

A Theology of Lordship

VOLUME 4

The

DOCTRINE

of the

WORD OF

GOD

FOREWORD BY J. I. PACKER

JOHN M. FRAME

The following chapters are included in this excerpt of John Frame's *The Doctrine of the Word of God*:

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*In Memory of
Edmund P. Clowney
(1917–2005)*

And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. (Ex. 31:18)

Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:1–9)

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (Josh. 1:8)

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (Ps. 19:7–11)

In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me? (Ps. 56:10–11)

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. (Matt. 5:17–19)

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. (John 1:1–3)

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. (John 6:68)

Scripture cannot be broken. (John 10:35)

If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. (1 Cor. 14:37)

From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:15–17)

And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:19–21)

Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to him belong,
They are weak, but he is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me! [3×]
The Bible tells me so. *[repeat after each verse]*

Jesus loves me, he who died,
Heaven's gates to open wide;
He will wash away my sin,
Let his little child come in.

Jesus loves me, loves me still,
Though I'm very weak and ill;
From his shining throne on high
Comes to watch me where I lie.

Jesus loves me, he will stay
Close beside me all the way:
If I love him, when I die
He will take me home on high.¹

1. "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know," by Anna B. Warner, 1859.

CHAPTER 1

The Personal-Word Model

The main contention of this volume is that God's speech to man is real speech. It is very much like one person speaking to another. God speaks so that we can understand him and respond appropriately. Appropriate responses are of many kinds: belief, obedience, affection, repentance, laughter, pain, sadness, and so on. God's speech is often propositional: God's conveying information to us. But it is far more than that. It includes all the features, functions, beauty, and richness of language that we see in human communication, and more. So the concept I wish to defend is broader than the "propositional revelation" that we argued so ardently forty years ago, though propositional revelation is part of it. My thesis is that God's word, in all its qualities and aspects, is a personal communication from him to us.

Imagine God speaking to you right now, as realistically as you can imagine, perhaps standing at the foot of your bed at night. He speaks to you like your best friend, your parents, or your spouse. There is no question in your mind as to who he is: he is God. In the Bible, God often spoke to people in this way: to Adam and Eve in the garden; to Noah; to Abraham; to Moses. For some reason, these were all fully persuaded that the speaker was God, even when the speaker told them to do things they didn't understand. Had God asked me to take my son up a mountain to burn him as a sacrifice, as he asked of Abraham in Genesis 22, I would have decided that it wasn't God and could not be God, because God could never command such a thing. But somehow Abraham didn't raise that question. He knew, somehow, that God had spoken to him, and he knew what God expected him to do.

We question Abraham at this point, as did Søren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*.¹ But if God is God, if God is who he claims to be, isn't it likely that he is able to persuade Abraham that the speaker is really he? Isn't he able to unambiguously identify himself to Abraham's mind?

Now imagine that when God speaks to you personally, he gives you some information, or commands you to do something. Will you then be inclined to argue with him? Will you criticize what he says? Will you find something inadequate in his knowledge or in the rightness of his commands? I hope not. For that is the path to disaster. When God speaks, our role is to believe, obey, delight, repent, mourn—whatever he wants us to do. Our response should be without reservation, from the heart. Once we understand (and of course we often misunderstand), we must not hesitate. We may at times find occasion to criticize one another's words, but God's words are not the subject of criticism.

Sometimes in the Bible we do hear of "arguments" between God and his conversation partners. Abraham pleaded for the life of his nephew Lot in Sodom (Gen. 18:22–33), and Moses pleaded that God would not destroy Israel (Ex. 33:12–23). But no human being, in such a conversation, ought to question the truth of what God says, God's right to do as he pleases, or the rightness of God's decisions. The very presupposition of Abraham's argument, indeed, is "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:25), a rhetorical question that must be answered yes. Abraham's argument with God is a prayer, asking God to make exceptions to the coming judgment he has announced. Abraham persists in that prayer, as all believers should do. But he does not question the truth of God's words to him (Rom. 4:20–21) or the rightness of God's plans.² Sometimes, to be sure, believers in Scripture do find fault with God, as did Job (Job 40:2), but that is sin, and such people need to repent (40:3–5; 42:1–6).

God's personal speech is not an unusual occurrence in Scripture. In fact, it is the main engine propelling the biblical narrative forward. The thing at issue in the biblical story is always the word of God. God speaks to Adam and Eve in the garden to define their fundamental task (Gen. 1:28). All of human history is our response to that word of God. God speaks to Adam again, forbidding him to eat the forbidden fruit (2:17). That word is the issue before the first couple. If they obey, God will continue to bless. If they don't, he will curse. The narrative permits no question whether the

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: The Sickness unto Death* (1941; repr., Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954).

2. On the question whether God can change his mind, see *DG*, 559–72. And see *ibid.*, 150, which is also relevant to the question whether God's decrees are in any sense dependent on events in history, that is, how God's foreordination is related to his foreknowledge.

couple knew that it was God who spoke. Nor does it allow the possibility that they did not understand what he was saying. God had given them a personal word, pure and simple. Their responsibility was clear.

This is what we mean when we say that God's word is *authoritative*. The *authority* of God's word varies broadly according to the many functions I have listed. When God communicates information, we are obligated to believe it. When he tells us to do something, we are obligated to obey. When he tells us a parable, we are obligated to place ourselves in the narrative and meditate on the implications of that. When he expresses affection, we are obligated to appreciate and reciprocate. When he gives us a promise, we are obligated to trust. Let's define the *authority* of language as its capacity to create an obligation in the hearer. So the speech of an absolute authority creates absolute obligation. Obligation is not the only content of language, as we have seen. But it is the result of the *authority* of language.

As we know, Adam and Eve disobeyed. Many questions arise here. How did people whom God had declared "very good," along with the rest of creation (Gen. 1:31), disobey his word? The narrative doesn't tell us. Another question is why they would have wanted to disobey God. They knew who God was. They understood the authority of his word and his power to curse or bless. Why would they make a decision that they knew would bring a curse on themselves? The question is complicated a bit by the presence of Satan in the form of a serpent. Satan presumed to interpose a word rivaling God's, a word contradicting God's. But why would Adam and Eve have given Satan any credence at all? The most profound answer, I think, is that Adam and Eve wanted to be their own gods. Impulsively, arrogantly, and certainly irrationally, they exchanged God's truth for a lie (cf. Rom. 1:25). So they brought God's curse upon themselves (Gen. 3:16–19). Clearly, they should have known better. The word of God was clear and true. They should have obeyed it.

Noah, too, heard God's personal speech, telling him to build an ark. Unlike Adam, he obeyed God. He might have thought, like his neighbors, and like Adam, that God couldn't have been right about this. Why build a gigantic boat in a desert? But Noah obeyed God, and God vindicated his faith. Similarly with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, David. All these narratives and others begin with God's personal speech, often saying something hard to believe or commanding something hard to do. The course of the narrative depends on the character's response, in faith or unbelief. Hebrews 11 summarizes the faithful ones. Faith, in both Testaments, is hearing the word of God and doing it.

That's the biblical story: a story of God speaking to people personally, and people responding appropriately or inappropriately.

Scripture is plain that this is the very nature of the Christian life: having God's word and doing it. Jesus said, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me" (John 14:21). Everything we know about God we know because he has told us, through his personal speech. All our duties to God are from his commands. All the promises of salvation through the grace of Christ are God's promises, from his own mouth. What other source could there possibly be, for a salvation message that so contradicts our own feelings of self-worth, our own ideas of how to earn God's favor?

Now, to be sure, there are questions about where we can find God's personal words today, for he does not normally speak to us now as he did to Abraham. (These are questions of *canon*.) And there are questions about how we can come to understand God's words, given our distance from the culture in which they were given. (These are questions of *hermeneutics*.) I will address these questions in due course. But the answer *cannot* be that God's personal words are unavailable to us, or unintelligible to us. If we say either of those things, then we lose all touch with the biblical gospel. The idea that God communicates with human beings in personal words pervades all of Scripture, and it is central to every doctrine of Scripture. If God has, in fact, not spoken to us personally, then we lose any basis for believing in salvation by grace, in judgment, in Christ's atonement—indeed, for believing in the biblical God at all. Indeed, if God has not spoken to us personally, then everything important in Christianity is human speculation and fantasy.

Yet it should be evident to anyone who has studied the recent history of theology that the mainstream liberal and neoorthodox traditions have in fact denied that such personal words have occurred, even that they can occur. Others have said that although God's personal words may have occurred in the past, they are no longer available to us as personal words because of the problems of hermeneutics and canon. If those theologies are true, all is lost.

The present book is simply an exposition and defense of the biblical personal-word model of divine communication. As such, it will be different from many books on the theology of revelation and Scripture. Of course, this book will differ from the liberal and neoorthodox positions, but it will not spend a great deal of time analyzing those. Nor will it resemble the many recent books from more conservative authors that have the purpose of showing how much we can learn from Bible critics and how the concept of inerrancy needs to be redefined, circumscribed, or eliminated.³ I don't

3. For examples of how I respond to such arguments, see my reviews of recent books by Peter Enns, N. T. Wright, and Andrew McGowan, Appendices J, K, and L in this volume.

doubt that we can learn some things from Bible critics, but that is not my burden here. As for inerrancy, I think it is a perfectly good idea when understood in its dictionary definition and according to the intentions of its original users. But it is only an element of a larger picture. The term *inerrancy* actually says much *less* than we need to say in commending the authority of Scripture. I will argue that Scripture, together with all of God's other communications to us, should be treated as nothing less than God's personal word.

To make that case, I don't think it's necessary to follow the usual theological practice today, setting forth the history of doctrine and the contemporary alternatives and then, in the small amount of space that remains, choosing among the viable options. I have summarized my view of the liberal tradition here in chapters 3–7, and I do hope that in later editions of this book and in other writings I will find time to interact more fully with those writings.⁴ But although we can learn from the history of doctrine and from contemporary theologians, the final answers to our questions must come from the Word of God itself. And I don't think you need to look hard to find those answers. You don't need to engage in abstruse, complicated exegesis. You need only to look at the obvious things and be guided by them, rather than by Enlightenment skepticism. This book will attempt to set forth those obvious teachings and explore some of their implications.

The main difference between this book and other books on the doctrines of revelation and Scripture is that I am trying here, above all else, to be ruthlessly consistent with Scripture's own view of itself. In that regard, I'm interested in not only defending what Scripture says about Scripture, but defending it by means of the Bible's own worldview, its own epistemology,⁵ and its own values.⁶ That there is a circularity here I do not doubt. I am defending the Bible by the Bible. Circularity of a kind is unavoidable when one seeks to defend an ultimate standard of truth, for one's defense must itself be accountable to that standard.⁷ Of course, I will not hesitate to bring extrabiblical considerations to bear on the argument when such considerations are acceptable within a biblical epistemology. But ultimately I trust the Holy Spirit to bring persuasion to the readers of this book. God's communication with human beings, we will see, is supernatural all the way through.

4. For examples of such interaction, see Appendices A, E, F, H, M, and Q in this volume.

5. I have formulated what I think a biblical epistemology looks like in *DKG*.

6. *DCL* focuses on biblical values. *DKG* makes the case that biblical epistemology can be understood as a subdivision of biblical ethics.

7. See *DKG*, 130–33.

CHAPTER 2

Lordship and the Word

If we are to understand the nature of the word of God, we must certainly understand something about the God who speaks. In my other writings (see especially the first seven chapters of *DG*), I have listed some important ways in which the God of Scripture differs from all the gods of other religions and the principles of philosophers. I will summarize these here.

GOD IS AN ABSOLUTE PERSONALITY

The biblical God is the supreme being of the universe—eternal, unchangeable, infinite. He is self-existent, self-authenticating, and self-justifying. He depends on no other reality for his existence, or to meet his needs. In these senses he is absolute. But he is not only absolute. He is also personal, an *absolute personality*.

Further, the biblical God is not only personal, but tripersonal. His self-love, for example, in Scripture is not based on the model of a narcissist, an individual admiring himself (though God would not be wrong to love himself in that way). Rather, his self-love is fully interpersonal: the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Father, and the love of both embracing the Holy Spirit and his own love for them. God is for us the supreme model not only of personal virtues, but of interpersonal ones as well.

Other religions and philosophies honor absolute beings, such as the Hindu Brahman, the Greek Fate, Aristotle's Prime Mover, Hegel's Absolute. But none of these beings are personal. They do not know or love us, make decisions, make plans for history. Significantly in our present context, they do not *speak* to us.

Other religions and philosophies do honor personal gods, as with the polytheisms of Canaan, Greece, Egypt, Babylon, India, and modern paganism. Yet

none of these personal gods are absolute. Only in biblical religion is the supreme being an absolute personality. Only in biblical religion does the supreme being *speak*. And only in biblical religion is the speaking God absolute, a being who, significantly, needs nobody or nothing outside himself to validate his speech.

Consider the immense significance of the fact that the Creator of heaven and earth, who sovereignly governs all the affairs of the universe, actually knows, befriends, even loves human beings—and that he *speaks* to us.

There are, of course, other religions that approach the biblical idea of an absolute personal God. These include Islam, Judaism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormonism. These present themselves as believing that the supreme being is an absolute person. I believe this claim is inconsistent with other things in these religions. Certainly, none of these religions embraces the absolute tripersonality of biblical theism. But my present point is that even in these religions the claim to believe in an absolute personal God arises from the Bible. For all these religions are deeply influenced by the Bible, though they have departed from it in many ways.

GOD IS THE CREATOR

God, the absolute tripersonality, is related to the world in terms of the *Creator-creature distinction*. He is absolute, and we are not. Cornelius Van Til expressed this distinction in a diagram with a large circle (God) and a small one under it (the creation). God and the world are distinct from each other.

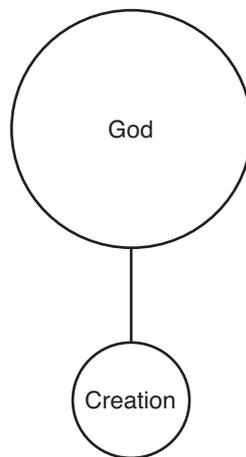


Fig. 2.1. Two circles

The world may never become God, nor can God become a creature. Even in the person of Christ, in which there is the most intimate possible union between God and human nature, there is (according to the formulation of the Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451) no mixing or confusion of the two natures. In the incarnation, God does not abandon or compromise his deity, but takes on humanity. In salvation, we do not become God; rather, we learn to serve him as faithful creatures.

At the same time, the Creator and creature are not distant from each other. This, too, is evident from the person of Christ, in which deity and humanity are inseparable, though distinct. Indeed, the Creator is always present to his creatures. The most important thing about any creature is its relation to the Creator. The creature's life, in every respect, at every moment, is possible and meaningful only because of that relationship. In him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

GOD IS THE COVENANT LORD

The Creator is related to the creature as its *covenant Lord*. *Lord* represents the Hebrew *Yahweh* (Ex. 3:15), the name by which he wants his people forever to remember him. So the chief confessions of faith in the Bible are confessions of God's lordship (Deut. 6:4–5; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11). God performs all his mighty works so that people will “know that I am the LORD” (Ex. 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:22; 10:2; 14:4; etc.). The chief message of the OT is “God is the Lord.” The chief message of the NT is “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

To say that God is Lord is to say that everything else is his servant. The relationship between Lord and servant is called *covenant*. As in the section on God as Creator above, there is to be no confusion between Lord and servant.

In Scripture, God's covenant lordship has three major connotations: (1) God, by his almighty power, is fully in *control* of the creation. (2) What God says is ultimately *authoritative*, in the sense we have discussed previously. (3) As covenant Lord, he takes the creation (and parts of the creation, such as Israel, or the church) into special relationships with him, relationships that lead to blessing or cursing. So he is always *present with* them. He was literally present with Israel in the tabernacle and the temple. He became definitively present to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. And his Spirit indwells NT believers, making them his temple. Truly God is “God with us,” Immanuel.

I describe God's control, authority, and presence as the three *lordship attributes*. I think there is some relationship between these and the three

persons of the Trinity: in general, the Father formulates the eternal divine plan of nature and history (authority), the Son carries out that plan (control), and the Spirit applies it to every person and thing (presence). This triad is echoed in many areas of the teaching of Scripture, and as we will see, it is reflected throughout the biblical doctrine of the word of God.

As in previous Lordship books, I will also distinguish three *perspectives* by which we can look at all of reality, corresponding to the three lordship attributes: in the *situational* perspective, we will examine nature and history as they take place under the controlling power of God. In the *normative* perspective, we will look at the world as God's authoritative revelation to us. And in the *existential* perspective, we will focus on our own inwardness, our personal experience, in which God has chosen to be near to us. These are perspectives, for we cannot fully understand reality under one perspective without considering the other two.

If God is to communicate with his creatures, clearly he must communicate as the Lord, for that is what he is. He cannot abandon his lordship while speaking to us. So his word must come to us with absolute power (able to accomplish its purposes, Isa. 55:11), authority (beyond criticism, Rom. 4:20, as we earlier described the authority of language to create obligation), and presence (the Word as God's personal dwelling place, John 1:1; Heb. 4:12–13). The word of God is the word of the Lord. So it can be nothing other than the personal word we discussed earlier.

PART TWO

GOD'S WORD IN MODERN THEOLOGY

The rest of this book will follow the pattern of my three perspectives. In Part 2, I will discuss the views of revelation and Scripture held by mainstream liberal theologians. That is our situational perspective, the theological situation into which we teach and preach the authority of God's Word. Part 3 will expound how Scripture itself defines the word, the normative perspective. Part 4 will discuss the means by which God's word comes from God's lips to our hearts, the existential perspective.

CHAPTER 3

Modern Views of Revelation

Following the example of Scripture, I prefer the term *word of God* to *revelation* when considering God's communication with his creatures. Scripture uses both terms, but *word* far more often. *Word* is God's communication. *Revelation* is the content disclosed by the word. The two terms can be used interchangeably, but I prefer to use the more common biblical terminology. Yet the mainstream modern theology of around 1650 to the present has chosen to speak most often of *revelation*, and perhaps it is best to present those modern concepts in terminology different from that emphasized in Scripture.

I will speak of *modern* and *liberal* theology somewhat synonymously: as those types of theology that do not accept the absolute authority of the Bible. There are, of course, nuances in these terms that I cannot discuss in this summary; so I will be describing as liberal some who, like Karl Barth, prefer not to be described that way. It is usually best to describe people in the terms they have chosen to describe themselves, but that cannot be an absolute rule.

What distinguishes modern views of revelation from orthodox (to my mind biblical) views is their affirmation of human *autonomy* in the realm of knowledge.¹ Intellectual autonomy is the view that human beings have the right to seek knowledge of God's world without being subject to God's

1. My emphasis on autonomy is very much influenced by the work of Cornelius Van Til. Herman Dooyeweerd also protested, at great length and in great depth, the "pretended autonomy of theoretical thought." See Dooyeweerd's *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Lewiston, NY: Edward Mellen Press, 1997). I have some disagreements with Van Til, and

revelation. It first appears in the history of thought in Genesis 3's narrative of the fall, in which Adam and Eve make their decision to disobey God's personal word to them. In their decision, they affirm their right to think autonomously, even to the point of contradicting God himself.

The spirit of autonomy underlies every sinful decision of every human being. As I noted earlier, it is irrational in an important sense. Paul tells us in Romans 1:18–32 that human beings know God clearly from his revelation to them in creation, but that nevertheless they choose to repress this knowledge and exchange it for a lie. How could anyone imagine that contradicting the Master of the universe could be a wise decision? This foolishness mirrors the biblical paradigm of irrationality, the foolishness of Satan himself, who (again in the face of clear knowledge) tries to replace God on the throne of the universe.

In this satanic project, man seeks to become his own lord. He denies God's ultimate control, authority, and presence. Either he denies that there is such a Lord or he ascribes lordship to something in creation. If he denies that there is a Lord, he embraces *irrationalism*, the view that there is no ultimate meaning in the universe. If he ascribes lordship to something finite (i.e., idolatry), he embraces *rationalism*, the view that a godlike knowledge can be obtained from the creation alone.

Of course, Satan and his followers embrace rationalism irrationally, for they have no right to insist that their minds are the ultimate criterion of truth. Similarly, they embrace irrationalism rationalistically, assuming the ultimate authority of their own minds. So in unbelieving thought, rationalism and irrationalism are two sides of a single coin, though they actually contradict each other. That contradiction is part of the irrationality of it all. That irrationality permeates the whole fabric of human knowledge. So we can understand how the assumption of intellectual autonomy destroys knowledge.

Of course, as Romans 1 shows, Satan and his disciples do have a clear knowledge of God, which they repress. But they have that clear knowledge of God in spite of, not because of, their commitment to autonomy. If they were consistent with their commitment to autonomy, they could not know anything at all.

We can see this spirit of autonomy in all sin. As in Genesis 3, sin assumes autonomy. It assumes that God does not exist, or that he has not given us a personal word. That is true of the sins of individuals, families, and nations. It is true of all types of sin: stealing, adultery, murder, deceit. It is also true

more with Dooyeweerd. But I believe these two thinkers deserve far more attention than they have received by the philosophical and theological communities.

of intellectual sin: denying the truth in the face of clear knowledge. Why should anyone imagine that the intellect could be left out of our account of sin? The mind is part of our being. It contributes to sin as much as our wills and feelings, as much as our arms and legs. So the spirit of autonomy appears in the history of human thought.

In the history of religion, human beings devise idols (false gods) and ascribe to them some kind of ultimacy, though pagans at their best have understood that their false gods had no ultimate control, authority, or presence. But around 600 B.C. something new appears in Western thought, beginning among Greek thinkers in Asia Minor. These thinkers, such as Thales, Anaximenes, and Anaximander, were given a unique name, because their thought was significantly different from that of the previous religious teachers and writers. The name was *philosopher*. In itself, the term is a good one, designating love of wisdom. Christians, too, should engage in philosophy in this sense. But the Greek philosophers received that name not because of their general love of wisdom, but because of a unique feature of their thought. The feature was a commitment to intellectual autonomy. The philosophers rejected the authority of religion and tradition and insisted on the sole ultimate authority of human reason.²

Greek philosophy fell into the paradox I have ascribed to all would-be autonomous thought, that of rationalism and irrationalism. Greek philosophers were rationalists, in that they embraced the ultimate authority of human reason, and irrationalists in that they denied the existence of any adequate source of order in the world. Their project, sophisticated as it became in such later thinkers as Plato and Aristotle, was the impossible task of imposing a rational order on an essentially irrational world—or, as they put it, categorizing matter by form.

In the early centuries after Jesus' resurrection, biblical thought came to influence the philosophical discussion. The Christian thinkers made use of Greek philosophy, but they modified it considerably by their allegiance to the biblical worldview. They did not, however, break away entirely from the Greek conception. The *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) begins with a distinction between two disciplines: philosophy, which operates by “natural reason” alone, and theology, which appeals to divine revelation. In Thomas's thought, these two spheres overlapped in certain ways. But in his work there was always some confusion as to the role of revelation in the sphere assigned to natural reason. He at least suggests

2. For more reflection on philosophical ideas that influence the theological understanding of revelation, see my review of Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Biblical Errancy*, Appendix M in this volume.

that intellectual autonomy is possible and legitimate in some degree and at some areas of thought.

The seventeenth century A.D. brought a change analogous to the birth of philosophy around 600 B.C. The medieval “scholastics” such as Aquinas had tried to combine biblical thought with Greek philosophy, and they had created their own Christian philosophical traditions to which all later philosophers were expected to subscribe. But as Thales rejected the traditions of the Greek priests and poets, René Descartes (1596–1650) and others rejected the traditions of scholasticism.

Wanting to achieve absolute certainty, Descartes resolved to doubt anything that he did not “clearly and distinctly perceive to be true.” For him, all the teachings of the church, as well as the philosophical traditions, were in this sense subject to doubt. The only idea that he clearly and distinctly perceived to be true was the fact that he himself was thinking. So the famous *cogito, ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am.” From this foundational truth, Descartes proposed to erect, by logical deduction, the whole fabric of human knowledge. Among the truths in that fabric was the existence of God. Descartes did profess to be a Christian. But his philosophy and theology were built on a foundation of human autonomy, which, as we have seen, is radically unbiblical.

Intellectual autonomy has been the rule in philosophy down to the present, with a few exceptions. Indeed, this principle has deeply infected theology as well.

A younger contemporary of Descartes, Baruch (or Benedict) Spinoza (1634–77), attempted to carry on Descartes’ program more consistently, by developing his philosophy in the form of a geometric system in his *Ethics* (1674). But Spinoza also applied the principle of intellectual autonomy to more explicitly theological subjects. In 1670, he published his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, in which he dealt with the nature and interpretation of Scripture and its implications for politics. In this volume, he defends freedom of thought in society by attacking superstition. He contends that the Bible, rightly interpreted, leaves reason absolutely free. Rational knowledge is just as much revelation as anything in Scripture. Prophecy cannot give knowledge of phenomena beyond that available to reason alone. Miraculous events, which contravene the laws apprehended by reason, can never take place. Spinoza denies the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and many other traditional ideas about the origin of Scripture. Essentially, he proposes that we read the Bible as any other ancient text, subjecting it to the criteria of human reason. It is God’s Word only in the sense that God endorses all the conclusions of reason. And of course, Spinoza understands reason to be autonomous.

Spinoza’s approach to Scripture (similar to that of others in the seventeenth century, such as Thomas Hobbes and Richard Simon) rather

quickly became the dominant view of mainstream academic theology. The Cambridge Platonists in seventeenth-century England, such as Ralph Cudworth and Benjamin Whichcote, affirmed the primacy of reason, as did the Deists, such as Lord Herbert of Cherbury and Matthew Tindal. These were the harbingers of the so-called Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, of which Voltaire, Denis Diderot, and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing are well-known representatives. In the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, the Germans led in the field of biblical criticism, with names such as H. S. Reimarus, D. F. Strauss, F. C. Baur, Julius Wellhausen, Johannes Weiss, Albert Schweitzer, and Rudolf Bultmann contributing to the liberal tradition. Today the “Jesus Seminar” in the United States (John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, Marcus Borg, and others) makes regular headlines for its pronouncements on what can and cannot be believed in the NT.

Some of these are more positive, some more negative as to the historical and doctrinal value of Scripture. But I can safely say that nobody in this succession ever took seriously the central issue: the acceptability of autonomous reasoning. Conservative scholars and churchmen did take issue with this principle, or at least they refused to accept it. But within the liberal movement itself, there was no consideration of the alternative. Intellectual autonomy was accepted as a presupposition, as something fundamental, not to be argued about. It was thought that anyone who disagreed was simply not a scholar, not qualified to do serious research.

Many did disagree and therefore maintained the authority of Scripture as the church had always done before Spinoza. We recall in this connection the names of biblical scholars E. W. Hengstenberg, J. F. K. Keil, Franz Delitzsch, Theodor Zahn, B. B. Warfield, Robert D. Wilson, Geerhardus Vos, J. Gresham Machen, George E. Ladd, F. F. Bruce, Edward J. Young, Meredith G. Kline, Ned Stonehouse, Donald Carson, Richard Bauckham, and Craig Blomberg. Certainly, these men qualify as scholars, if we are permitted to employ a less tendentious definition of scholarship than that common in the liberal community.

But the major university faculties were nonetheless dominated by those who embraced the principle of intellectual autonomy. It all happened very quickly. There was no academic debate on whether it is right for human beings to exercise reason without the authority of God’s revelation. There was not much argument about whether the universities should change their time-honored commitments to divine revelation. Rather, major figures simply began teaching from the new point of view, and there was no significant resistance. They accepted the assumption of autonomy and saw to it that their successors accepted it, too. Campus politics certainly played a major role in this development. The conservatives did not know what hit them.

Soon, because pastors were trained in universities, the liberal view spread to the churches, so that by the late nineteenth century most mainstream denominations in America were tolerating that approach. In 1924, 1,274 ministers of the Presbyterian Church USA signed a document called the *Auburn Affirmation*, which denied that the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, the resurrection of Christ, and his miracles should be tests of orthodoxy in the denomination. In the 1930s, ministers in the denomination were disciplined for insisting that the church's missionaries believe in the above-listed doctrines. The liberal commitment to intellectual autonomy had made these doctrines optional, and many church leaders regarded them as literally untrue. Those who objected to these developments (contrary to liberal claims of "tolerance") were given no respect or power in the councils of the church.

This change was astonishing. The adoption of intellectual autonomy as a theological principle was certainly at least as important as the church's adoption of the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity in 381, or the doctrine of the two natures of Christ in 451. Yet without any council, without any significant debate, much of the church during the period 1650 to the present came to adopt the principle of intellectual autonomy in place of the authority of God's personal words. But this new doctrine changed everything. Given intellectual autonomy, there is no reason to accept supernatural biblical teachings such as the doctrine of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. The virgin birth, miracles, atonement, resurrection, and glorious return of Jesus are on this basis no longer defensible. J. Gresham Machen showed, in *Christianity and Liberalism*, that liberalism rejected the historic Christian teachings about the Bible, God, Christ, the atonement, salvation, and the church.³ Some thinkers rejected these traditional doctrines outright. Others reinterpreted them in some symbolic fashion. In both cases, these doctrines had to meet the criteria of autonomous human reason.

If these doctrines are true, they must be true because of God's personal testimony. There is no way that they can be validated on the authority of autonomous reason. Indeed, if human reason is autonomous, the God of the Bible does not exist, for his very nature as the Creator excludes the autonomy of his creatures. And in fact nothing at all can be validated by autonomous reason, for as we have seen, such reasoning leads to a rationalist-irrationalist dialectic, which destroys all knowledge. For that pottage, much of the church has forsaken its birthright, God's personal word.⁴

3. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923).

4. For more discussion on the antithesis between biblical and unbiblical thought on the subject of the Word of God, see "Antithesis and the Doctrine of Scripture," Appendix A in this volume.

CHAPTER 4

Revelation and Reason

For the next several chapters, I will describe and evaluate in more detail the liberal theologies of revelation. I will organize this discussion under my three perspectives, normative, situational, and existential. Under the normative perspective, I will consider the relation of revelation to reason. Under the situational, I will discuss revelation and history. And under the existential, revelation and human subjectivity. Then there will be a chapter on the important relationship between revelation and God in these views.

I have said a great deal already about the relation of revelation and reason, and the liberal view of it. But there is more to be said.

I hope it is understood that my complaint against liberalism is not a complaint against reason itself, but against the propositions (1) that human reason operates autonomously, and (2) that autonomous reason provides the ultimate criteria of truth and falsity, right and wrong, by which everything (including Scripture) is to be judged.

Reason itself is a good gift of God. English translations of Scripture do not use the term *reason* in anything like a philosophical sense. But the Bible is full of what we call reasoning. For example, God often gives us reasons for his commands. In Exodus 20:11, God commands Israel to keep the Sabbath day, “for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth.” Israel is not only to rest one day a week, but to rest for that reason. Deuteronomy 5:15 adds another reason: God rescued Israel from bondage in Egypt and gave them rest, so they should give rest to their households. In Isaiah 1:18,

God calls Israel, "Come now, let us reason!" Paul's letters often contain the term *therefore*, as in Romans 8:1 and 12:1. Paul uses it to indicate the reasons why God's people should hope in God and obey him.

Even when God's commands appear arbitrary, as in his command to Adam to abstain from the forbidden fruit, there is a reason: "for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). Even if there is no obvious connection between eating the fruit and bearing God's judgment, a rational person will not make a choice that opposes God's desires, that brings estrangement from God and death.

Service to God, then, is rational service. Service of the head as well as the heart. Those who disbelieve and disobey are not reasonable people; they are "fools" (Ps. 14:1; Prov. 1:32; 1 Cor. 1:20).

But Scripture does distinguish between right and wrong reasoning. In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30), the fellow who chose not to invest his talent but to hide it in the ground thought he had good reasons for doing so: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours" (vv. 24–25). This is actually fairly plausible reasoning—reasoning that I might well have used myself in the same situation. But Jesus condemns it as not only fallacious, but "wicked" (v. 26). Reason is a good gift of God, but it is fallible, and it is affected by sin.

It is best, I think, to define reason as a human faculty, like our ability to see, hear, or touch. Reason is our ability to judge consistency and logical validity. It enables us to see whether two statements are logically consistent or inconsistent and when an argument is valid or invalid. Like our sight and hearing, it is not always accurate, and it can be distorted by sin. Sin gives us a bias against God's authoritative reasoning. And it commits us to intellectual autonomy, which, as we've seen, destroys knowledge the more consistently it is carried out.

The term *reason* can be used either descriptively (referring to the faculty just described) or normatively (referring to the right use of this faculty). In the first usage, even bad reasoning is reasoning. In the second usage, bad reasoning is not really reasoning at all; it is unreason.

It is then important to ask what constitutes good reasoning. There is, of course, a close relation between reason and logic, so that we regard violations of the laws of logic to be violations of reason as well. But an argument can lead to a false conclusion even when it is a logically valid syllogism. For example, consider: "All professors of theology eat rats. Dr. Clark is a professor of theology. Therefore Dr. Clark eats rats." This is a valid argument. But because the first premise is false, the conclusion may be false

as well. That is to say, sound syllogisms require not only logical validity, but also true premises. Logic alone does not tell us whether our premises are false or true. That knowledge must come from elsewhere. One cannot, therefore, judge the rational strength of arguments by logic alone. Logical reasoning presupposes knowledge of reality beyond knowledge of logic.

In the context of a biblical worldview, logical reasoning presupposes God, the author and ultimate standard of logical truth and all human rationality. Denying God, as we have seen, leads necessarily to irrationality (and to rationalism as well!).

Now, as we have seen, the liberal theologies of revelation began among philosophers such as Baruch Spinoza of the rationalist tradition.¹ It seemed obvious to them that reason should have the final word in evaluating claims to revelation. Indeed, the only alternative appeared to be that we should make those evaluations *unreasonably*. I will surprise readers by saying that Christians, too, ought to believe in the ultimate authority of reason. But in saying this, I take *reason* in the normative sense, reason functioning at its best. Reason has the last word because it presupposes the reality of God and subjects itself to the “premises” of God’s revelation to us.

The point was often made (as in Immanuel Kant’s *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*²) that even if an angel speaks to us, our reason must determine whether it really is an angel, and whether the angel’s words deserve to be followed. This point is just as cogent (if a bit more startling) applied to the personal words of God himself. Even if God himself were to speak to you, as to Abraham (Kant would say), your reason must determine whether it is really God speaking, and whether God deserves to be obeyed.

In my surprising mode again, I agree with this argument. Yes, indeed, our reason should evaluate every claim to revelation, including the claims of the biblical God. But what constitutes a sound rational analysis of these claims? The problem with the argument as presented by Spinoza and Kant is its assumption about how reason should function. It simply assumes, without raising the issue, that reason should function autonomously. As we have seen, this assumption must be challenged. It leads to rational unintelligibility as well as to spiritual disaster.

1. I am here using the term *rationalist* in a narrower sense than before. In the wider sense, as I discussed it in chapter 3, all would-be autonomous thought is rationalist (and of course irrationalist as well). In the narrower sense, *rationalist* refers to a distinct school of philosophy: philosophers who give more authority to reason than to sense experience. In this sense, the rationalist school is opposed to the *empiricist* school (e.g., John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume), which favored the primacy of sense experience. René Descartes and Spinoza were rationalists in both broader and narrower senses.

2. Many editions, such as 1934; repr., NY: Harper and Bros., 1960.

A legitimate rational evaluation of God's personal words will consider the authority of God and conclude that the hearer should certainly believe these words, without objection. In making this evaluation, reason is doing its proper work in the proper way, and it is completely trustworthy.

Later liberal thinkers, as we will see, didn't like the idea of subjecting God to human reason, but they still conceived of reason as functioning autonomously. Indeed, it was the autonomous character of reason that led them to be suspicious of reason. So they subordinated reason to history (Albrecht Ritschl, Oscar Cullmann), feeling (Friedrich Schleiermacher), Jesus Christ (Karl Barth), personal encounter (Martin Buber, Emil Brunner), self-understanding (Rudolf Bultmann), community (Roman Catholic thinkers and some Protestants), the experience of an oppressed community (Gustavo Gutiérrez, James Cone, Elizabeth Johnson), hope in an open future (Jürgen Moltmann), and others.

But these alternatives offer no remedy to the problem. If "history" means anything, it is a rational account of events, to be analyzed by rational people. It is not an alternative to reason, but a rational inquiry. Schleiermacher's "feeling" generated a great deal of rational reflection on Schleiermacher's part. Certainly, he intended his account of feeling, and his assertion of the primacy of feeling, to be a rational account. The same is true of the others, including Barth's "Jesus Christ." For Barth himself emphasized that in our understanding of Christ, there must be no *sacrificium intellectus*, no sacrifice of the intellect.

Evangelical Christians, too, should not claim that there is anything wrong with reason as such, or that it is unfit to identify and evaluate God's revelation. Scripture never suggests that there is any defect in human reason as such. The problem with reason is not that it is naturally unfit to examine revelation, but that it is fallen. The problem is that fallen man tries to use his reason autonomously. All his arguments are founded on the false premise that God is not the author and final standard of truth. We should not seek to be less rational, or to substitute something else for reason. Rather, our reason, with all the rest of us, should be regenerated by God's grace. Then we should learn to use reason in a new way, suited to regeneration, under the authority of our covenant Lord.

There is a certain circularity in saying that we should base our reasoning on God's Word, while evaluating God's Word. I have discussed this circularity in *DKG* and in chapter 1 of this book, and I will discuss it in later chapters as well,³ because it is important for many issues that arise on these topics. Arguments are always circular when they seek to validate an

3. I have developed the topic especially in Appendix E.

ultimate principle of thought. To show that reason is ultimate, one must appeal to reason. To show that sense experience is ultimate, one must show that this view is warranted by sense experience itself. Similarly with history, feeling, experience, and so on. Christians should not fear charges of circularity when they are proving God's Word by God's own principles of rationality. All alternative systems of thought are in the same boat. And as we have seen, reasoning in accord with God's Word is the only kind of reasoning that doesn't dissolve into meaninglessness.

There is one limitation of reason that I have not so far referred to in this section. That is that reason, like all other human faculties, is incapable of knowing God exhaustively, knowing God as he knows himself. This fact implies that there may be arguments that seem sound to us that God himself (because of his superior understanding of logic and because he has a better knowledge of the truth of the premises) disallows. And there may be, for the same reason, arguments that seem invalid to us, but not to God, or conjunctions of sentences that seem inconsistent to us (such as "God is good, but he foreordains evil") but not to God.⁴

Reason, however, ought to acknowledge the limitation of being less than divine, of being creaturely. That is, paradoxically, the rational thing for reason to do. The Creator-creature distinction applies to reasoning as well as everything else. So God's higher knowledge is a limitation of human logic, but it is also a presupposition of it and a condition of its validity. To deny this limitation is to deny the ultimacy of God's thought and to assert human autonomy in its place. And autonomy leads to incoherence.⁵

4. I have discussed the problem of evil and the paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in *DG*, chapters 8–9.

5. For more discussion of the relation between revelation and reason, see *DKG*, 242–301, 329–31, and my article "Rationality and Scripture," Appendix B in this volume.

CHAPTER 5

Revelation and History

As we have seen, theologians debating revelation have often discussed reason as a norm for evaluating revelation. So I have presented reason as the normative perspective of the debates.

We have also seen, however, that some theologians have wanted to deny or limit the authority of reason in the interest of some other category. The most common of these is history. I argued in the last section against the notion that history could somehow be a substitute for reason in Christian theology. Rather, the discussion of history requires reason. To discuss history is to engage in rational analysis.

Sometimes, however, we think of reason as a faculty for constructing abstract systems of thought, like Euclid's geometry, in which every idea is linked to every other by a tight chain of logical deductions, based on self-evident axioms. Certainly, it is often observed, Christian theology cannot be such a system. For it does not deal primarily with abstract or general truths, as does Euclid's system. Nor does it, like geometry, deal primarily with truths that are timeless, that are always true. Rather, Christian theology is about a *gospel*, good news: news about events in history. In that sense it is true that revelation is historical. So if we identify reason with axiomatic systems and timeless truths, then revelation is historical rather than rational.

Of course, it should be evident that I think it wrong to identify reason with axiomatic systems and timeless truths. These are some forms of rational thought. But rationality is not limited to them. Reason is also important

in examining history, in understanding things that happen in time. So as we begin to discuss history, I don't intend to leave rationality behind. Reason is crucial in the examination of history. But it must be a reason that is subject to God's Word, not conceived as autonomous.

Or look at it this way: in the previous section, we looked at reason as a norm, as a tool of analysis. In this section we look at the data that theological reason seeks to analyze. As a norm, reason seeks to understand a situation. History is that situation, conceived in broadest terms. So reason is the normative perspective, history the situational.

The term *history* can refer either to a series of significant events or to a (rational!) account of such events. In both senses, therefore, history is crucial to Christian theology, even though the term is not often found in English translations of Scripture. As events, history provides the content of Christian faith. Revelation (well, "special" revelation) is an account of those events. So revelation is history and history is revelation.

The content of Scripture has often been summarized by three events: creation, fall, redemption. These can be further subdivided into many other events: God's creative acts over six days, Satan's temptation, the sin of our first parents, God's curses on and promises to them, the flood, God's covenant with Abraham, and so on. This series of events leads to the coming of Christ, his perfect life and teachings, and his atoning death, resurrection, and ascension. Events following the work of Christ on earth are the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost and the spread of the gospel through the earth. Revelation also holds out the promise of future events: Jesus' return, the final judgment, and the eternal destinies of the saved and the lost.

In chapter 2, I discussed three ways in which the biblical God is different from all other beings that have been called *god*. The biblical God is an absolute tripersonality, he relates to the world as Creator to creature, and he holds the office of covenant Lord over all things. The centrality of history is also a unique feature of biblical religion. For biblical faith, everything turns on the historical events of creation, fall, and redemption.

In Buddhism, there are, to be sure, stories of the Buddha's life, focusing on his enlightenment under the bodhi tree. But what the Buddha learns under the bodhi tree is not about specific historical events. Rather, he learns general truths, such as that life is suffering. On the Buddhist view, these are true at all times. They are true whether or not Gautama Buddha discovered them, and they would be true even if Buddha had never lived. Some forms of Buddhism, to be sure, honor stories about miracles performed by the Buddha. But to most sophisticated Buddhists, these miracle tales are an embarrassment. They detract from the main thrust

of Buddhist theology, in which the path to enlightenment is not through miracle, but through a life based on the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path.

The same is true of Hinduism, Taoism, and other religions. Judaism and Islam seem to be exceptions. But neither of these admits to any historical basis for human salvation. As with Buddhism, they refer to history only to cite teachers such as Moses and Muhammad, who tell us how to live. If indeed these two religions are exceptional to some extent, however, it is because they are both strongly influenced by the Bible. This is the same point I made about their views of God in chapter 2.

So the centrality of historical events is foundational to biblical faith, and unique to it. It is therefore not surprising that many theologians in the liberal tradition came to assert that revelation is historical events, not spoken or written words. The Bible itself points to the mighty acts of God (Pss. 106:2; 145:4, 12; 150:2) as the subject matter of our praise. Obviously, God's acts in the context of creation, fall, and redemption do reveal him. They show us what kind of God he is. For example, the NT often singles out the atonement as the chief revelation of, indeed the definition of, God's love (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:4–5; 1 John 3:16; 4:8–11; Rev. 1:5).

It is tempting to say, therefore, as some theologians have, that these events are a more fundamental revelation of God than the words about those events. On the other hand, it is the words that make the events accessible to us. A frequent pattern in Scripture is that a prophet will predict an event, then a passage narrates the event, and then further commentary interprets the event. Word, event, word. But even the narrative of the event is by word. The nature of an event is that it occurs at a specific time and place. Words are the *news* of the event, the necessary media to report that event to people who weren't there, and to interpret its significance. If the event, say, of Jesus' atonement had taken place without witnesses to spread the news in words, we would not benefit from it today.

So James Barr, in *Old and New in Interpretation*, says:

The progression of the story is given not only by what God does but also by what he says. Indeed, yet more, there is no progression given by God's deeds and sayings alone, but only one when both of these are combined with the deeds and sayings of men. It is possible to make a chain of things done by God, and regard the sayings attributed to him as human meditation upon the things done. If we do this, we should be frank that it is also a modern

rationalizing device, which departs from the form, and therefore from the spirit, of the literature itself.¹

Barr was no fundamentalist; indeed, he was a very sharp critic of conservative Christianity. Yet he was also a sharp critic of the theologians who tried to limit revelation to the actions of God narrated in Scripture and to disparage the authority of his words reported there. It's fairly obvious when you think about it. Scripture represents God both as acting and as speaking, and it doesn't prefer the one to the other.

Those who prefer God's acts to his words do so not because of anything in Scripture, but because they demand the right to consider biblical history autonomously. Divine words get in the way when human beings try to place their own interpretations on God's actions.

Hence, through the history of liberal theology, a number of theologians have sought to place emphasis on history, the acts of God, as opposed to revealed words. Among these are Albrecht Ritschl (1822–99), “acts of God” theologians of the mid-twentieth century such as Oscar Cullmann (1902–99) and G. Ernest Wright (1909–74), and the later school of Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–). In Ritschl's understanding, theology should be based on the attempt of historians to find and understand the “historical Jesus.” For Cullmann, revelation consists of historical events interpreted by faith. For Pannenberg, revelation is general history, understood by reason to validate the Christian faith. Others such as Karl Barth (1886–1968) also had much to say on the role of history in revelation, as part of his larger theology of revelation.²

For Ritschl, history is history interpreted by autonomous reason. What is authoritative in the historical events is not the events themselves, or truths derived from those events, but “value judgments” that arise from the work of the historian. Pannenberg's thought is similar, except that Pannenberg is more interested in Jesus' resurrection as a reference point for understanding the Bible's interpretations of its history. For Cullmann, the events in question may be perfectly natural in themselves, perhaps unremarkable; but

1. James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 21. He adds, “Such a device has more serious consequences than at first appears, for it damages the picture of the personal God of the Bible.”

2. Readers may also be interested in my paper “Muller on Theology,” *WTJ* 56 (Spring 1994): 133–51, also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1994Muller.htm and as Appendix C in this volume. In this review article I take issue with Richard Muller's book *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991). Muller presents an evangelical version of the thesis that theology is a form of history. I complain that he does not give Scripture an adequate role in his understanding of theological method.

when one looks at them in faith, they become significant. In a way, what is important for Cullmann is not the event itself, but faith's interpretation of the event. So although he speaks much of the primacy of the acts of God, he actually ascribes more authority to interpretation than to fact.

None of these repudiates the principle of human intellectual autonomy. Indeed, all presuppose it. For all of them, history is events interpreted by autonomous human thought. This is why, I think, in the end Cullmann should be seen as backing away from history, embracing faith instead. But the relation between faith and event in his thought is obscure.

Barth distinguished between two concepts of history, expressed by two German words, *Geschichte* and *Historie*. *Historie* consists of events available for the inspection of secular historians, who use the standard techniques of autonomous historiography. Barth, like Cullmann (but not like Ritschl or Pannenberg), hesitates to base the Christian faith on *Historie*, so defined. But he recognizes in Scripture the centrality of such events as Christ's incarnation, atonement, and resurrection.³ So he explains these events as history, taken in a different sense: *Geschichte*. It is very difficult from Barth's writings to get a clear idea of what *Geschichte* is. Barth's main concern, I think, is to insulate it from the methods of autonomous, "objective" historians. *Historie* is indeed accessible to them. In it, they are free to believe or disbelieve, to determine for themselves its significance. But Barth does not want to give them such freedom with the great events of redemption.

Nevertheless, if *Geschichte* is to be truly independent of autonomous historical science, Barth thinks that it must be of a very different character from *Historie*. Events of *Historie* take place at particular times and places. Those times and places can be investigated, so that the historian can make an authoritative judgment whether they happened or not. *Geschichte* must, however, be immune to such profane analysis. So the events of *Geschichte* must be removed from calendar time and space.

Another distinction: events of *Historie* can affect only those who directly experience them when and where they can occur, or those who hear authoritative reports from scientific historians. But events in *Geschichte* can affect all people equally.

3. Many in the church have attempted to make major distinctions between events such as the atonement and resurrection, and "secular" events such as the Battle of Waterloo. Compare (1) the medieval distinction between nature and grace, (2) Martin Luther's distinction between the "two kingdoms," (3) attempts among liberal theologians and some evangelicals to distinguish between Scripture's authority for "faith and practice" and for supposedly secular areas of life, and (4) Meredith G. Kline's attempt to distinguish between the "realm of the holy" and the "realm of the common." I reject all of these as lacking biblical support. (For argumentation, see *DCL*.) God's lordship, and therefore the scope and authority of his Word, extends to all of life.

The idea of *Geschichte* as a series of events without specific time and place, that affect all people, and that can be known apart from the mediation of historical scholarship is an odd notion. It seems even odder for Barth to place the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection into that realm. So all sorts of questions have arisen as to whether Barth believes these events “really happened” in the time-and-space world. To say the least, Barth’s answer to this question is unclear. He does believe that the resurrection, for example, took place in literal history; but he represents this event as a pointer to a higher reality that can only be described as *geschichtlich*.

Clarification of this issue will have to be left to Barth scholars more expert than I. I should say, however, that this unclarity arises because Barth accepts the notion of intellectual autonomy. *Historie* is precisely the sphere in which such autonomy holds sway. So Barth believes that secular scholars should be perfectly free to criticize the historical assertions of the Bible. But as a Christian, Barth senses the danger of exposing the central truths of redemption to such negative criticism. *Geschichte*, whatever other purposes it may serve, supports that concern, but it introduces much confusion.

It would be better simply to repudiate the legitimacy of autonomous historical scholarship. Then there is no need for two histories. There is only one, which occurs in time and space, and which is accessible to historians who regard God’s Word as their ultimate standard of truth. Nothing in the Bible suggests the kind of distinction that Barth sets forth, and Barth’s formulation brings nothing but confusion to discussions of biblical epistemology. In Scripture, it is simple: we believe in the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection because of the apostolic testimony (as 1 Cor. 15:1–2, 11), which amounts to God’s personal words.

The whole discussion began with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), who said in his “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power”⁴ that there was a “big, ugly ditch” between “accidental truths of history” and “necessary truths of reason.” Now, it is right to say that necessary truths of reason, like $2 + 2 = 4$, are not derived from an examination of historical events. And it is true that most historical inquiries do not yield the kind of certainty that we associate with mathematical and logical truths. But Lessing intended to draw a theological implication from this observation. As an Enlightenment rationalist, he believed, like Baruch Spinoza, that autonomous reason is the ultimate criterion of faith. So his “ditch” was a ditch not only between history and the necessary truths of reason, but also between history and faith.

4. In H. B. Nisbet, ed. and trans., *Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Many have been troubled by Lessing's ditch. How can we believe in Christ on the basis of historical events, when those events are so uncertain? No historical event is absolutely certain, it seems, let alone events that took place in a vastly different time and culture. The theologians of history that we have considered in this chapter were all somewhat intimidated by this chasm. Ritschl and Pannenberg thought they could cross the chasm by autonomous historical scholarship. Cullmann felt the need of something else to bridge the gap, which he called faith. Barth thought that he had to distinguish a new kind of history, in which there was no gap, but in which historical scholarship played no role.

In this respect, Barth follows Immanuel Kant. For Kant, the world of ordinary experience in time and space, the world of "phenomena," is knowable by autonomous human reason; indeed, its fundamental structure is created by reason. Even "religion within the limits of reason" is subject to the criteria of autonomous rationality, as I indicated in the previous chapter. That would include knowledge of the historical events recorded in the Bible. But Kant also speaks of the "noumenal" realm, the realm of things as they are in themselves, in which reason is incompetent. We can, nevertheless, imagine what the noumenal world is like and develop beliefs about it by a kind of "faith." Although the existence of God, for example, cannot be demonstrated by reason, we should believe that God exists for the scientific and moral advantages that belief gives us. Barth's *Historie* is much like Kant's phenomenal realm; Barth's *Geschichte* is much like Kant's noumenal. Barth leaps Lessing's ditch by placing faith in *Geschichte*, much as Kant placed it in a posited noumenal. Both Barth and Kant do this because they agree with Lessing as to the autonomy of reason in historical scholarship. They concede ordinary history in time and space to secularists, in order to be able to make theological statements concerning a different realm, unfettered by historical scholarship.

But if we renounce the autonomy of historical scholarship, then the gap disappears. If God's own testimony resolves all controversy, then the truths of redemptive history are not dubious or merely probable. They are certain, because God's Word is our ultimate criterion of certainty.⁵ Histori-

5. I will indicate later that even with a soundly biblical epistemology, a believer may not become certain about everything in Scripture. There are questions of interpretation, and of course our level of understanding is subject to the sovereign decision of the Holy Spirit. But the uncertainties in our faith do not spring from the fact that history is essentially unknowable or uncertain. Nor should we imagine that there are no certainties in our faith. It is hard to conceive of any disciple of Christ who is uncertain, for example, that Jesus lived, or that he rose from the dead. For such a disciple, these events become the *criterion* of certainty, the certainty by which all other certainties are tested. See chap. 41.

cal scholarship that proceeds with this presupposition will attain certainty about the main redemptive events of Scripture.

Then we are free to regard God's revelation as it is in the Bible: both divine acts and divine words, the words interpreting the acts and the acts as the subject matter of the words. We study the events in the authoritative light of God's words, and we study the content of the words, which tell us of God's acts.⁶

6. For more discussion of the relation between revelation and history in modern theology, see "Antithesis and the Doctrine of Scripture," Appendix A in this volume.

CHAPTER 6

Revelation and Human Subjectivity

We have seen that modern theologians have developed ideas of revelation drastically different from the traditional views of the church. They have substituted human reason for the personal words of God, as the ultimate test of truth. Some have also tried to locate revelation in history rather than in divine words, not only because of the actual prominence of history in Scripture, but because history seems more amenable to autonomous rational thought than divine words. I have tried to show that it is biblically wrong to substitute either history or human rationality for the ultimate authority of God's personal words.

Another approach to revelation in liberal theology has been to identify it with a subjective event, something that takes place within the human heart. This view is most often associated with Friedrich E. D. Schleiermacher (1768–1834), often called the “father of modern theology.” Schleiermacher was not pleased with the rationalism of earlier modern thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza and Immanuel Kant. He thought the focus on reason was unsuitable to the distinctive nature of religion. To him, religion was based not on reason, but on *Gefühl*, a German term that can be translated “feeling” or “intuition.” Religion begins, he thought, with a “feeling of absolute dependence,” and *God* is, in the first instance, a name for that reality we feel dependent on. The Christian faith interprets that reality in terms of Jesus Christ. So Christian theology expresses the Christian religious affections in the form of speech. The feeling is first, the words (of Scripture and theology) a secondary expression of and reflection on the feeling.

So for Schleiermacher, revelation is not the deliverances of reason as such, or the history presented in Scripture, but the feeling of God, the religious consciousness, that interprets the biblical history. Revelation is primarily subjective, not objective. It is not objective truths, but our subjective responses to objective truths.

Although Schleiermacher tries to lessen the emphasis on reason that was so strong in the work of his predecessors, we should note that Schleiermacher's voluminous writings are not just expressions of feeling. They are rational *analyses* of religious feeling. And as with others we have discussed, Schleiermacher gives no indication of bringing reason under the authority of divine words. His reasoning seeks to be *autonomous*. Autonomous feelings interpreted by autonomous reasoning. In fact, one suspects that Schleiermacher has limited revelation to feeling in part to avoid making religious feeling subordinate to divine words. So Schleiermacher's differences from the rationalists are not as great as he would have us believe.

Emotion and reason, I believe, are not sharply separate aspects of the mind.¹ Each affects the other, of course. Moreover, each defines the other in an important sense. Emotion can be understood as a kind of reasoning, in the sense that it is an appropriate or inappropriate response to data given to the person.² And reason is a kind of emotion: for when we arrive at conviction following a process of rational analysis, that conviction is very much a feeling, what I have elsewhere called "cognitive rest."³

So when we pass from Spinoza to Schleiermacher, from reason to feeling as a judge of truth, we have not passed very far. The real issue is between those who accept and reject autonomy, not between autonomous reason and autonomous feeling. Similarly, there is not a great difference between Schleiermacher and those liberal theologians who have identified revelation with history. For what they consider history is either an achievement of autonomous reason (Albrecht Ritschl, Wolfhart Pannenberg) or a datum malleable to subjective faith (Oscar Cullmann). Rationalism, historicism, and subjectivism are three perspectives on autonomous human thought. None are capable of dealing properly with God's personal words.

Nevertheless, we should look at some more recent representatives of theological subjectivism, for many have followed Schleiermacher's emphasis. Although Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) recognized an objective revelation in Scripture, he considered the objective truth of Scripture to be far less important than our subjective response to God. Emil Brunner (1889–1966)

1. For more discussion of this relationship, see *DKG*, 337–39; *DG*, 608–11; *DCL*, 370–82.

2. Emotional responses tend to be more spontaneous, rational responses more labored; but there is a continuum between these, not a sharp division.

3. *DKG*, 152–62.

was deeply critical of Schleiermacher. Yet, following suggestions of Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Ferdinand Ebner (1882–1931), Brunner came to think that revelation in its highest sense was a personal encounter between God and the individual. The divine-human encounter cannot be described objectively. Indeed, the use of words depersonalizes it. Factual knowledge “about” God compromises the integrity of our knowledge of God himself. So revelation can never be identified with a spoken discourse or a written document. In this sense, it is subjective rather than objective.

Karl Barth, though his emphasis is elsewhere as we will see, also identifies revelation with human subjectivity at a certain level. For him, Scripture is the word of God only as it “becomes” the word of God to an individual by a present event.⁴ Its being, as the word of God, is entirely in its becoming the word. We never “have” God’s word, but only the recollection of its being given in the past and the expectation or hope that we will hear it again in the future. Otherwise, Barth thinks, God’s words become objects, to be “possessed,” “manipulated,” or “preserved” by human beings. Thus, he believes, God loses control over his own words. So the biblical text should never be simply equated with God’s word. It is a human document, prone to error, even in its theological assertions. But that is of no concern to faith, in Barth’s view. Whether there are errors in the biblical text is of no consequence: errors do not prevent God from speaking his instantaneous, unpreservable words. The erroneous text may “become” the word of God anytime God wants it to.

I have some sympathy with Kierkegaard, who was wrestling with dead orthodoxy in the Danish Lutheran state church. He recognized the biblical importance of a living experience with God, in which God actually enters time and enters the experience of the individual. But his contrasts between objective and subjective tend to set asunder what Scripture brings together. In Scripture, subjective revelation is the Spirit’s illumination of objective revelation. It brings the objective truth of Scripture into our hearts, communicating to us a vital personal relationship with Christ.

I have less sympathy for Brunner. His insistence that objective words and facts compromise the personal character of relationships is nonsense. It is not true on the human level. A friendship may sometimes be compro-

4. More recent Barth scholars emphasize that for Barth, the Bible “is” the word of God; it does not only “become” the word. Indeed, it “becomes” because it “is.” But its “being is in becoming,” so its “being” the word of God is simply its capacity to become the word of God. In my judgment, the consequences are the same, whether the Bible “is” the word in its becoming, or whether the Bible merely becomes the word without being it. In neither case are we authorized to receive the words of Scripture as God’s personal words, except on those special occasions when he chooses to speak through the Bible.

mised when facts come to light, but more often factual knowledge enriches such relationships. And Scripture never suggests that a factual knowledge of God's character, his words, and his deeds diminishes the quality of our friendship with him—quite the contrary.

As for Barth, his conception is also unbiblical. Scripture never says that “the being of God's word is in its becoming.” Rather, in Scripture God simply speaks his personal words, and people are expected to believe, obey, rejoice, mourn, give thanks, and so forth. Revelation in Scripture is not something instantaneous, appearing for a moment and then disappearing, leaving only its “recollection and expectation,” as Barth says. Rather, revelation is to be preserved from one generation to the next (as Ps. 78:1–8). The Ten Commandments, written by the finger of God, were to be kept by the ark of the covenant, the holiest place in Israel (Deut. 10:5). That document is to be read over and over again, in every sabbatical year (Deut. 31:10–13). The apostolic tradition of the gospel of Christ is also something given once for all that is to be preserved and guarded (Jude 3).⁵

Does the objective preservation of the text compromise God's sovereignty over his Word? Certainly not. The document is the constitution of God's covenant people. It is the very expression of his sovereign authority. It validates God's sovereign right to impose on his people everlasting ordinances. The objectivity of revelation is precisely what protects it from human manipulation.

Orthodox Reformed theology does not reject a subjective element in revelation, but it formulates it rather differently. In a Reformed understanding, there is both objective and subjective revelation. God reveals himself in creation and in Scripture, objectively. But that objective revelation is of no use to us unless the Holy Spirit illumines our hearts and minds. As sinners, we suppress God's revelation (Romans 1 again). It is the gracious, regenerating work of the Spirit that enables us to understand, believe, and obey. So on the Reformed view, there is a sense in which revelation is not completed until it becomes subjective by the Spirit's work.⁶

The term *revelation* has various uses, some objective, some subjective. When a government official announces the year's budget in a document, we say that the budget has been “revealed,” even though nobody may have actually read the document. Einstein revealed his general theory of relativity to all, publicly, in 1915, even though few people on the earth could actually understand it. That is objective revelation, like the natural

5. On this point, see chapter 16.

6. On this point, see chapters 41–44.

revelation in Romans 1, which reveals God clearly no matter how man chooses to respond.

But there are other cases in which something does not become revelation until someone actually knows it. The price of grain in China is public knowledge, but I don't know it. It has been objectively revealed, but it has not been revealed *to me*. Now, in Romans 1, the revelation is both objective and subjective. The passage does not contemplate anyone who is ignorant of this revelation or who has not responded to it. Rather, everybody knows it, and knows God (v. 21) through it.

A further distinction is also important if we are to understand the debate over revelation. There are different human responses to revelation: responses in unbelief and in faith. In Romans 1, the response of the pagans is to repress the truth, exchange it for a lie, and so on. But in Matthew 11:27, Jesus says that "no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." Now, Jesus here refers to a subjective revelation, a revelation that brings knowledge to the hearer, and indeed knowledge as part of a close saving relationship with the Father and the Son, a knowledge in faith. This meaning of *revelation* can also be found in Ephesians 1:17, where Paul prays that God will give to the Ephesians "a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of [Christ]."

So we may distinguish three kinds of revelation: (1) objective revelation, (2) subjective revelation received in unbelief, and (3) subjective revelation received in faith.

Now, since Schleiermacher, liberal theologians have tended to say that revelation doesn't exist unless it is subjective, until someone knows it. I have sometimes described this tendency as the "subjective turn" in the history of the doctrine of revelation. Liberals have tended to disparage the idea of objective revelation, the revelation that is "just there" in nature and Scripture regardless of what anybody thinks. Further, they have tended to believe that revelation is not revelation unless it is received *in faith*. So if someone has not come to believe, then he has not actually received revelation. This idea contributes to the universalistic tendencies in liberalism, for it regards those who reject God as those who have not received revelation, rather than (as in Romans 1) those who have received it and have rejected it.

Scripture, however, as we have seen, speaks of both objective and subjective revelation, and of revelation received both in unbelief and in faith. All these kinds of revelation are important. Objective revelation is important, both because it actually exists and because it creates an obligation to believe. (Romans 1:20 puts the point negatively: it takes away our excuses.) Subjective revelation received in unbelief is important as an illustration

of human depravity: man represses the truth, even when it is presented clearly to him. And subjective revelation received in faith, by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit, shows that God drives his Word home to the hearts and minds of those he intends to communicate with as a Father and friend.

So for orthodox Reformed theology, there are both subjective and objective forms of revelation. For Schleiermacher and the subjectivist tradition, there is only subjective.⁷ And thereby Schleiermacher loses the element of *obligation*, which we earlier associated with the concept of *authority*. Revelation is not just what we feel, or even what we believe on the basis of feelings. It is what we *ought* to believe, what we are *obligated* to confess.

The present event, in which the Spirit draws our hearts into God's embrace, is an illumination of the Word of God, the gospel of Christ, already and permanently revealed (1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13).

There really is a subjective element in God's revelation, for God intends his words to be apprehended and understood. All true communication is objective (the content and the transmission) and subjective (the hearing and the response). But the subjective element is a human response to God's objective personal words to us. Liberal theology has often sought to avoid the authority of God's personal words by eliminating the objective side of the communication. This enables man to judge God's Word with his autonomous reason. That concept is unacceptable to Christian believers.

7. As we will see in the next chapter, Barth regards revelation in Christ as objective in a certain sense. But our knowledge of him is a subjective occurrence that cannot be expressed in objective truths.

CHAPTER 7

Revelation and God Himself

I have considered modern liberal views of revelation in terms of three themes representing our normative (reason), situational (history), and existential (feeling) perspectives. The word *perspective* indicates my judgment that these three approaches are not very different from one another. Rather, they represent three aspects of a single approach, one that subordinates God's personal words to human autonomous thought.

In my judgment, these views are more right in what they affirm than in what they deny. It is not wrong to say that reason should judge matters of religion. It is wrong to say that such judgments should be made autonomously. It is not wrong to say that revelation centers on historical events. But it is wrong to insist on interpreting and evaluating these by autonomous historiography. Further, it is not wrong to say that revelation consists of feelings; that, too, is a legitimate perspective! But it is wrong to insist that those feelings be understood, interpreted, and evaluated by autonomous thought.

There are other features of liberal thought about revelation that we will consider later in this text, on subjects such as hermeneutics, canon, and the accuracy and purpose of Scripture. I postpone them because these matters concern written revelation specifically rather than revelation in general, and because they have attracted more or less equal interest both in liberal and in orthodox theological traditions.

But something should be said here about one more theme that has often appeared in liberal theology, especially in the neoorthodox writers of the

mid-twentieth century. That is the theme that revelation is essentially identical with God himself. This broad statement puts talk of reason, history, and subjectivity into a larger context. Whatever we say about reason, history, and subjectivity, some theologians say, they are nothing more than means of putting us in touch with God himself.

We may recall the slogan common during that period: “God doesn’t reveal information; he reveals himself.” The purpose of this slogan was to demean the idea that God speaks to us in personal words, particularly words that state propositions. As a general refutation of the personal-word model of revelation, this slogan is not very impressive. On the human level, there is no reason why someone cannot reveal himself through revealing information about himself. In fact, we regularly do that. It’s almost impossible to imagine revealing yourself to someone without at the same time revealing information about yourself. And whenever we reveal information about ourselves, we are to some extent (not exhaustively, to be sure) revealing ourselves.

On the divine level, there is certainly no scriptural support for the notion that God never reveals information about himself, that such information tells us nothing about God himself, or that God’s giving of information is not revelation. Consider the uses of “reveal” in Daniel 2:47; Matthew 11:27; and Philippians 3:15 and of “revelation” in Romans 16:25; 1 Corinthians 14:6, 26; Galatians 1:12; 2:2; Ephesians 1:17; 3:3; and Revelation 1:1. These constitute most of the NT occurrences of this word group. All of these passages present revelation as God’s communicating information. First Peter 1:13 uses “revelation” to refer to Jesus’ return, probably in view of the fact that it is informative. The return of Jesus is glorious, a public display of his lordship that reveals Christ himself, and also many things about him.

Nevertheless, the equation of revelation with God himself can be understood in ways that merit serious theological discussion. Karl Barth’s view is a case in point. We have seen that Barth engages the continuing discussions about the relation of revelation to reason, history, and subjectivity. But the heart of his view is that revelation is nothing less than Jesus Christ himself. Barth develops this position by showing that revelation has a Trinitarian structure: the Father is the Revealer, the Son the Revelation, and the Spirit the Revealedness. So when Barth defines revelation, he focuses on the Son. He distinguishes three forms of revelation: Christ, Scripture, and Preaching. These are hierarchically structured. Christ alone is revelation in the fullest sense. Scripture may be called revelation insofar as it witnesses to Christ and insofar as the Spirit uses it as an instrument to bring God’s Word (Christ) to its recipient. Preaching is revelation insofar as it

witnesses to Scripture and thereby puts us in touch with Christ and the Spirit. Scripture and Preaching are not in themselves the word of God, but they can “become the word,” and they “are” the word “in becoming.”

It is theologically right to say that in a sense God is revelation. God is a being who in his very nature is communicative. He speaks not only to creatures, but within his Trinitarian existence, Father to Son, Son to Father, both to the Spirit, and the Spirit to both of them.¹ And we should note the specific biblical references to Christ as the Word of God, which we will examine more directly in chapter 11. This attribution is most explicit in John 1:1, but is also evident in Hebrews 1:1–3 and 1 John 1:1–3. Note also Paul’s use of Deuteronomy 30:11–14, which speaks of the nearness of God’s word to Israel, to refer to the nearness of Christ in Romans 10:6–8. Note also the related ideas that Christ is God’s wisdom (1 Cor. 1:30) and that he is God’s name (Phil. 2:10–11; cf. Isa. 45:23). When the Word becomes flesh, he speaks with authority greater than any scribe (Matt. 7:29).

But it is also evident in Scripture that the triune God reveals himself through personal words, received through such means as reason, history, and human subjectivity. Should we say with Barth that Christ is the true revelation and that the personal words are revelation in a lesser sense, as witnesses to Christ? Or would it be better to say that in those personal words Christ himself comes to us and speaks? I will argue the second possibility later on.

What is clear from Scripture, however, is that the identity of revelation with Christ does not compromise the authority of God’s personal words. If anything, it underscores that authority. For to dishonor God’s personal word is to dishonor Christ. To disobey the personal word is to disobey Christ. To disbelieve the personal word is to disbelieve Christ.

Even if God’s personal words, from an ontological point of view, are something “less” than Christ himself, they are not less authoritative, less reliable, or less powerful.

When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, he did not merely stand somewhere so that people could look at him and absorb some silent influence from him. Rather, he *taught*. That is what we would expect from an absolute *person*. He said to Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice” (John 18:37). His word was uniquely authoritative (Matt. 7:29) because *he* was uniquely authoritative. The fact that he was the Word meant that his words were of ultimate authority.

1. See *DG*, 470–75, and my further discussion in chapters 8, 11, and 42 of this book.

So the Christological nature of revelation does not permit us to disparage God's personal words in any way. Rather, it enhances their authority and power. Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

It is best to see Christ not as a "form" of revelation superior to other forms, but as the *speaker* of God's personal words.² So our response to God's personal words is nothing less than our response to Christ himself. In God's personal words, Christ himself comes to engage our belief and obedience.

Barth does make the value judgment that Christ himself is somehow more authoritative than the words given in Scripture, or any words or sentences given to human beings. We ought to reject that judgment. Christ as Lord is our supreme authority. But to say that he is more authoritative than his own words (i.e., more authoritative than himself) is nonsense. And Scripture itself never makes any such value judgment. Rather, it calls us to give to Jesus' words the same reverence, obedience, and belief that we give to Jesus himself.

Nevertheless, we should thank Barth for drawing our attention to the identity between the Word and Christ. As with the other themes in modern theology that we have considered, we should agree with what Barth affirms, but not with what he denies. He affirms rightly that Christ is God's Word; but he is wrong to deny that God's personal words, the very words of Christ, are ultimately authoritative.³

2. Christ is, of course, also central to forms of revelation other than word-revelation. He is the one who performs the mighty acts of God, what I will call *event-revelation* in chapter 13. And he is the person who most reveals the Father, as I will indicate in chapter 42.

3. For more discussion of liberal theologies of revelation, see Appendices A, F, H, and Q in this volume.

PART THREE

THE NATURE OF GOD'S WORD

In Part 2, I summarized and evaluated approaches of representative modern theologians in dealing with revelation and the Word of God. That is the theological situation in which we live, and in which we are called to rethink these doctrines. But the determining voice in our deliberations must be that of God himself.¹ His voice in Scripture must be our norm, our rule for determining what we should say today. So I describe the modern theological discussion as our *situational perspective*, Scripture's self-witness as the *normative perspective*. The Bible itself will show us how to apply its teaching to the situation we are in.

Some may think this approach is circular, for in determining the Bible's own view of revelation I will be assuming at the outset some of my conclusions. For example, since I maintain that God is the author of Scripture, I will assume that Scripture is consistent with itself, that it presents (across its sixty-six books) a single view of its own authority.

I defended this circularity in chapters 1 and 4, above, and elsewhere.² Circularity is necessary when any system of thought seeks to defend its first

1. So I reject the common pattern of theology today in which a writer cites all the contemporary literature on his subject and then tries to come to a conclusion by triangulating among the different views with little reference to Scripture. To determine the truth of any theological proposal, we must look at Scripture itself in depth, even at the expense of neglecting some historical and current thought.

2. *DKG*, 130–33; *AGG*, 9–14; Appendix E in this volume.

principle, its supreme authority. A rationalist must defend his rationalism by appealing to reason. A Muslim must ultimately defend his religion by appealing to the Qur'an. And one who believes in the supreme authority of Scripture must appeal to Scripture.

Nevertheless, those who are not committed in advance to the authority of Scripture should at least take an interest in what it says. Certainly, if Scripture were to deny its own authority, Christians (and everybody else) should deny it, too. But if it affirms its own authority, and gives sufficient reasons for believing in that authority, then Christians (and everybody else) should accept its claim.

CHAPTER 8

What Is the Word of God?

The WLC asks in Question 3, “What is the Word of God?” And it answers, “The holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience.”

Many Christians would give this answer almost instinctively: the word of God is the Bible. It is true, as I will argue, that the Bible is God’s Word, supremely authoritative. And certainly (and I think this is the main point that the catechism wishes to make) Scripture is God’s sufficient revelation to us today, for all of life. But it would not be right to say that the Bible is the *only* word of God that has ever been spoken. The Bible itself tells us that Paul, as an inspired apostle, wrote two letters to the Corinthians that never became part of the Bible (1 Cor. 5:9; 2 Cor. 2:4). Further, it is evident that the prophets, apostles, and Jesus all uttered inspired spoken words that did not end up as part of the canon of Scripture. And God speaks also to angels (Ps. 103:20) and to the natural world (Pss. 147:15–18; 148:8), words that we do not have in written form. Such words are the means by which God created all things (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, etc.; Ps. 33:6, 9). And as we have seen, Christ himself is the divine Word (John 1:1, 14).

So the word of God is more than just the Bible, although the Bible is the Word of God. The Bible is one utterance, or a series of utterances, of God’s word. But it does not exhaust the word of God. We should not be embarrassed about this fact. To acknowledge the broader dimensions of the word of God is not to disparage the written Word in any

way. Indeed, we can get a clearer and stronger view of the importance of Scripture when we understand its relationship to the other utterances of God. Psalm 19 shows us that God's written Word ("the law of the LORD," v. 7) is as powerful and reliable as the words of God that govern the natural world (vv. 1–6). A similar argument is implicit in Psalm 147:15–20.

How, then, should we define *word of God*? God's word is, certainly, the sum total of his communications, everything that he has said, is saying, and will say. But it is even more than that, for as we saw in chapter 7, there is a sense in which God's word is God himself. God eternally communicates his love and purposes within the Trinity: Father to Son, Son to Father, both to the Spirit, and the Spirit to both. This communication is essential to God's nature. He is, among all his other attributes, a *speaking* God.¹ This is part of what I meant in chapter 2 by saying that God is absolute personality. For speaking is a quality unique to personal beings. As with the broader concept of absolute personality, the concept of a speaking God is unique to biblical religion.

We can say, then, that God's eternal inter-Trinitarian speech is a necessary divine attribute, an attribute without which God would not be God. As such, speech, like all other necessary attributes, designates the essence of God, what God really and truly is.² Ultimately, God's word is God, and God is his word.

And given the teaching of John 1:1–14 (see again chapter 7), the term *Word* also designates specifically the second person of the Trinity. There is no contradiction between thinking of the word as a divine attribute and thinking of *Word* as the name of the eternal Son of God. Fatherhood is a divine attribute, but *Father* is also the name of the first person of the Trinity. Similarly *Spirit*: a divine attribute, and the name of the third person of the Trinity.

So God's word is God himself, understood as a speaking God, one who eternally communicates. His inter-Trinitarian communications are essential and necessary to who he is. But by his grace and free decision³ he also speaks to his creatures. These communications do not exhaust his word, but they are truly his utterances, his expressions.

It is important, therefore, to distinguish the word of God itself, which is purely divine, from the created media through which the word comes to us (which I discuss in chapter 12 and thereafter). The Creator-creature distinction in Scripture is fundamental and nonnegotiable.

1. See *DG*, 470–75.

2. *Ibid.*, 225–37, 387–94.

3. *Ibid.*, 230–36.

So nature, for example, is not the word of God; it is a created medium by which the word of God comes to us.⁴

I therefore define the word of God as (1) God himself, understood as communicator, and (2) the sum total of his free communications with his creatures. Usually in this book I will be using definition (2), but of course we will need to explore (1) as well and understand the relation between the two.⁵

4. This was one of the major issues in my controversy with the followers of Herman Dooyeweerd. See Appendix D in this volume.

5. The Greek word *logos*, which is usually translated “word” in the English Bible, has various meanings, such as “thought,” “reason,” “account,” “discourse,” “teaching,” “intellectual content.” In Heraclitus, Philo, and other ancient writers, the term refers, even more broadly, to some kind of cosmic principle of rationality. I see this as a dim memory of the truth that the supreme reality is an absolute personal communicator.

CHAPTER 9

God's Word as His Controlling Power

When God speaks to us, he speaks as Lord, for that is his relation to us. We should therefore expect that his speech, like all his actions, will express his lordship attributes: his control, authority, and presence. Indeed it does.

We look first at the controlling power of his word. It is important that we understand God's word not only as a communication of linguistic content to our minds, though it is that, but as a great power that makes things happen.

When God first utters his word in the first chapter of Genesis, he speaks not to rational beings, but to inanimate objects. And in the first instance, he addresses that object before it exists. He says, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3), and light comes into existence. Such is the power of his word that he is able to "call [*kalountos*] into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17).

So Scripture often extols the power of God's word. Summarizing Genesis 1, Psalm 33:6 and 9 say, "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. . . . For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm." Cf. Ps. 148:5; John 1:3, 10; Heb. 1:2; 11:3; 2 Peter 3:5–7.

After God makes the world, he continues to govern it by the word of his power. Note what is ascribed to the "voice of the LORD" in Psalm 29 and to the words and commands of God in Psalms 147:15–18 and 148:7–8. God's word governs providence as well as creation. Cf. Gen.

1:9, 11, 22; 8:21–22; Job 37:12; Pss. 18:15; 33:11; 119:89–91; Matt. 8:27; Heb. 1:3; 2 Peter 3.

When God speaks to rational creatures, the word continues to be powerful. God's word brings judgment on sinful people, and often the power of that judgment-word is palpable (Ps. 46:6; Isa. 30:30–31; 66:6; Hos. 6:5; Joel 2:11; Amos 1:2). In 2 Peter 3:5–7, the apostle compares the judgment of Noah's flood with the original creation by the word of God. Just as God's word was powerful enough to bring the world into being, so it will destroy all the works of wickedness. The fire of judgment is one that comes out of God's mouth (Job 41:19–21; Ps. 18:7–8, 13–14; Jer. 5:14; 20:9; 23:29). Fire is God's "answer" to unbelief (1 Kings 18:24). He answers with fire upon the sacrifice that stands in place of the sinner (1 Chron. 21:26). To change the metaphor, God's word is the mighty sword (Isa. 49:2) or hammer (Jer. 23:29) that brings defeat to his enemies (Hos. 6:5). Compare Paul's reference to the word of God as the "sword of the Spirit" in Ephesians 6:17.

But God's word is also powerful to save, powerful in grace. In Genesis 18:14, after God has promised a miraculous child to Abraham and Sarah in their old age, he ascribes the miraculous power to his word. He asks, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?"—literally, "Is any word too wonderful for the LORD?" In Luke 1:37, the angel Gabriel, having announced to the virgin Mary that she would bear the Messiah, echoes Genesis 18:14: "nothing will be impossible with God"—literally, "no word [*rhema*]¹ will be impossible for God."²

When a centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant, he tells Jesus not to come personally to his home, but only to "say the word" (Luke 7:7). He adds:

For I too am a man set 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. (v. 8)

Indeed, Jesus does heal the servant from afar. And he comments, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (v. 9). What is remarkable about the centurion's faith? Perhaps his request to "say the word" gives the answer. In Greek, this phrase is redundant, "speak with a word" (*eipe logo*). The unusual emphasis on the *verbal* nature of this healing indicates the centurion's belief in the power of Jesus' *word* to heal the servant.

1. In Greek, *logos* is a broader term than *rhema*, though both can be translated "word." *Logos* can refer to an individual saying, as does *rhema*, but *logos* can also refer to a discourse, rationale, rational account, principle of rationality, and so forth.

2. Cf. also Jer. 32:17, 27.

And when the apostles bring the gospel of Christ to the world, they rejoice that it is not only a content, but also a power (Rom. 1:16; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13). Not only is it accompanied by signs of God's power (Rom. 15:19), but the word itself changes hearts and strengthens believers (Rom. 16:25). It is the "word of life" (Phil. 2:16; see John 1:1), the gospel that brings life and immortality to light (2 Tim. 1:10).

So the word of God is powerful both in judgment and in blessing. These are the twin covenant sanctions. In the covenant, the Lord promises blessing to the obedient, judgment to the disobedient (Deut. 27–28). So the commandments of God have a double edge; they can be blessing (Ex. 20:12) or curse (v. 7). Obedience to God's commands is the path of life (Lev. 18:5; Deut. 8:3; Pss. 19; 119:25, 50), but the commandments themselves can give opportunity for sin (Rom. 7:7–25). God tells Isaiah that his message will be mostly one of hardening and curse: "Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (Isa. 6:10). God sends Isaiah to people who doubtless have already hardened their hearts against the Lord. But in this context it is Isaiah's words, the words of God, that bring the hardening. Jesus and the apostles invoke the words of Isaiah 6 to characterize their own preaching (Matt. 13:14–15; Mark 4:11–12; Luke 8:10; John 12:37–40; Acts 28:26–28; Rom. 11:8; cf. John 15:22).

The power of the word brings wonderful blessings to those who hear in faith, with a disposition to obey. But it hardens those who hear it with indifference, resistance, rebellion. In considering this biblical teaching, I often warn my seminary students to pay heed to what God is telling us here. For seminarians typically spend two or more years intensively studying Scripture. It is so important that they hear in faith, lest the Word actually harden their hearts and become a fire of judgment to them. God's Word never leaves us the same. We hear it for better or worse. So we should never hear or read God's Word merely as an academic exercise. We must ask God to open our hearts, that the Word may be written on them as well as in our heads.

So God accomplishes all his works by his powerful word: creation, providence, judgment, grace.³

The power of the word is the power of God's Spirit (1 Thess. 1:5), though the Spirit is not always mentioned in contexts that speak of the word's

3. If we add God's eternal plan to this list, we have a good summary of all the works of God reported in Scripture. God's eternal plan is also an exercise of his word. It is the agreement between Father, Son, and Spirit to carry out their program for creation, fall, and redemption. See Pss. 2:7–9; 110; Matt. 11:25–27; John 4:34; 5:19–30; 6:38; 17:1–26.

power (as 1 Thess. 2:13). That is to say that the power of the word is personal, not impersonal. So when the word of the gospel leads one hearer to faith and hardens another, that is God's sovereign decision. The difference is not that some hearers are better able to resist God's word than others, as some Lutherans have claimed. That would mean that the word, like an impersonal force of electricity or gravity, works uniformly on everyone, and that the only differences in response come from those who hear. Scripture, however, teaches that God himself determines who will respond favorably to his word. That is Paul's argument in Romans 9:1–28.

To say this is not to say that the word is powerful only when the Spirit accompanies it and is powerless otherwise. The word is never powerless, as we have seen from Genesis 18:14 and Isaiah 55:11. That implies that the word is never without the power of the Spirit. But sometimes that power effects a blessing, sometimes a curse, depending on God's sovereign intent.

How powerful is the power of the word? The power of God's word is nothing less than his own omnipotence. As we saw earlier, *no* word of God is too hard for him to accomplish. In Isaiah 55:11, we read, "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." What God says with his mouth he fulfills with his hand (2 Chron. 6:15; cf. Ezek. 1:3; 3:22).

God's Word as His Meaningful Authority

The second of the lordship attributes is divine authority. As I indicated in chapters 1 and 2, God's word expresses that authority that is unique to God, his *ultimate* authority. As we saw in chapter 1, the authority of language is its capacity to create obligations in the hearer. God's language is authoritative not only in telling us what to believe and do, but in directing our emotions, our preoccupations, our priorities, our joys and sorrows. That is to say, God's words are authoritative in all the ways that language can be authoritative, and their authority is ultimate.

Authority is a function of the *meaning* of language. Here it is important to observe that God's word is not only powerful, but also meaningful. The power of language is what it does; meaning is what it says. Of course, saying is one kind of doing, so meaning is one of the powers of language.¹ But it plays such an important role among the powers of language that it deserves special attention.

In the history of liberal theology, we may observe that the "older liberalism" (Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, Wilhelm Herrmann) saw the words of Scripture as meaningful, but without divine power. They were merely words of men, to be examined and evaluated like any other

1. And in the case of God, the power of his language is an aspect of its meaning. For the power of God's word comes from his authority to command things to happen. Thus, in God's word, power and meaning are perspectives on each other.

words of men. In neoorthodoxy (Karl Barth, Emil Brunner—even Rudolf Bultmann) there was a greater understanding of the Word as a divine power, but a denial that the Word was meaningful language. The same power-centered view of God's Word can be found among some disciples of the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd.²

In traditional theology, and in Scripture itself, God's word is both powerful and meaningful. We have seen Bible references to its power. But Scripture also regards God's word as having meaningful content. The word is never a blind force.³ When God creates the world by the word of his power, he not only makes things happen. He commands them to happen by intelligible speech, giving names to things that interpret their function. In Genesis 1:5, 8, and 10, God "calls" (*qara'*) things by names: Day, Night, Heaven, Earth, Seas. (Cf. Ps. 147:4; Isa. 40:26.) In the remaining verses of Genesis 1, he determines, in other language, the nature and function of each created thing, and by the word *good* he evaluates the work of his hands. In verses 27–28 he defines by his word the nature and task of mankind.⁴

Note also that in 2:19 God gives an analogous task to Adam, to give names to the animals, as God has already given names to the things in creation. In the ancient world, a name was not merely an arbitrary label. God asked Adam to create a system of meaningful words that would indicate the nature and characteristics of the animals.

In chapter 9, we saw how the powerful word of God accomplishes all of God's actions. Not only do his words accompany what he does; they empower everything he does. Whatever God does, he does by his word; whatever God does, the word does. Now, we should note that all these

2. See my *The Amsterdam Philosophy*, available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_books/1972Amsterdam.htm and in *The Collected Works of John M. Frame*, CD and DVD collection, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing; Whitefish, MT: Bits & Bytes, Inc., 2008). See also the essays in Appendix D in this volume.

3. Preachers and others sometimes point out the relationship between the Greek word for *power*, *dynamis*, and the English word *dynamite*. In some contexts, the power of God's word can profitably be compared to that of dynamite, but there is a major difference. Dynamite only destroys, sending debris every which way. But the power of God's word builds up God's kingdom, rather than merely tearing things down. It creates an order, not a chaos: a rational structure. So does the power of God's word create the universe, turning what is "without form and void" (Gen. 1:2) into a beautiful, orderly universe. In the first three days of creation, God produces locations (heaven and earth, seas and land, growing fields). In the next three, he produces beings to dwell in those locations (heavenly bodies, sea creatures and birds, animals and men). In God's creative work we find the very definition of order: a place for everything and everything in its place.

4. Note the analogue in the realm of redemption. As God gave names to all the creation in Genesis 1, so in redemption he calls us by name (Isa. 43:1) and gives us a new name (Isa. 62:2; 65:15), God's name (Isa. 43:7; Jer. 7:10; Amos 9:12).

words constitute meaningful communication. Everything God does is informed by his wisdom (Ps. 104:24). So the world as a whole is meaningful, its meaning determined by God's plan.

Similarly, when God speaks to rational beings (himself, angels, humans), his word conveys meaning. In his word, he expresses his wisdom, knowledge, desires, intentions, love, grace. That meaning is authoritative. When God shares his love with us, we have the obligation to treasure it. When he questions us, we should answer. When he expresses his grace, we are obligated to trust it. When he tells us his desires, we should conform our lives to them. When he shares with us his knowledge and intentions, we ought to believe that they are true.

In chapter 1, I showed how the whole course of the biblical narrative is structured as a dialogue: God speaks, man responds. The course of subsequent history is the result of man's response to God's word. When man disobeys, there is curse. When he obeys, there is blessing. So biblical history is covenantal. The covenantal Lord sets forth his will, and history describes the covenantal sanctions.

So every page of the Bible teaches or illustrates the authority of God's word. Everything that human beings do or say is a response to God's word or a consequence of their response. Let us look at some examples in a brief survey of redemptive history.

ADAM AND EVE

In Genesis 1:28, the first recorded experience of the first human beings was that of listening to God's word. In that experience, they learned their fundamental task as human beings, the task of filling and subduing the whole earth. In Genesis 2:16–17, God supplies food for Adam, authorizing him to eat of every tree in the garden. But he adds a negative command, that Adam is not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The narrative in chapter 3 of Genesis underscores the centrality of the word of God. A talking serpent enters a dialogue with the woman. Aesop's fables, of course, are full of talking animals, but these are rare in Scripture.⁵ God had told Eve, along with Adam, to have dominion over the lower creation (1:28), not to listen to the word of an animal as if it were God's. Satan, speaking through the serpent⁶ (Rev. 12:9), here sought

5. I think Balaam's ass in Numbers 22:27–30 is the only other instance.

6. Scripture often identifies Satan in verbal terms. He is a liar, a deceiver, an accuser. The serpent figure well illustrates the negative power of Satan's tongue, for a poisonous serpent attracts by his fluttering tongue and kills through the bite of his mouth.

precisely to overturn the system of authority that God had instituted. Instead of God's having the supreme authority, then man, then wife, then the animal creation,⁷ Satan the talking animal wanted to rule over the wife, who would rule her husband, who would seek to overturn the authority of God. We see this in the aftermath (Gen. 3:8–13) in which Eve blames the serpent, Adam blames the woman, and both implicitly blame the providence of God.

The contest is precisely between two words claiming supreme authority: God's and Satan's. Satan's attack is precisely on the word that God had spoken. He questions whether God had uttered such a word (3:1), and then, assuming that God had spoken it, Satan contradicts it (3:4–5).

Adam and Eve had no third authority to arbitrate the dispute. They had no means, scientific, philosophical, or religious, to test whether God or Satan was telling the truth. In effect, what happened was that they trusted their own word, their own judgment, as if it were divine. This is the origin of the autonomous rationality that we discussed in chapters 3–7. But clearly the text condemns such autonomy. What Adam and Eve should have done was to accept the naked word of God—without verification from any other source—even though it was contradicted by another source claiming expertise.

In the narrative, God's word prevails, for human disobedience brings death on the first couple and on the whole creation (vv. 14–19). God imposes the wages of sin. But amazingly, he also proclaims his grace, for he says that a descendant of Eve will one day crush the head of the serpent (v. 15). This is the first intimation in Scripture of Messiah's coming, and it also implies that the physical death that the first couple deserves will not be immediate. They will live to reproduce and enjoy the fruits of their labors, albeit with pain and suffering.

Adam and Eve have no reason to expect such grace, except by the word of God. As with the original prohibition, there was no verification. In their own wisdom, Adam and Eve could not possibly have determined that God would show grace to them; in fact, they had every reason to doubt that. Nor could they possibly have guessed that the Messiah would come many centuries later to redeem them.

But this time, they believed—without verifying, without testing, without trying to evaluate God's word by their autonomous judgment. Adam named his wife Eve, "life" (v. 20). He might have named her Death, given her role in the narrative to this point. But he believed God, whose word said

7. I realize that this notion of authority is not politically correct these days. For my general view of the relations between the sexes, see *DCL*, 622–47.

that she would bring forth life, children to till the earth and to bring forth the messianic line. When Eve bore the first child, she named him Cain, saying: "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD" (4:1). In the birth of Cain, she believed, according to God's word of promise, that God was fulfilling his plan to redeem the earth through a seed of the woman.

NOAH

The story of Noah, too, begins with God's favor (6:8) and with God's word (6:13–22). The science of meteorology being what it was at the time, Noah had no way of confirming the unlikely possibility that God would send a flood to destroy humanity. Nor would his human wisdom alone have motivated him to construct a large boat in the desert. Still, against the objections of unbelief, "Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him" (v. 22; cf. 7:5, 9). The word of God was enough.

The NT teaches that the last days of our present age will be like the days of Noah. People will be carrying on their daily work and recreations without any attention to God's warnings (Matt. 24:37–39). These will be "swept away." But those who hear and obey Jesus' warnings will be ready for the new deluge (vv. 43–44).⁸

Hebrews 11:7 commends Noah's faith as a model of Christian faith: he was "warned by God concerning events as yet unseen" and responded to God's word "in reverent fear." Indeed, he not only obeyed God's word, but also proclaimed it to others (2 Peter 2:5).

ABRAHAM

Of all characters in the OT, Abraham is the chief NT model of saving faith (Rom. 4:1–25; Gal. 3:6–9; Heb. 11:8–19; James 2:21–24). What was the object of his faith? The word of God. The narrative begins with God's telling him to leave Ur, his home city, and go to another land (Gen. 12:1). God promises blessing to him (vv. 2–3), but as with Adam and Noah,

8. Second Peter 3:5–7 finds the word of God in still another dimension of the flood story: "The heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God." It was nothing else than God's word that held the water up in the sky. And the word not only warned Noah that the water was to fall, but *caused* the water to fall. (Recall the discussion of the last chapter: the word governs all the events of nature.) Similarly, says verse 7, "by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire." Surely, then, the word gives the best testimony concerning its own actions.

Abraham has no independent means to test whether God is telling the truth. He must simply accept God's word for God's word's sake.

Later, God tells him that he and his wife Sarah will have a son (Gen. 17:15–21), but that promise is unfulfilled until Abraham is over a hundred years old and his wife is well past the age of childbearing. In this case, not only is there no independent means of verification, but all the evidence points in the opposite direction. Everybody knows that old men and women don't have babies. Sarah laughed at the very thought (18:12–15).⁹

Abraham's record of trusting God was not spotless; note the episodes in 12:10–20 and 16:1–16. But Paul presents the broader picture in Romans 4:16–25:

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Abraham believed the word of God, even though in doing so he had to believe that God could raise the dead. So should our faith be, says Paul, a faith in God's promise, regardless of those who say that Jesus' resurrection is impossible.

In fact, God did give a son to Abraham and Sarah, and his name, Isaac (“laughter”), mocked Sarah's mockery. But later, God again spoke to

9. Recall my discussion in chapter 9 of Genesis 18:14: “Is anything too hard for the LORD?”—which can be translated: “Is any word too wonderful for the LORD?”

Abraham, telling him to take this very son, the son of the promise, to a mountain in the land of Moriah to offer him as a sacrifice (Gen. 22). In this case, too, Abraham had no independent way of verifying whether he should do this, and indeed he may well have seen it as violating God's own moral law.¹⁰ Even more seriously, if Isaac were to die, it would seem, God could not fulfill his promise of blessing the world through Isaac's descendants. So Abraham might have seen this commandment as contradicting God's own previous words.

Yet somehow God identified himself to Abraham as the one who was speaking (cf. my discussion in chapter 1), and so Abraham had no choice but to do what God told him, whatever might be the result. As we know, it was a test, and Isaac did not die. God provided a substitute, foreshadowing the work of Christ (Gen. 22:11–14). James says that Abraham's obedience in this test completed his faith (James 2:22). The letter to the Hebrews says, "He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back" (Heb. 11:19)—another example of Abraham's resurrection faith.

So God tested Abraham's faith in regard to both the promises of the covenant: land and seed. He trusted God's promise of land, even though he owned no part of the land of promise. He trusted God's promise of seed, even though God himself appeared to threaten that promise.

JESUS

I will discuss Moses with the prophets and apostles at a later point. Of course, they, too, received a word from God that required absolute obedience. But we need to look at Jesus here and now, for he is not only a recipient of the word, but the Lord who speaks.

Since Jesus is both perfect God and perfect man, he is both the most authoritative speaker and the most faithful hearer of the word of God. As a human hearer, he speaks just what his Father teaches him (John 8:28; 10:18; 12:49–50; 14:10; 15:15). He does not question, contradict, or hesitate.

But he is also the Word of God incarnate (John 1:1, 14). As I argued in chapter 7, the fact that Jesus is the Word does not detract at all from the authority of God's personal words to human beings. In fact, Jesus himself, as the Word of God, brings verbal testimony to the truth (John 18:37).

10. God later prohibited human sacrifice explicitly in Deuteronomy 18:10, but one would think that even people living long before would have seen this practice as wickedness.

He presents this testimony as the reason why he came into the world. His mission was revelatory: to follow Moses' revelation of the law with a revelation of grace and truth (John 1:17). He has made the Father known to us (v. 18; cf. Matt. 11:27). His mission is not *merely* revelatory. He came to accomplish redemption, not just to tell us about it. But his redemptive act reveals his grace, and the revelation of his grace interprets the redemptive act. Revelation and redemption are two aspects of—two perspectives on—his ministry to us.

Jesus' personal words are of utmost importance to the message of the NT. There is no trace of any development from a word-centered revelation in the OT to a nonverbal revelation in the NT. Quite to the contrary. Jesus' personal words are crucial to his ministry. In the community of his disciples, his word is the supreme criterion of discipleship. Jesus teaches that calling him Lord is meaningless unless we do the will of his Father (Matt. 7:21–23). The will of his Father is to be found in the law of Moses (Matt. 5:17–20), and also in Jesus' own words (7:24–29). Those who hear Jesus' words and do them will be like the wise man who built his house on the rock. Those who do not hear and obey will be like the fool who built his house on sand.

When he returns in glory, Jesus will be ashamed of those who have been ashamed of him—notably those who have been ashamed of his words (Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26). His mother and brothers are those who “hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21).

The Gospel of John, which begins by identifying Jesus with the Word of God, is, of the four, the most preoccupied with the importance of the words of Jesus. In John 6:63, Jesus says, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” Five verses later, Peter asks, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

In John 8:47, Jesus identifies his own teaching with the “words of God” and insists that anyone who is “of God” will hear and obey them.

John 12:47–50 is remarkable:

If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.

Note here (1) the equation between rejecting Jesus and rejecting his words (v. 48), (2) the word of Jesus (particularly in contrast with his personal

presence during his earthly ministry) as the judge of men (v. 48), (3) the determination of Jesus' words by the Father, both in content ("what to say") and in form ("what to speak") (v. 49),¹¹ and (4) the commandment of the Father (both his commands in general and his commands given to Jesus specifically) as the means and substance of eternal life (v. 50).

Some lessons from John 12: (1) If we are critical of Jesus' words, we may not appeal beyond them (neoorthodox fashion!) to Jesus himself (vv. 48–49). (2) We may not appeal to the substance or content of Jesus' words, beyond the forms in which they are presented (v. 49). (3) We may not claim eternal life while rejecting the demand of Jesus' words upon us (v. 50).

It is also the Johannine literature that identifies most clearly our love for Christ as his disciples with our obedience to his commands. See John 14:15, 21, 23; 15:7, 10, 14; 17:6, 17; 1 John 2:3–5; 3:22; 5:2–3; 2 John 6. John's visions of Revelation identify God's people as those who "keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 12:17; see 14:12).

Paul refers less often to the words Jesus spoke in his earthly ministry, more often, understandably, to his own apostolic revelation. But note Luke's account of his message to the Ephesian elders at Acts 20:35. And in 1 Timothy 6:3–4, Paul follows Jesus himself in making agreement with Jesus' words a test of fellowship: "If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing."

To hear the words of Jesus, then, is the same as hearing the words of the Father. We are to hear the words of Jesus as Abraham heard the words of Yahweh, as words of supreme authority. We are not in any position to find fault with the words of Jesus. They rather create obligations on our part: to hear, believe, obey, meditate, rejoice, mourn—whatever the words may demand of us.

11. This seems to be the best way to render in English the Greek distinction between *ti eipo* and *ti laleo*. The first is from the verb *lego*, the second from *laleo*. These are often interchangeable and translated "to speak." But the former tends to emphasize content, the second manner—the sounds that come out of the mouth.

CHAPTER 11

God's Word as His Personal Presence

The third of the lordship attributes is the divine presence. Because God is Lord, he lives in and with his creation. Indeed, he chooses people to encounter his presence in a special measure. So Israel is his special people, and he is their God. In the tabernacle and temple, he is literally “God with them.” His Son is named Immanuel, “God with us” as he takes on human form and takes the place of sinners before God’s judgment. And his Spirit dwells with us and in us as his temple.

We have seen that in his word, God speaks as Lord. His word is his controlling power and his meaningful authority. Should we see the word also as God’s personal presence? I believe so.

From a general theological perspective, this conclusion is unavoidable. God’s speech is, as we have seen, a necessary divine attribute, so that wherever God is, his word is. We have also seen that *Word* is a title of the second person of the Trinity, and whenever one divine person acts in the world, the other two persons act together with him. God is the word, and the word is God. So we conclude that wherever God is, the word is, and wherever the word is, God is. Whenever God speaks, he himself is there with us.

The same conclusion follows from God’s attribute of omnipresence. Since God is everywhere, God and his word are always near to us.

But the presence of God in the word is not only a deduction from broader theological principles. Scripture is often very specific about it.

GOD'S NEARNESS TO HIS PEOPLE IS THE NEARNESS OF HIS WORDS

In Deuteronomy 4:7–8, God says that he is especially near to Israel and connects that nearness with the rightness of his statutes:

For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

Deuteronomy 30:11–14, then, speaks of the nearness of the word to Israel in the same terms as God's own nearness:

For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

In Romans, Paul quotes this Deuteronomy passage, with some adjustments. Here, the nearness of the commandments in Deuteronomy becomes the nearness of Christ, particularly in the gospel message:

But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) or "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim). (Rom. 10:6–8)

WHERE THE WORD IS, THERE IS GOD'S SPIRIT

In many biblical texts we see the word accompanied by the Spirit, and vice versa. In Genesis 1:2, God's Spirit hovers over the waters as God prepares to create all things by his word. Psalm 33:6 couples God's "word" and "breath" as the sources of creation. God's breath is

his Spirit.¹ Cf. Isa. 34:16; 59:21. Jesus says his words are both Spirit and life (John 6:63).

In John 16:13, Jesus says that the Spirit will “speak” to bring the disciples into all the truth. Throughout the book of Acts (note, e.g., 2:1–4), when the Spirit falls upon people, they often begin to speak of Jesus. In 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Paul couples word and Spirit as factors that are always equally present when people receive the gospel in faith. Negatively: in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, Paul tells people to ignore either a false word or a false spirit, suggesting that Satan’s counterfeit words also come with a counterfeit spirit.

Scripture also connects the written Word of God to the Spirit. Second Timothy 3:16 tells us that Scripture is *theopneustos*, “God-breathed,” again invoking God’s Spirit-breath as the source of the Word. Similarly, 2 Peter 1:21 indicates that the written Word has come about by the Spirit’s direction of the human writers.

GOD PERFORMS ALL HIS ACTIONS THROUGH SPEECH

In chapter 9, I noted that all of God’s works could be summarized thus: his eternal plan, creation, providence, judgment, grace. In that context I indicated how all these actions reveal his controlling power. But of course, where God’s power is, his authority and presence are there, too. We considered in chapter 10 the inseparability of his power and authority. Now we should note the inseparability of both of these from his personal presence.

Since God is not a physical being, his presence with us is different from the presence of a physical object or person. With a physical being it is possible to measure its distance from us, but that is not possible with God. How, then, could we judge when a nonphysical person is present with us? Such a person, evidently, is present wherever he can exercise his controlling power, and wherever he can enforce his authoritative commands. But God, of course, exercises his power and authority throughout the universe; so he is present everywhere.²

1. The biblical words for *Spirit*, the Hebrew *ruach* and the Greek *pneuma*, are both often translated “wind” or “breath.”

2. By *presence* in this context, of course, I refer to God’s general omnipresence. Scripture also refers to other kinds of presence, in which God reveals himself to us more intensely: the burning bush, Mount Sinai, the Holiest Place in the tabernacle and the temple. In these forms, too, his presence is not separated from his speech. My larger

So if God performs all his actions by powerful and authoritative speech, then his speech is never separated from his personal presence.

GOD IS DISTINGUISHED FROM ALL OTHER GODS BECAUSE HE IS THE GOD WHO SPEAKS

Idols are “dumb” or “mute” (1 Cor. 12:2). Cf. Pss. 115:5–7; 135:16; Hab. 2:18–20. In 1 Kings 18:24–35, the contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal concerns which deity will “answer.” God’s answer, of course, is by fire. Speaking is unique to God, an attribute that distinguishes what he is from all other supposed gods.

THE PERSONS OF THE TRINITY ARE DISTINGUISHED FROM ONE ANOTHER IN SCRIPTURE ACCORDING TO THEIR ROLE IN THE DIVINE SPEECH

This is not the only scriptural way of representing the Trinitarian distinctions, but it is one significant way: The Father exerts his lordship through speech (Pss. 29; 147:4; Isa. 40:26; 43:1; 62:2; 65:15; Eph. 3:14–15). The Son is the Word spoken (John 1:1; Rom. 10:6–8 [cf. Deut. 30:11–14]; Heb. 1:1–3; 1 John 1:1–3; Rev. 3:14; 19:13). The Spirit is the powerful breath that drives the word along to accomplish its purpose (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 33:6; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). I will later refer to this pattern as the *linguistic model of the Trinity*. So in still another way we see that God’s speech is inseparable from his Trinitarian being.

THE SPEECH OF GOD HAS DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

These include righteousness (Ps. 119:7), faithfulness (119:86), wonderfulness (119:129), uprightness (119:137), purity (119:40), truth (119:142; John 17:17), eternity (Ps. 119:89, 160), omnipotence (Gen. 18:14; Isa. 55:11; Luke 1:37), perfection (Ps. 19:7ff.). These attributes are not merely the attributes of something in creation, such as human faithfulness, righteousness, or truth. Clearly, in context these passages are saying that the

point is that in even the broadest kind of divine presence, general omnipresence, his word is there, too.

words of God are different from merely human words because they embody the unique qualities of God's own nature.

THE WORD DOES THINGS THAT ONLY GOD CAN DO

In Hebrews 4:12–13, the author says:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Verse 12 speaks of the word of God discerning the most hidden aspects of our being. That clearly is something that only God can do. Verse 13 seems to mark a transition from talking about the word to talking about God. But there is no grammatical indication of a change to a new subject. In both verses the author speaks of the powers of the word, and in both the powers of God. There is no distinction between one and the other. What the word does, God does, and vice versa. So the word not only has distinctively divine attributes, but also performs distinctively divine acts.

THE WORD OF GOD IS AN OBJECT OF WORSHIP

The psalmists view the words of God with religious reverence and awe, attitudes appropriate only to an encounter with God himself. The psalmist trembles with godly fear (Ps. 119:120; cf. Isa. 66:5), stands in awe of God's words (Ps. 119:161), and rejoices in them (v. 162). He lifts his hands to God's commandments (v. 48). He exalts and praises not only God himself, but also his "name" (Pss. 9:2; 34:3; 68:4). He gives thanks to God's name (Ps. 138:2). He praises God's word in Psalm 56:4, 10. This is extraordinary, since Scripture uniformly considers it idolatrous to worship anything other than God. But to praise or fear God's word is not idolatrous. To praise God's word is to praise God himself.

Does this worship justify "bibliolatry"? The Bible, as we will see later, is God's word in a finite medium. It may be paper and ink, or parchment, or audiotape or a CD-ROM. The medium is not divine, but creaturely. We should not worship the created medium; that would be idolatry. But through the created medium, we receive the authentic word of God, and that word of God should be treasured as if God were speaking it with

CHAPTER 16

The Permanence of God's Written Word

Now, would these words be any less personal if they were to be written down? Emil Brunner and others have argued to this effect. There is some truth in this view. John, for example, tells his “elect lady” that he would rather not use paper and ink to communicate certain things, but rather hopes “to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete” (2 John 12). As we will see later in our discussion of person-media,¹ there are some ways in which person-to-person meetings communicate beyond the capacity of written words. But there are also some ways in which written words are better than personal visits. For one thing, written words are more permanent and therefore more suitable for official and public functions.

And we will also see that according to Scripture, God himself has appointed written revelation to play a central role in his communication with human beings. In fact, that revelation (illuminated by the Spirit and ministered through the teaching of the church) is our main access to God's personal words in the present age. So written revelation will be the main focus of the rest of this book, with some digressions.²

1. See the discussion of the *apostolic parousia* in chapter 43.

2. For a briefer summary of what Scripture says about itself, see “Scripture Speaks for Itself,” Appendix F in this volume. Note also my review of John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, in Appendix G.

To begin, therefore, we should set aside the prejudice of the contemporary theological community against the idea of written revelation from God. The literature often seems to suggest that divine revelation comes from the divine voice and the prophets/apostles, but that written Scripture is a merely human record of revelation. But in fact, Scripture contains a doctrine of Scripture. It teaches us that God's personal words often come to us through written words—indeed, that written words are of major importance.³ They have the same authority as the divine voice itself. And God himself has ordained that these written words serve as the constitution of his church.

Before we look directly at this teaching, we should consider an important assumption that underlies the Bible's doctrine of written revelation. That is that divine revelation is not just a momentary experience given to an individual. It is rather to be preserved and passed on to others and to subsequent generations. Even before the beginning of the written canon, we see this emphasis on permanence, for example in the covenant memorials of the patriarchs. In Genesis 8:20, we read that Noah builds an altar in response to God's delivering him through the flood. God responds by reestablishing his covenant. The rainbow (9:12–17) is the sign of the covenant, a permanent witness to God's promise.⁴ Abram later builds an altar in Shechem (12:7) to memorialize God's promise that his descendants would possess the land. Cf. also 13:18. After Jacob experienced his revelatory vision of God, he erected a pillar and poured oil on it (28:18), in remembrance of the divine speech to him (35:14). These stone pillars are less than written revelation, of course. But they indicate the patriarchs' desire, and God's, to leave permanent witness to God's covenantal words.

God's covenants are with families, not only with individuals. He does not renew the covenant, by divine voice, individually to each member of the covenant community. Rather, he appoints the recipients of the covenant words to preserve those words and to pass them on to later generations. Although oral tradition plays a role, the normal way of preserving words is through writing.

The same is true in the NT. As we saw in chapter 15, Jesus empowered his disciples to remember all the words he spoke to them (John 14:26). He

3. On the circularity of appealing to Scripture for a doctrine of Scripture, see my brief remarks and references in chapters 1, 4, 8, 14, and Appendices C and E. Briefly, (1) any argument in favor of a supreme authority must appeal to that authority and therefore be circular; and (2) in this case, we are merely using the same procedure by which the church establishes all its doctrines. Scripture is our chief authority for the doctrine of God, of sin, of Christ, of salvation; it must also be our chief authority for the doctrine of Scripture.

4. Rainbows individually disappear, of course; but the *institution* of the rainbow is permanent.

was concerned not only for his disciples, but for those who come to believe through the disciples' word (17:20). The revelation is to be "passed down" as a *tradition*, first "handed over" (*paradidomi*) from the Father to the Son (Matt. 11:27) and then "revealed" to those whom the Son chooses. The revelation of Jesus' resurrection is one that Paul "received" (1 Cor. 15:3) and then "delivered" (*paradidomi*) to the churches. So Paul exhorts the Thessalonian church, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions [*paradosis*] that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter" (2 Thess. 2:15). And:

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition [*paradosis*] which you received from us. (2 Thess. 3:6 NASB)

Later, Paul exhorts Timothy to "guard the deposit [*paratheke*] entrusted to you" (1 Tim. 6:20). Cf. 2 Tim. 1:12–14; 2:2; 2 Peter 2:21. These passages indicate that the gospel of Christ is a specific content, a tradition (indicated by the *paradidomi* and *paratheke* terminology), passed from the Father, to the Son, to the apostles, to the churches. That tradition⁵ serves as the criterion of discipleship, of doctrine and behavior. It is to be defended and preserved, passed from one generation to the next. As Jude says:

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered [*paradidomi*] to the saints. (Jude 3)

The prominent twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth is well known for the view that revelation cannot be preserved, but exists only in a crisis moment, leaving us only with "recollection and expectation." He believes that if revelation becomes permanent, it then becomes something that we can possess, master, manipulate, and so forth. Intuitively, we will probably agree that Christians, not least theologians, have fallen into the trap of treating God's word as a commodity of which they are masters, though it is difficult to identify when this happens and to prove guilt. The only certain way to prove someone guilty of such an attitude is to read his heart. Certainly, nobody ever admits guilt in this respect. In any case, Barth is right to insist that God's word must be sovereign over us, not the other

5. Of course, in the NT there are bad traditions as well as good. The bad traditions are the merely human traditions of the Pharisees that make "void the word of God" (Matt. 15:6). These traditions add to and supplant the true word of God, and so we should reject them. Cf. Col. 2:8. See chap. 38.

way around. But to deny the permanence of God's revelation is no help. Such a denial is unscriptural, as we have seen. And my impression is that Barthian theologians are no more or less prone than anyone else to use revelation as a tool to magnify themselves and to disrespect others, as if they were masters of the word.

In Scripture itself, God ensures the sovereignty of his revelation not by making it momentary and evanescent,⁶ but by establishing it as a permanent part of the human landscape, like the pillars and altars of the patriarchs. God commissioned Israel to put the Book of the Law in the holiest part of the tabernacle (Deut. 31:26) and to have the commandments read publicly to the nation as God's witness against their sins (vv. 10–11). The permanent law of God maintained God's sovereignty over his people. And later, during a time of national apostasy, Hilkiah the high priest discovered a copy of the law of God in the temple and brought it to King Josiah, leading to national repentance (2 Kings 22:8–20). Humans may try to add to the word, subtract from it, ignore it, misuse it, or hide it, but they can never be sovereign over it. It will always be God's word, and its very permanence is a sign of that: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa. 40:8).

6. Barth's approach amounts to sovereignty by retreat. In his view, for God's word to be sovereign, it must escape the scrutiny of human beings. But such sovereignty is to no purpose. It cannot command, promise, or guide, as it must if it is to be God's covenant word.

CHAPTER 41

Assurance

It may seem that we have been on a long, strenuous journey through the steps listed in chapter 33: copying, textual criticism, translations, editions, teaching, preaching, sacraments, theology, confessions, creeds, traditions, human reception, interpretation, and understanding. It may seem that we can barely perceive the autographic text through the fog. And it may seem that with every step, we lose assurance. For at every step, errors enter the picture. Can we be sure that our Bible is based on accurate copies, a proper textual tradition, sound teaching, interpretation, and so on?

But believers understand that reading the Bible is not like this. It's not like a slog through a jungle in which we have to hack away at thousands of pieces of underbrush before we reach our destination. Rather, it is very much like listening to our Father talking to us. As in Abraham's case, we hear in Scripture a personal word from God.

If the problems of text, translation, and so on are so difficult that we can never identify the voice of God, then, of course, our faith is an illusion. Faith in Scripture is precisely hearing the voice of God, believing, obeying, and participating in his words (chap. 39). Abraham is the primary model of Christian faith in the NT (Rom. 4:1–25; cf. John 8:56; Gal. 3:6–29; Heb. 6:13–20; 11:8–22; James 2:21–23). “He believed the LORD, and [God] counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6) is quoted three times in the NT (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23). We, too, are to believe Christ, and our faith in the promise of his free grace is the instrument of our salvation.

It will not do to say that revelation is something nonpropositional, perhaps an occasional mystical experience. That is not the kind of revelation Abraham heard. God gave him commands, and an intelligible promise. Our own salvation is grounded in that promise. Without it, there is no hope.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul expresses amazement that some in the church have come to deny that the dead are raised. He replies:

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Cor. 15:12–19)

If there is no resurrection for human beings, then not even Christ has been raised. We know that Christ has been raised, so certainly there is a resurrection for all believers. But how are the Corinthians to be sure that Jesus was actually raised from the dead? The answer is that they have learned this in a personal word from God:

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 the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the

grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? (1 Cor. 15:1–12)

Now, apologists often quote this passage as a list of evidences for the resurrection, and it certainly is that. Paul lists resurrection appearances to apostles, even one appearance to five hundred brothers at once, some of whom are still alive and therefore, we should assume, capable of testifying. But the Corinthians, most of them, had not personally witnessed the resurrection. Nor had they individually cross-examined the witnesses. For them, the knowledge of the resurrection came from another source, namely, the preaching of Paul (vv. 1–3, 11–12). Paul’s primary argument is that the resurrection of Christ was part of the apostolic preaching, the preaching God used to plant the church. To doubt that is to doubt the whole gospel. To reject the resurrection is to reject Paul’s preaching as “vain” (v. 14) and faith itself as vain. And if our faith is futile, we are yet in our sins (v. 17).

Paul’s preaching was like the promise to Abraham: a personal word from God. Our faith, too, is based on this personal word. If we have no personal word, our faith is futile, and we are yet in our sins. And if we cannot identify God’s Word (despite the history of textual and interpretative problems), then we have no hope. Christianity is a sham.

But we have seen that God intends to speak personal words to his people. He acknowledges no barriers that can keep him from communicating with us successfully. And believers throughout the centuries have been assured that God’s Word is true. They have found that Word to be trustworthy enough to build their lives upon it, to trust it as their only comfort in life or death, to believe and obey it no matter what the unbelieving world may say.

How is such assurance possible? For one thing, it is not at all difficult for God. Abraham’s case was also problematic. Humanly speaking, it is hard to understand why he would accept God’s word. His reason and emotions must have questioned the notion that he should leave his home to dwell in a new and strange land (Gen. 12:1). Even more, his conscience must have rebelled against the idea that God would want him to sacrifice his beloved son, the son of the covenant (22:2). Any of us would have been inclined to say that the voice asking him to do such things could not have been the voice of God. But God somehow managed to identify himself. Abraham was assured that this was the word of God. It was the highest assurance because it came from God himself.

Similarly, God gets through to believers today. The unbelieving world, the academic establishment, and our own rebellious inclinations pose a thousand reasons why we should not accept Scripture as humble servants. The problems of text, interpretation, and theology often seem insuperable. But many still believe, and their number increases. It is hard to account for this. But it is God at work.

Subjectively, it works like this. When someone believes God's Word with true faith, he or she does not accept it through autonomous reasoning, through the consensus of scholars, or through an independent examination of evidences. We do not believe God because we have subjected God to our tests and the tests of others. Rather, God's Word is the foundation of our thought.¹ God's Word is the ultimate criterion of truth and right. It is the judge of what reasoning is valid and sound. The ultimate test of a scholar is whether his work agrees with Scripture. And Scripture determines what evidences are to be believed.

It is God himself who enables us to accept his Word as our foundation, our presupposition.

To say this is not to deny that Scripture presents problems to us. Often, it is not easy to know what Scripture is saying, or to answer the objections that arise in our hearts. So there is much in the Bible of which we do *not* have assurance, even when we seek to trust God's Word as our presupposition.

But the Christian life is a journey, a movement from faith to more faith (with, to be sure, ups and downs along the way). This is a journey both toward better understanding and toward overcoming our unbelief (Mark 9:24). The latter process is called *sanctification*. The former process is also related to sanctification: our level of understanding is related to our level of trust and obedience.² But our lack of understanding is also related to our finitude, our inability to resolve all the questions that the phenomena of Scripture pose to us.

Yet every believer begins with certainty. When we trust in Christ, we "know" that we have eternal life (1 John 5:13), and we "know" that he hears our prayers (v. 15).³ As I mentioned earlier, if we have faith

1. It should be obvious to those who know about such things that I am not asserting "foundationalism" in the sense that it is usually criticized today. For some observations on the subject, see *DKG*, 128–29, 386–87. I do not believe that all human knowledge should be deduced from Scripture, as René Descartes tried to deduce all human knowledge from his foundational argument. But I do maintain that all human knowledge must be reconcilable with Scripture.

2. See *DKG*, 40–49.

3. I am describing here the faith of normal adults. God is able to make special provision for those who are unable to understand propositional content. See *WCF* 10.3.

at all, we *know* that Christ has been raised from the dead. It is our fundamental confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16; cf. John 6:69). Such facts become our presuppositions, the foundations of knowledge.

These presuppositions are the ultimate criteria of truth for a Christian. All other ideas must be consistent with them. They form the foundation on which all our other knowledge is to be built. When someone raises an objection that conflicts with one of these presuppositional beliefs, we know that objection is false, whether or not we can otherwise refute it.

But there are things in the Bible that we do not understand well enough to affirm them with this kind of assurance. My former colleague Richard Pratt uses a diagram that he calls the “cone of certainty” to illustrate this problem. It is simply a cone with the narrow end at the top and the broader end on the bottom. At the narrow end of the cone are those beliefs we are sure of: say, the existence of God, the deity of Christ, his resurrection, salvation by grace through faith, and so on. At the bottom of the cone, there are matters in Scripture of which we are very unsure: Where did Cain get his wife (Gen. 4:17)? Why did Jephthah keep the vow to make his daughter an offering (Judg. 11:29–40)? Why was it such a serious crime for somebody to gather sticks on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32–36)? At the bottom of my cone is God’s reason for bringing evil into the world, and the timing of the millennium. We may have views about such matters, but we are not sure of them.

In between the bottom and the top are matters about which we may have opinions, but we would not claim that they are absolutely certain. For me, these would include the mode and subjects of baptism, the frequency of the Lord’s Supper, the biblical pattern for church government, and the nature of Jesus’ ignorance (Matt. 26:36).

As we grow as believers, there is movement through the cone. Some things of which we were once very certain become uncertain. Other things of which we have been uncertain become certain. But the overall progression, I think, is toward greater certainty. Scripture values certainty; and therefore our sanctification moves toward that goal, as part of the holiness God seeks in us.

The Bible often tells us that Christians can, should, and do know God and the truths of revelation (Matt. 9:6; 11:27; 13:11; John 7:17; 8:32; 10:4–5; 14:17; 17:3; many other passages). Such passages present this knowledge not as something tentative, but as a firm basis for life and hope.

Scripture uses the language of certainty more sparingly, but that is also present. Luke wants his correspondent Theophilus to know the “certainty” (*asphaleia*) of the things he has been taught (Luke 1:4) and the “proofs”

(*tekmeria*) by which Jesus showed himself alive after his death (Acts 1:3). The centurion at the cross says, “Certainly [*ontos*] this man was innocent!” (Luke 23:47).

The letter to the Hebrews says that God made a promise to Abraham, swearing by himself, for there was no one greater (Heb. 6:13). So God both made a promise and confirmed it with an oath, “two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie” (v. 18). This is “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (v. 19). Similarly, Paul (2 Tim. 3:16–17) and Peter (2 Peter 1:19–21) speak of Scripture as God’s own words, which provide sure guidance in a world where false teaching abounds. God’s special revelation is certain, and we ought to be certain about it.

On the other hand, the Bible presents doubt largely negatively. It is a spiritual impediment, an obstacle to doing God’s work (Matt. 14:31; 21:21; 28:17; Acts 10:20; 11:12; Rom. 14:23; 1 Tim. 2:8; James 1:6). In Matthew 14:31 and Romans 14:23, it is the opposite of faith and therefore a sin. Of course, this sin, like other sins, may remain with us through our earthly life. But we should not be complacent about it. Just as the ideal for the Christian life is perfect holiness, the ideal for the Christian mind is absolute certainty about God’s revelation.

We should not conclude that doubt is always sinful. Matthew 14:31 and Romans 14:23 (and indeed the others I have listed) speak of doubt in the face of clear special revelation. To doubt what God has clearly spoken to us is wrong. But in other situations, it is not wrong to doubt. In many cases, in fact, it is wrong for us to claim knowledge, much less certainty. Indeed, often the best course is to admit our ignorance (Deut. 29:29; Rom. 11:33–36). Paul is not wrong to express uncertainty about the number of people he baptized (1 Cor. 1:16). Indeed, James tells us, we are always ignorant of the future to some extent, and we ought not to pretend that we know more about it than we do (James 4:13–16). Job’s friends were wrong to think they knew the reasons for his torment, and Job himself had to be humbled as God reminded him of his ignorance (Job 38–42).

So Christian epistemologist Esther Meek points out that the process of knowing through our earthly lives is a quest: following clues, noticing patterns, making commitments, respecting honest doubt. In much of life, she says, confidence, not certainty, should be our goal.⁴

I agree. But in regard to our knowledge of God’s Word, certainty should be our goal. We should not be complacent with doubt, but we should use all the abilities God has given us to advance in knowledge of his Word. Besides following clues, noticing patterns, and such things, we should employ our

4. Esther Meek, *Longing to Know* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003).

spiritual resources: prayer, sacrament, teaching. In all these, God comes through to us. That is to say, as we obey the revelation of which we are certain, God grants us certainty about other things.

So the process I have described since chapter 33—copying, textual criticism, translations, and so forth—is not a journey toward more and more uncertainty and confusion. To be sure, we encounter errors at each step of the human assimilation of God's Word. But each step also represents progress toward greater understanding. At each step, errors enter in, but errors are also corrected. By faith we expect that the overall trajectory of our assurance is upward. With each step, we grow in grace, knowledge, confidence, and certainty.

To speak of this journey toward certainty is to speak of the workings of the Holy Spirit, the subject of the next chapter.⁵

5. The present chapter may be usefully compared to my article "Certainty," available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2005Certainty.htm.

Writing on the Heart

Person-revelation manifests God's lordship attribute of covenant presence (chap. 2). In person-revelation, God himself comes into our midst (chap. 42) and makes human persons into media of his revelation (chap. 43). But the most intimate way in which God's revelation is present with us is his saving revelation on the hearts of his people.

There may be some anticipation of this idea in the many passages that speak of God's placing his *name* on his people, identifying himself with them. In the ancient Near East, names had significance. Today, we often give children names mainly for their sound or a family connection. But in Bible times, a person's name reflected events surrounding his birth, his parents' hopes for him, or some other meaning. The name always said something about the person.

In some passages, God gives new names to people to signify their place in his redemptive plan (Gen. 17:5; 32:28). The redemptive promise is a promise of a new name (Isa. 62:2; Rev. 2:17). Further, God knows his people by name (Isa. 43:1) (i.e., intimately and completely), and he calls on them by name (Isa. 45:3–4) to serve his purposes.

In Scripture, "name of the Lord" is used both for various terms such as *Yahweh*, *Elohim*, and *Adon* that apply to him, and for God's whole revelation of himself.¹ So God's name is a virtual synonym for his *word*. God

1. For a longer discussion of God's name and names, see *DG*, 21–35, 343–61. See also my treatment of the third commandment in *DCL*, 487–97. Much of the material in the following paragraphs is taken from *DG*.

vindicates his name, for it represents his reputation (1 Sam. 12:22), as we refer to a man's "good name" (Prov. 22:1). As with *word* (chaps. 8–11), God's name is God himself.

As we sing praise to God, we sing praise to his name (Pss. 7:17; 9:2; 18:49; many other passages); we give the glory due to his name (Ps. 29:2); we exalt the name (34:3) and fear it (61:5). God's name is an object of worship. Since in Scripture God alone is the proper object of worship, this language equates the name and the Lord himself.

Similarly, the name of God defends us (Ps. 20:1). We trust in the name for deliverance (33:21). God's name endures forever (72:17; 135:13). It "reaches to the ends of the earth" (48:10). It is holy and awesome (111:9). God saves us by his name (54:1). He guides us "for his name's sake" (23:3). In Isaiah 30:27, it is the "name of the LORD" itself that comes to bring judgment on the nations and blessings on his people. So God's name has divine attributes and performs divine acts. In short, Scripture says about the name of God virtually everything it says about God.²

So when God chooses to make his "name" dwell in a place (Deut. 12:5, 11, 21; 14:23–24; 1 Kings 8:29; 9:3; 2 Kings 23:27), that place becomes a location of his special presence. To say that God's name dwells in that place is to say that God himself dwells there. God's name is his *glory*: when Moses asks to see his glory, he expounds his name (Ex. 33:18–19). (Note also parallels between the name and the glory in Psalm 102:15 and Isaiah 59:19.) To say that God's "name" is in an angel is to say that the angel has the authority of God (Ex. 23:21).

It is not surprising, then, that the third commandment of the Decalogue tells us not to misuse God's name. We should speak the name of God with the reverence we should have in his personal presence.

One of the most remarkable proofs of the deity of Christ, then, is that the NT uses his name just as the OT used the name of Yahweh. When the Jewish rulers ask Peter and John "by what power or by what name" they had healed a crippled man, Peter replies that it was "by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" (Acts 4:7, 10). He concludes, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (v. 12; cf. v. 17). In 5:41, we read that the apostles "left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name." Cf. 9:21; 22:16. We see that *name* can be used as a substitute for *Jesus*, as it substitutes for *Yahweh* in the OT, and that the name of Jesus has the same powers as the name of Yahweh.

2. Compare the discussion of the word of God as God himself, chapters 8, 11.

In Isaiah 45:23, Yahweh says, “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.” In Romans 14:11, Paul applies this passage to God (*Theos*); but in Philippians 2:10–11, he applies it to Christ:

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.

In Romans 10:13, Paul quotes Joel 2:32: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Joel spoke of the name of Yahweh; Paul speaks specifically of the name of Jesus. In Genesis 4:26, the family of Seth begins to “call upon the name of the LORD,” an indication of the beginnings of corporate worship. In 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul describes the Christian church as “those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” We call on the name of Christ for salvation and to praise him. We pray for healing “in the name of the Lord” (James 5:14, certainly again a reference to Jesus).

According to Matthew 28:19, we are to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” One name, threefold. *Son* is on the same level as *Father*. Baptism is initiation to discipleship, and it places upon us the name that brings together Father, Son, and Spirit.

The reference to baptism indicates that we also, as well as the Father and the Son, are bearers of the holy name of God. In our case, the name is not ours by nature; it does not make us objects of worship. Rather, God’s name dwells in us as it dwelled in the tabernacle. God places his name upon us, as he placed his name in the tabernacle and in the Holy Land (Deut. 12:5). In the Aaronic benediction of Numbers 6:24–26, the priests, says Yahweh, “shall put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them” (v. 27). Certainly, the Trinitarian apostolic benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14 has the same significance. So God’s people are “called by” his name (Jer. 14:9; cf. Isa. 43:7) and on this basis pray to God for their deliverance (Jer. 14:21). We are temples of God’s Spirit and thus bearers of his name.³

Once he has chosen a people for himself, he will not forsake them, for the sake of his own name, which he has identified with theirs (1 Sam. 12:22). In Amos 9:11–12, the Lord promises:

“In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom

3. Cf. Rev. 3:12; 14:1; 22:4.

and all the nations who are called by my name,” declares the LORD who does this.

God’s word to Amos says that not only Israel is called by God’s name, but other nations as well, speaking (see the quotation in Acts 15:17–18) of the outreach of the gospel of Christ to all the nations of the world. New believers are to be baptized into that one “name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). God’s new name will be on the “foreheads” of the people of God in the last day (Rev. 22:4).

In a still broader sense, all creation bears the name of the Lord. As we saw earlier, God’s covenant lordship is over all the earth. He has made the world to be his temple, and of course his name must dwell in his temple. I believe that Jesus implies the presence of God’s name in creation in Matthew 5:33–37 (cf. 23:16–22), his exposition of the third commandment. There he addresses those who tried to avoid the force of oaths by not using particular names of God. Rather than swearing by Yahweh or by God, they would swear by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or even their own heads. Jesus’ answer is that heaven, earth, Jerusalem, and, yes, our heads are subject to God’s sovereignty, so that to invoke anything in creation is to invoke God himself. If we swear, “May the heavens collapse if I fail to do this,” only God can bring about that collapse or prevent it. If I swear, “May my hair turn white if I am lying,” only God can enforce that oath. So when we swear by created things, we are implicitly swearing by God himself, by his own name. That means that everything in creation is a dwelling place for God’s name, a place of God’s presence.

My application of this rich vein of biblical theology is that God sets his own name, a revelation of himself, indeed his own presence, upon every believer. He places upon us a seal that says we belong to him and he belongs to us. That is a word of God that defines who he is and who we are in relation to him. It says that our deepest nature is to be his covenant servants. We can be intelligibly described only as God’s people, and as the people in whom he himself has chosen to dwell. We are, by our very nature, God’s people, and therefore we are revelations of him.

Some of God’s people, to be sure, rebel against him. But they, too, reveal God, even in their rebellion, as I indicated in chapter 43. These people are members of God’s covenant, but they receive the curses of the covenant rather than the blessings. Even in their case, their deepest nature is to be covenant servants of God, but in their case rebellious servants.⁴

4. Here, of course, I am using *servant* to describe the covenant status of the rebels, not their heart-allegiance, which I will discuss in the following pages. In terms of *DG*, chap-

Another expression in Scripture that shows the deep penetration of God's revelation into our being is the writing of God's word on our hearts. The heart is the inner core of a person, the basic direction of his life (for good or ill), the person as God sees him. The heart is what we really are, when all our masks are off. Jesus taught:

The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. (Luke 6:45)

When God revealed his law to Israel, he intended it to reside not only on tablets of stone, but also on their hearts (Deut. 6:6). That means that it was to govern their deepest thoughts and motives, to control all their actions, in all areas of life. They were to live a life surrounded, saturated, by his words:

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:7–9; cf. Rev. 22:4)

God's word was to be everywhere. The people were to know it so well that it would direct their decisions even when they had no time to think about it. They were to be a people for whom obeying God's word was second nature.

So the psalmist says, "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Ps. 119:11). And the wisdom teacher tells his pupil, "Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart" (Prov. 3:3; cf. 7:1–3). The righteous man is one who has the word in his heart (Ps. 37:31). In Psalm 40:7–8, the redeemed man who delights to do God's will has God's word in his heart.⁵

Not all Israel had God's word in their heart. But some did. God says through Isaiah:

Listen to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear not the reproach of man, nor be dismayed at their revilings. (Isa. 51:7)

ter 16, these people are historically elect, not eternally elect. These two types of election are vastly different, though Scripture describes them in similar terms.

5. The writer of Hebrews quotes this passage at 10:5–7 in his letter as applying to Christ. He doesn't refer to the writing of the word on his heart, doubtless because that was obvious in the case of Jesus, whose deepest inclination was to do the Father's will.

These people are the remnant, the believers within Israel, as opposed to those who rejected God. But God looks forward to a time when all his people will have a new heart, and a new spirit (Ezek. 11:19; 18:31). Their new heart will be a gift of God's sheer grace (Jer. 24:7; Ezek. 36:26; 37:23). The gift of a new heart is part of a new covenant that God will make with his people:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:31–34)

In this covenant, God will write his word not on stone tablets, but on the hearts of his people. Those hearts will be the covenant document (chap. 17). They will all know God, and he will forgive their sins. God himself will be their teacher (cf. John 6:45; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 John 2:27).

The writer to the Hebrews says that the new covenant was established by the new priesthood of Jesus, rendering the Mosaic covenant obsolete (Heb. 8:1–13). Through Christ, God has written his word on the hearts of his people. The people of God in the OT, the righteous remnant, were saved not by their works, but by looking forward to the promise of God to redeem his people through Christ. And those who had the word written on their hearts back then (as Pss. 37:31; 40:7–8) were righteous because of Christ, just as "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:3, quoting Gen. 15:6). By anticipation, the old covenant saints were members of the new covenant, though it was yet to be sealed by the shedding of Jesus' blood.

So we who believe in Christ have the word of God written on our hearts. Though we often fail, our deepest inclinations are to follow Jesus and to obey his Father. Paul is even able to say of the Corinthian church:

You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a

letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Cor. 3:2–3)

The church at Corinth had many problems; Paul rebukes them about many things. But God knew their hearts, and Paul knew also that their hearts were with Jesus. So they serve as person-revelation. They themselves are a letter recommending the ministry of Paul.

We have seen through this book that revelation begins in God's own heart, and that it typically follows a very indirect process between his speech and our hearts. In nature and Scripture, his word is objective. But the destination of revelation is deeply subjective. For as I indicated in chapter 6, the ultimate purpose of God's word is to communicate with his creatures, and that purpose is incomplete until the word resides within his hearers. So Scripture speaks of revelation in both objective terms and subjective terms (cf. also chap. 39). In this book, I have focused on the objective. God's word exists in creation and in Scripture, regardless of what anyone thinks of that. But Scripture also speaks of revelation as something subjective.

In Isaiah 53:1, God through Isaiah asks the rhetorical question, "Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" By the parallelism of these two questions, we can tell that here God's arm (his power) has been revealed only to those who have believed. This verse does not speak of a revelation given to everyone as an objective datum, but as a revelation given to those who have heard and believed the prophecy.

Similarly, Jesus, in Matthew 11:27, says:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Reveal here refers neither to natural or general revelation nor to the biblical canon. It is rather an event in the heart of the recipient. Jesus does not merely make the knowledge of the Father available objectively in case we might like to consider it. Rather, he gives us actual *knowledge* of the Father, as a gift.

A similar use of *revelation* appears in Ephesians 1:17, where Paul prays

that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.

This revelation is not additional natural revelation. Nor is Paul asking that God will give to the Ephesians some new books to be included in the canon. Rather, he is praying that in all the objective revelation God has given, the Spirit will actually reveal God so that the Ephesian Christians will subjectively know God better.

For other references to such subjective revelation, see John 3:3; Rom. 1:17; 2 Cor. 4:6; Gal. 1:15–16; Phil. 3:15; 1 John 2:27.

Our hearts, then, are the destination of God's revelation. In us the process of communication reaches its terminus. In our hearts we receive God's personal words to us in such a profound way that they become the foundation of all our thinking and living. We look forward to the consummation of this knowledge in the last day, when God will tear away from us our sinful inclinations to disobey and devalue this wonderful word. God has accompanied his word through all the vicissitudes of history, the problems of Scripture, and the spiritual battles of our lives,⁶ so that we might receive it with joy. And he will continue to accompany it until he receives us into glory.

6. After writing this sentence, I noticed that it contained a covenantal triad.

APPENDIX A

ANTITHESIS AND THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE

Note: This essay was my Inaugural Address at Reformed Theological Seminary, upon my assumption of the J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy. It discusses the relationship between the biblical doctrine of Scripture and its alternatives. It compares the biblical doctrine with those of liberal theology and of evangelicals who compromise with liberalism. This discussion supplements chapters 3–7 of the present book.



The Bible often divides people into two classes, antithetically related. There are the sons of Cain and of Seth (Gen. 4–6), Israel and the nations (Ex. 19:5–6), the righteous and the wicked (Ps. 1), the wise and the foolish (Prov. 1:7), the saved and the lost (Matt. 18:11), the children of Abraham and those of the devil (John 8:39–44), the elect and the nonelect (Rom. 9), practitioners of the wisdom of the world and of the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1–2), believers and unbelievers (1 Cor. 6:6), those who walk in light and those who walk in darkness (1 John 1:5–10), and the church and the world (1 John 2:15–17).

These antitheses aren't all equivalent. That is to say that they are not simply alternative names for the same two groups. The distinction between elect and nonelect, for example, is not the same as the distinction between believer and unbeliever. There are elect people among the current group of unbelievers, and that fact motivates missions and evangelism. So in Acts 18:10, the Lord assured Paul that "I have many in this city who are my people"—many elect who had not yet embraced the gospel.

Similarly, under the old covenant there were Gentiles such as Melchizedek, Rahab, and Ruth who entered the people of God; and as Paul says in Romans 9:6, “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.” Some Gentiles, then, belong to God’s people, and some Jews, in their hearts, do not. So the distinction between elect and nonelect is different from the distinction between Jew and Gentile, between Israel and the Nations.

Furthermore, the antithesis between wise and foolish, for example, is a division within the body of professing believers. Nevertheless, wisdom and not foolishness is the mentality proper to believers in the Lord. Foolishness really belongs outside of God’s people. In a believer, foolishness contradicts his belief in God. In the consummation glory, all believers will be wise, not foolish. The distinction between the antitheses of belief/unbelief and elect/nonelect is also a distinction destined for dissolution. In the end, all the elect will be believers, just as even now all the nonelect are unbelievers.

In that way, given these nuances and qualifications, the antitheses actually coalesce. There is a great big ugly ditch, to abuse the metaphor of Lessing, that runs through the human community. Some are on one side, some on the other. Although the location of that ditch is not always plain today, God will make it plain in his final judgment. Eventually, the inconsistencies of believers and of unbelievers will be erased, everyone will show their true colors, and the antithesis will be fully manifest.

Now, Christians have often used these antitheses in the interest of theological polemics. Let me quote from one: “Whoever wills to be in a state of salvation, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith, which except everyone shall have kept whole and undefiled without doubt he will perish eternally.” So begins the so-called Athanasian Creed,¹ which continues by summarizing Nicene Trinitarianism and Chalcedonian Christology, and then concludes, “This is the catholic faith, which except a man shall have believed faithfully and firmly he cannot be in a state of salvation.” You see, what this creed does is to align the antithesis of saved and lost with the antithesis of orthodox and unorthodox. You can’t be saved unless you profess orthodox doctrine.

That alignment, of course, doesn’t take account of people who are too young, for example, to intelligently profess these doctrines, or of those who do not have sufficient mental capacity or education. I don’t know the extent to which the writers or the original readers of the creed understood these qualifications, but of course they must be made.

1. Most likely not by Athanasius, the famous bishop of Alexandria. It is usually thought to be from western Europe, around A.D. 500.

Nevertheless, it is not wrong to define Christian belief in terms of a definite content. That content certainly includes the full deity and humanity of Christ, as the creed says. Although I think one can be devoted to Christ without intelligently confessing the formulae of the creed, surely the church should not recognize as a Christian anyone who understands these doctrines and *denies* them. Denial of them is the spirit of antichrist, as John puts it in 1 John 4:3. Or, as Paul puts it in Galatians 1:6–9, if anyone preaches a different gospel, contrary to that of the apostles, he is under a divine curse.

We find the same antithetical language in the polemics of the Protestant Reformation, which identifies the pope as Antichrist and his doctrine as devilish. And often in the following centuries, with varying degrees of justification, theologians have invoked the biblical antitheses against rival theologies.

The most significant, and to my mind most justifiable, recent use of these antitheses has been in the controversy between liberalism and orthodoxy. Liberalism is a movement that developed in the seventeenth century, came to flourish in the so-called Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, dominated the academic theological world in the nineteenth century, and came to rule many major denominations of the church in the twentieth. Liberalism's distinctive position is that the Bible is not the inspired Word of God, but a group of human reflections about God. That view of the Bible led many to contradict the teachings of the Bible, such as prophecy, miracle, the deity of Christ, his blood atonement, his physical resurrection, and his second coming.

Many who disagreed with the liberals nevertheless regarded them as a legitimate faction within the church, just as U.S. political parties, even when they strongly disagree, recognize the right of their opponents to participate in the political process. In this model, opponents see one another as holding different positions on the "spectrum of opinion." Many in the church today continue to hold such a view of liberalism. But in 1924, in his great book *Christianity and Liberalism*,² J. Gresham Machen evaluated the situation very differently:

In the sphere of religion, in particular, the present time is a time of conflict; the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian

2. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923).

terminology. This modern non-redemptive religion is called “modernism” or “liberalism.”³

In Machen’s view, liberalism was not a faction or party within Christianity, a position along the Christian “spectrum.” It was a different religion entirely.⁴ In his book, Machen shows that the two religions hold exact opposite positions on everything of importance: doctrine, God, man, the Bible, Christ, salvation, and the church. Machen’s approach is antithetic. Liberalism is by its very nature non-Christian, unbelieving. We may extrapolate that on this view liberalism is also foolish, not wise, wicked, not righteous, in darkness, not light, worldly, not churchly.

Machen’s antithetic evaluation of liberalism led him eventually to leave Princeton Seminary, and later the Presbyterian Church USA, to found new institutions that would maintain the biblical gospel against unbelief. Others followed his example. Significantly, this year we celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Reformed Theological Seminary, which was also formed by men deeply convinced that existing seminaries in the Southern Presbyterian Church compromised the gospel itself by liberal teaching.

Antithesis was also a major element in the thought of Machen’s disciple Cornelius Van Til. Occasionally, he made joking reference to it, as when he announced on the first day of class that the human race consisted of two distinct groups, Dutchmen and non-Dutchmen. But most of the time, he was deadly serious. As Machen had written *Christianity and Liberalism*, so Van Til wrote *Christianity and Barthianism*.⁵ As Machen regarded liberalism as a different religion entirely from Christianity, so Van Til had the same view of the theology of Barth, Brunner, Hordern, Hendry, Dowey, and others in the so-called neoorthodox camp.

Van Til’s apologetics also traded heavily on the concept of an antithesis between believer and unbeliever. I have criticized him for overstating the antithesis, as when he says that “the unbeliever can know nothing truly,”⁶ and for other unclarities in his particular formulation. I have also objected to the fact that he sometimes used antithesis language to refer not only

3. Ibid., 2.

4. Many followed Machen in this analysis, although it never became a majority view. Jan Karel Van Baalen, in his *The Chaos of Cults* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 283–317, identified modernism as a cult. On page 303, he quotes liberal Charles Clayton Morrison, longtime editor of *Christian Century*, as agreeing with Machen in 1924 that fundamentalism (as he preferred to call it) and modernism are indeed two different religions. On page 314, Van Baalen quotes Morrison again and liberal theologian Wilhelm Pauck as agreeing with Van Til’s similar assessment of neoorthodoxy.

5. Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962).

6. CVT, 187–213.

to believer and unbeliever, but also to Reformed and non-Reformed, and even to Van Tillian and non-Van Tillian apologists within the Reformed community. But his basic insight wears well: the difference between faith and unbelief is relevant to human thinking and reasoning, not merely to some narrowly defined “religious” dimension of life. Religious antithesis generates epistemological antithesis. Christians *think* differently from non-Christians; and when they don’t, they should.

In describing the difference between Christian and non-Christian thinking, Van Til argued that the two groups of people held different *presuppositions*. A presupposition, for Van Til, was the most fundamental commitment of the heart, a commitment that governed human life. Some people are committed to Jesus Christ and seek to “take every thought captive” to him (2 Cor. 10:5). The rest are committed to something else, either another religion, a philosophy, a political movement, or their own reason. There is no neutrality. To paraphrase Bob Dylan, “you gotta serve somebody.” Our presuppositional commitments govern all our life decisions, indeed all our thinking. And in the end there are only two presuppositions: the supremacy of God and the supremacy of something in creation, which Scripture calls idolatry.

To be committed to Jesus Christ is to honor his word, above all other words. Van Til, together with all other orthodox believers, held that the word of Christ, the word of God, is to be found in the Holy Scriptures, indeed that the Bible *is* the Word of God. So a short way of setting forth the content of the believer’s presupposition is to say that it is the content of the Bible. Of course, believers vary in the degree to which they know and understand Scripture, and therefore in the degree to which they can apply that presupposition. But they seek a greater and greater understanding, so that more and more aspects of their lives can be subject to God’s Word.

Van Til therefore maintained that a strong doctrine of Scripture, such as the first chapter of the WCF, is an indispensable element of Christian theology. To deny the ultimate authority of God’s written Word is to adopt a different authority, one that must in the nature of the case be allied with Satan.

For several years during the 1950s and 1960s, as I recall, Van Til’s OT colleague Edward J. Young reviewed books for *Christianity Today*, often publishing a yearly roundup of writings in the OT field. Although Young reviewed books by liberal and orthodox writers equally, he made a very sharp distinction between them. When there was a book that was hard to classify in these categories, he took careful note of the book’s orthodox elements and of its liberal elements. Like Van Til, Young saw biblical scholarship in an antithetical pattern. Either OT scholars honored the Bible

as God's Word or they didn't, or they wavered unstably between the two positions. And for Young, the most important element of a review was to identify where the author stood in terms of these two positions.

Today, Young's reviews look very old-fashioned, though one cannot deny his expertise and analytical perception. In the years since the 1960s, it has become more and more difficult to classify works of scholarship in the antithetical pattern of Machen, Van Til, and Young. "Liberal" writings and "orthodox" writings are getting harder and harder to tell apart, and many evidently think that it's something of a waste of time even to make this distinction. Those who come from the liberal traditions of the academic mainstream have (with exceptions, such as the so-called Jesus Seminar) tended to come to more and more conservative conclusions concerning the dates, authorship, and historical accuracy of biblical texts. Those who come from the evangelical traditions, on the other hand, have come more and more to obtain doctorates from institutions in the academic mainstream. They have therefore gotten into the habit of carrying out their scholarship using the methods, and sometimes the assumptions, of that mainstream. So as the two parties have come closer and closer together, there has come about a unity among biblical scholars unprecedented since the 1700s. This is a most remarkable event that has taken place in our time.

As an example, consider the book *The Last Word* by N. T. Wright,⁷ which I recently reviewed in the *Penpoint* newsletter.⁸ The subtitle of the book promises that this book will lead us "beyond the Bible wars to a new understanding of the authority of Scripture." I should mention that the title and subtitle are found in the American edition only, not the original British edition. Evidently, the author or publisher wanted to address battles over biblical inerrancy, which European Christians tend to regard as American and therefore unimportant. In fact, however, the book does not address those issues at all. Rather, Wright provides his readers with a context for biblical authority in which, he thinks, questions about biblical inerrancy and the like do not arise.

Wright is considered conservative in his evaluation of biblical history. He displays no bias against the idea of the miraculous, and elsewhere he has staunchly defended belief in the resurrection of Jesus. He regards the hyperliberal scholarship of the Jesus Seminar with ill-disguised con-

7. N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005). The book was published in Great Britain under the title *Scripture and the Authority of God*, by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

8. *Penpoint* 17, 4 (August 2006). The review is included as Appendix K of the present volume.

tempt. But he does not follow the old American evangelical pattern of declaring Scripture to be inerrant, or of painting a picture of antithesis between belief and unbelief in Scripture. Rather, he gives the impression that those questions don't even arise if we understand Scripture in its proper context.

That context is that of God's own authority. Wright tells us that

the phrase "authority of Scripture" can make Christian sense only if it is shorthand for "the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture."⁹

What is the force of that *through*? How does God exercise his authority through Scripture? God's authority, Wright says, "is his sovereign power accomplishing the renewal of all creation."¹⁰ Scripture is an instrument of that authority. Specifically, Scripture is the story, the narrative, of that sovereign power. So we should not read Scripture as a "list of rules" or a "compendium of true doctrines," although both doctrines and rules can be found in the text.¹¹ Although he does not quite say so, I think that the narrative character of Scripture is what, to his mind, should keep us from raising the kinds of questions distinctive of the Bible wars. He seems to think that as long as we regard Scripture as story or narrative, we don't need to worry about the infallibility of its doctrinal or ethical teaching, much less the inerrancy of its statements on other subjects.

Wright is, of course, not the first scholar to opt for narrative as the basic form of divine revelation in Scripture. The literature advocating "narrative theology" and "story theology" is enormous, and the discussion of it has been going on for several decades.

And we should trace this development back much earlier than the birth of narrative theology in the 1980s. The Ritschlian quest for the historical Jesus sought to turn theology away from a focus on Scripture as an inspired text to a neutral investigation of the history of the origins of Christianity, from which it was thought that value judgments would arise that would guide our theological reflection.

The post-Bultmannian "new quest of the historical Jesus" of Ernst Käsemann, Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling, and others tried to trace the roots of Bultmann's existentialist gospel, somehow, to Jesus. The so-called "third quest" of the 1990s disavowed theological agendas and tried to place Jesus in his Jewish environment. The name of N. T. Wright has

9. Wright, *Last Word*, 23.

10. *Ibid.*, 29.

11. *Ibid.*, 25–26.

been associated with this movement, as well as with the movement of narrative theology.

To go back to the early and middle twentieth century, we should note Karl Barth, who also identified revelation with history of a sort. Barth and his associates despised the Ritschlian program and emphasized that God speaks to us from above, not through our autonomous historical research. But Barth, like Ritschl, denied that revelation was to be identified with the text of Scripture. Rather, in the Barthian circle, as in Ritschl's, revelation was event, a kind of history (a *Geschichte*). I will not try to unpack Barth's difficult concept here, but to summarize, it seems to me that for Barth revelation is the event in which God opens his mouth to speak—as he once put it, *Dei loquentis persona*. What God actually says when he opens his mouth cannot be translated into human words or sentences; these are only pointers to the event of his utterance, a word of power by which he overturns our self-righteousness. Barth did also defend the literal historicity (*historisch*) of some supernatural events, such as the virgin birth and resurrection of Christ, but the relation of these events to our actual salvation was highly obscure. When Barth said that God accomplished our salvation by historical events, he seems to have meant not events that happened in time and space but events within God's own inner life.

The “acts of God” theology of the mid-twentieth century, advocated by G. Ernest Wright and others, also located revelation in history. In Wright's view, the events in question may have been unremarkable in themselves, but they became revelation when interpreted by faith. Wolfhart Pannenberg and his circle criticized this kind of subjectivism, and opted to build faith on the objective foundation of rational historical inquiry, carrying us back, in some respects, to the Ritschlian project.

So we should see narrative theology as one of many attempts to locate God's revelation in historical events. This project is not without a biblical basis. Scripture has much to say about God's mighty acts—his signs and wonders, the events of history by which our salvation comes. These events are revelatory. God says of the events of the exodus that through them “the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD” (Ex. 7:5; cf. v. 17). Similar expressions are found often in Scripture.

But it would be wrong to think that God in Scripture reveals himself *only* in events and actions and not also by words and sentences. James Barr in his 1966 book *Old and New in Interpretation*¹² took his fellow liberals to task for this assumption. As modern men we can, he said, deny the idea

12. James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1966).

of God's speaking to people in authoritative propositions, but we cannot deny that the biblical writers affirmed such a concept. And surely we must be blind indeed not to note that verbal communication from God to human beings is a pervasive biblical theme, from the garden of Eden to the consummation of redemption. Indeed, that verbal revelation often takes written form, as when God writes the Ten Commandments with his own finger (Ex. 31:18).

If we are to deny that this can take place, it can only be because of a general skepticism about the supernatural, which is in the end a skepticism about the reality of God. If we allow the possibility but deny the actuality of such revelation, it can only be because of a general skepticism about the claims of the Bible itself. Neither skepticism is worthy of people who profess to be Christians.

Why, then, has such skepticism come to dominate the supposedly Christian discipline of theology? Certainly, no church council has authorized it. Certainly, there is no argument for it from Scripture or the main body of church tradition. The only explanation that makes any sense is that theologians are no longer willing to think according to biblical and Christian presuppositions. They want, like their colleagues in other fields, to think autonomously or neutrally.

N. T. Wright is not, in my view, a neutralist. He defends biblical supernaturalism, and very effectively. But in his book *The Last Word*, he says nothing about the Bible as a verbal revelation of God. He says that the Bible is a narrative of God's saving power. He also says at one point¹³ that God's providence gathered together the books that belong to our canon. But there are other books that narrate the coming of God's kingdom, some written by Wright himself. And God's providence has placed some of them in my library. Does that make them Scripture? Surely not. To be Scripture, a book must be more than a narrative, and more than a providential collection of books. It must be authored by God, written by God's finger, God-breathed. Of that, Wright tells us nothing, and apparently he hopes the question won't arise, lest we get back into the Bible wars.

I have no nostalgia for the fundamentalist-modernist controversy; indeed, I would prefer that there be as little controversy in the church as possible. But the question of a divinely authored text will not go away. And it remains a major point of dispute between orthodox Christians and the mainstream of biblical and theological scholarship today.

Wright's book, I think, is symptomatic of many titles in theology and biblical studies that seek to avoid, disguise, or suppress the antithesis

13. Wright, *Last Word*, 37.

between Christianity and liberalism. We can be thankful to God for what Wright and others have taught us. In other forums, I would gladly commend Wright's picture of Scripture as a tool of God's advancing kingdom. Those who seek, for example, to avoid the political implications of the gospel need to deal seriously with Wright's model. That model is a necessary one for our understanding of the place of Scripture. But it is not *sufficient*. Scripture is a narrative about God's kingdom, but it is not *merely* that. It is God's own account of that kingdom, and it is that kingdom's written constitution.

It is, therefore, not only narrative. It is also doctrine, the teachings by which God governs his church. The narrative involves the doctrine, and the doctrine involves the narrative. The narrative shows us how God redeems all aspects of human life and rules us through his word, spoken by prophets and apostles, incarnate in Jesus, written in the Bible. The doctrine tells us that we are saved by God through his mighty acts in Christ. Scripture is both situational, telling us about events of history, and normative, ruling our beliefs and our lives.

The situational and normative sides of Scripture are perspectives—ways of looking at Scripture that necessitate and imply one another. Neither can be itself without the other. Those familiar with my writings will expect a third perspective, and I will not disappoint them: Scripture is also existential—a message from God to the human heart.

When Wright expresses reservations about using Scripture as a “court of appeal,” he is questioning the normative perspective. When he criticizes its use as a *lectio divina*,¹⁴ he is questioning the existential perspective. His lack of balance is therefore due in part to monoperspectival thinking.

In any case, the attempt of Wright and many others to isolate the situational perspective and to negate the others is biblically indefensible, and it obscures a crucial antithesis.

There are lessons here also for Reformed people, especially for those who are self-consciously orthodox in their thinking. We have our own reasons for putting much emphasis on the situational perspective, for we of all people want to insist that God saves his people through historical events, most particularly through the incarnation, sacrificial death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus Christ. As with all historical events, these must be seen in the context of other historical events, especially, in this case, the history of God's covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, through the history of Israel. Hence the emphasis in our circles upon redemptive history.¹⁵ We should remember, however, that

14. *Ibid.*, 64–65.

15. A redemptive-historical approach to theology is sometimes called “biblical theology,” but that is a misnomer. All theology is biblical, if it is sound theology.

the best advocates of a redemptive-historical method, such as Vos, Gaffin, Clowney, and Kline (and to an extent Herman Ridderbos), also insist on the normative dimension: we learn of this history through a divinely authored Bible.

For the same reasons, there are dangers in drawing too close a relation between theology and history, as, I believe, Richard Muller does in his *The Study of Theology*.¹⁶ I have also drawn attention to the dangers in approaches to theology that emphasize church history over biblical exegesis.¹⁷ Over the last thirty years it has been common for evangelical and Reformed theologians to earn PhDs in church history or historical theology, for in these disciplines there appear to be fewer conflicts between evangelical convictions and the liberal academic mainstream. This is understandable, and it may be necessary. But in this atmosphere, it is all too easy for young theologians to forget the indispensable normativity of theology. Theology is the discipline of going to the Scriptures and reporting its teaching as a norm, saying, “Thus says the Lord.” One cannot say this in a secular university graduate program without being laughed at. That kind of theology won’t earn you a doctorate. But after the doctorate, it is important for the young theologian to recover his roots and return to the normative exposition of Scripture as the infallible Word of God.

In the past I have often urged Reformed theologians to put more emphasis on the existential perspective—to avoid pseudo-intellectualism and to put a genuinely biblical emphasis on human feelings—the subjective side of knowing God. I still think that, too, is an important need in our circles. But in this paper I am urging that we accentuate the normative. Historically, Reformed theology has had a good record on this score; perhaps it has even been guilty of an overemphasis at times. Some may even think that in this paper I am bringing coals to Newcastle. But today the pendulum has shifted to the point where I sense the need to warn us again to see the vast difference between those who understand Scripture as the Word of God and those who do not.

16. Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991). My review of this book was published in *WTJ* 56, 1 (Spring 1994): 438–42, and is now available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1994Muller.htm and as Appendix C of the present volume.

17. “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism,” *WTJ* 59 (1997): 269–318, also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/Biblicism.htm and as Appendix O of the present volume. Also see my article “Traditionalism and Sola Scriptura,” *Chalcedon Report* (October 2001): 15–19 (November 2001): 434–35, which is available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1999Traditionalism.htm and as Appendix P of the present volume.

I don't want to go back to the days when we spent inordinate amounts of time debating the historicity of every little thing in the Bible. Theology should be focused where the Bible is—on the gospel of Christ. Nor do I want to simply reject scholarship written from a liberal point of view. That scholarship has much to teach us, as even Cornelius Van Til and Edward J. Young knew well. But it is important to draw a line here, and where the line is fuzzy to describe how and why. In assessing a liberal theologian, there should be a point where we say not merely that this or that detail of his thought is false, or that this theme is overemphasized or that theme underemphasized, but that the overall theological method is wrongheaded. We should be gentler, more gracious, and more nuanced in making these judgments than were some of the old fundamentalists. But those judgments must be made. In the end, the doctrine of Scripture creates an antithesis, and we mislead our readers to the extent that we fail to acknowledge it.

And in our own theological work, we should make clear that the Bible is our sole ultimate authority. That is, we should not give the impression that we are merely triangulating—positioning ourselves between Barth over here, Pannenberg over there, perhaps Vos or Ridderbos in some other direction. The theologian, like the preacher, must be willing to say, “Thus says the Lord.” May he give us the perception and the courage to do that, whatever the cost.