personal Word through whom all things were created; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, anointed in the Jordan, and proclaimed a message of repentance and forgiveness in the power of the Spirit; who was crucified for claiming to be one with the Father with the authority to forgive sins; who was vindicated by the Father in his resurrection from the dead; and who promised to return in glory. Both the identity and the mission of the personal Word of God come together in the cross, making the Word of God in the divine economy a *cruciform* Word. The biblical narrative also speaks of a spoken form of the Word of God. This living and active Word was proclaimed by God’s Spirit-led prophets and apostles for the judgment and salvation of sinful human beings, and the church continues to proclaim this Word of repentance and forgiveness. In time the Word spoken by the prophets and apostles was written down. These writings were gathered together by the church as definitive versions of the Word that God gave his prophets and apostles to speak in the power and guidance of his Spirit of truth. It is in this context that the Scriptures are properly understood to be the written Word of God and the only rule and norm for the preaching and teaching of the church.

This account of the Scriptures as one form of the Word of God does not answer every question in contemporary theology about the prophetic and apostolic writings. Indeed, there are many aspects of the theology of Scripture that I have not even mentioned. This was most obvious in chapter 5 where I only scratched the surface of the canon, authority, and interpretation of the Scriptures. Rather than trying to offer a comprehensive theology of Scripture, my goal has been to provide a foundation for the theology of Scripture that is grounded in and consistent with the biblical narrative and its focus on the cross. This foundation recognizes that these Scriptures were written so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have life in his name (John 20:31).

Gustav Wingren suggests that the most basic decision a theologian makes is his answer to this question: "What is the essence of Christianity?"² The answer to this question, says Wingren, determines the shape of one's theology, including the theology of Scripture. David Kelsey agrees: "A theologian's answer to that question, and the way he makes that decision, is decisive for the way he construes scripture and for the ways in which he uses scripture in the course of making his theological proposals."³ In this dissertation I have answered Wingren's question for the theology of the Scripture by pointing to Paul's words to the Corinthians. With him we preach "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 2:23)—our theology of Scripture notwithstanding.

² Wingren, *Theology in Conflict*, 163.

³ Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 8.

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