



# **SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY**

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
CHRISTIAN BELIEF

**JOHN M. FRAME**

FOREWORD BY J. I. PACKER

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4. The Lord's Covenants
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31. Justifying Claims to Knowledge
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**JOHN M. FRAME**

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
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**To the Next Generation**

Adam  
Amanda  
Gavin  
Kristina  
Malena  
Olivia  
Rebecca  
And those yet unborn

And to Carol  
*NKwagala nnyo!*

# ABBREVIATIONS

AGG	John M. Frame, <i>Apologetics to the Glory of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994)
ASV	American Standard Version
BRD	Herman Bavinck, <i>Reformed Dogmatics</i> , 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–8)
CD	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936–62)
CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
CVT	John M. Frame, <i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995)
CWM	John M. Frame, <i>Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997)
DCL	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Christian Life</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008)
DG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002)
DKG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987)
DWG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Word of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010)
ER	John M. Frame, <i>Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the One Body of Christ</i> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); available at <a href="http://www.frame-poythress.org">http://www.frame-poythress.org</a> ; <a href="http://www.evangelicalreunion.org">http://www.evangelicalreunion.org</a>
ESV	English Standard Version
GST	Wayne Grudem, <i>Systematic Theology</i> (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994)
HC	Heidelberg Catechism
<i>Institutes</i>	John Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i>

IRF	John M. Frame, "Introduction to the Reformed Faith," available at <a href="http://www.frame-poythress.org">http://www.frame-poythress.org</a>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
KJV	King James Version
LXX	The Septuagint, early Greek translation of the OT, sometimes quoted in the NT
MCW	<i>Collected Writings of John Murray</i> , 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977)
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NOG	John M. Frame, <i>No Other God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001)
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
PP	John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism," available at <a href="http://www.frame-poythress.org">http://www.frame-poythress.org</a>
PWG	John M. Frame, <i>Perspectives on the Word of God</i> (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000)
RD	Heinrich Heppe, <i>Reformed Dogmatics</i> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950, 1978)
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBL	John M. Frame, <i>Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006)
SCG	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa contra Gentiles</i>
ST	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologiae</i>
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith (Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, Presbyterian Church in America, 1986); published together with the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC), the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC), and proof texts
WST	John M. Frame, <i>Worship in Spirit and Truth</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996)
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

## WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

THEOLOGY IS FULL of definitions of things. One of the useful features of a systematic theology is that you can turn there and get quick definitions of terms such as *justification*, *glorification*, or *hypostatic union*. Definitions are useful, but we should be warned that they are rarely, if ever, found in Scripture itself.<sup>1</sup> Such definitions are themselves theology in that they are the work of human beings trying to understand Scripture. This work is fallible, and theological definitions are almost never adequate in themselves to describe the complex ways in which language is used in the Bible. For example, when John speaks of those who “believed” in Jesus in John 8:31, he is not using the term in any of the classical theological definitions of *belief* or *faith*. You can tell, because in verse 44 Jesus tells them, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires.”

This reminder is especially appropriate when we are defining terms that are not explicitly found in Scripture itself. *Theology* itself is one of these. Theologians have developed a number of terms and concepts that are absent from Scripture itself, such as *Trinity*, *substance*, *person*, *nature*, *aseity*, *inerrancy*, *effectual calling*. There is nothing wrong with inventing new terms in order to better communicate biblical teaching. Indeed, this happens on a grand scale whenever the Bible is translated into a new language. When people first translated the Bible into French, German, English, and other languages, each time they had to come up with a whole set of new terms for everything in the Bible. From this fact, we can see that the line between translation and theology is not sharp.

Theologians came up with the term *effectual calling* to distinguish one biblical use of the term *calling* from others. Effectual calling is God’s sovereign summons that actually draws a person into union with Christ. But this is not the only kind of calling mentioned in Scripture. *Calling* can also refer to a name-giving, or an invitation, or a request for someone’s attention. So the term *effectual calling* isolates a particular

1. A few Bible passages come close to defining something, such as 1 John 3:4 (sin); 1 John 4:10 (God’s love). But are these definitions, or only contextually significant descriptions? Of course, the precise distinction between definition and description is not always clear.



biblical concept, distinguishing it from others. We see again, then, how making a definition is itself a theological task. It can help us to understand something of the teaching of Scripture.

Definitions, then, can be helpful teaching tools. But we should not look at them to find what something “really is,” as though a definition gave us unique insight into the nature of something beyond what we could find in the Bible itself. A theological definition of *omniscience* doesn’t tell you what omniscience really is, as if the biblical descriptions of God’s knowledge were somehow inadequate, even misleading or untrue. Even though there are none to few definitions in the Bible, Scripture, not any theological definition, is our ultimate authority. Theological definitions must measure up to Scripture, not the other way around.

Nor should we assume that there is only one possible definition of something. *Sin* can be defined as (1) transgression of God’s law or as (2) rebellion against God’s lordship. Other definitions, too, may be possible, but let’s just consider these. Of course, if you define sin as transgression of God’s law, you may well need to make it clear that such transgression constitutes rebellion. And if you define it as rebellion, eventually you will probably need to say that the rebellion in question is a rejection of a divine law. You may use either definition as long as you understand that each implies the other. You may choose either one as your definition, as long as you recognize the other as a description.

So of course, definitions are not something to live or die for. We should seek to understand the definitions of various writers, recognizing that someone who uses a different definition from ours might not differ with us at all on the substantive doctrine.

## Long and Short Definitions

Theologians often prefer very long definitions. One of Karl Barth’s definitions of *theology* is an example:

Theology is science seeking the knowledge of the Word of God spoken in God’s work—science learning in the school of the Holy Scripture, which witnesses to the Word of God; science labouring in the quest for truth, which is inescapably required of the community that is called by the Word of God.<sup>2</sup>

Here Barth tries to bring a large amount of theological content into his definition. This attempt is understandable, since every theologian wants his concept of theology to be governed by the content of theology. So he tries to show how the very definition of theology reflects the nature of the gospel, the content of Scripture, the preeminence of Christ, the nature of redemption, and so on.

2. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 49–50. He uses a somewhat shorter definition in *CD* for the related concept *dogmatics*: “As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God.” *CD*, 1.1:4.

I think this is a mistake. In his *Semantics of Biblical Language*,<sup>3</sup> James Barr warned biblical scholars of the fallacy of supposing that the meanings of biblical terms were loaded with theological content. The meaning of Scripture comes not from its individual terms, but from its sentences, paragraphs, books, and larger units. For example, the word *created*, just by itself, out of all context, teaches us nothing. But “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1) teaches us a great deal. “By him all things were created” (Col. 1:16) teaches us even more.

The same warning is appropriate for theologians. Certainly our theological methods and conclusions must be derived from God’s revelation. But our definition of the word *theology* need not recapitulate those conclusions, though it must certainly be consistent with its conclusions. That is, the definition of *theology* cannot be a condensation of all the content of the Scriptures. Yet it must describe an activity that the Scriptures warrant.

## Theology as Application

Let us then attempt to develop a concept or definition of theology.<sup>4</sup> The basic idea of theology is evident in the etymology of the term: a study of God. But we should seek a more precise definition.

As I will argue in chapters 23–28, in Christianity the study of God is a study of God’s revelation of himself. Natural revelation and word revelation illumine one another. Scripture (our currently available form of word revelation) is crucial to the task of theology because as a source of divine words it is sufficient for human life (2 Tim. 3:16–17), and it has a kind of clarity not found in natural revelation. But natural revelation is a necessary means of interpreting Scripture. To properly understand Scripture, we need to know something about ancient languages and culture, and that information is not always available in Scripture alone. Nevertheless, once we have reached a settled interpretation as to what Scripture says, that knowledge takes precedence over any ideas supposedly derived from natural revelation.

So theology must be essentially a study of Scripture. It should not be defined as an analysis of human religious consciousness or feelings, as in the view of Friedrich Schleiermacher.<sup>5</sup> But we need to ask *how* theology is to study Scripture. Theology is not interested in finding the middle word in the Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes, for example.

Charles Hodge saw theology as a science that dealt with the facts of Scripture, as an astronomer deals with facts about the heavenly bodies or a geologist deals with facts about rocks. He said that theology “is the exhibition of the facts of Scripture in their proper order and relation, with the principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves, and which pervade and harmonize the whole.”<sup>6</sup> If Schleiermacher’s concept of theology is *subjectivist*, Hodge’s might be called *objectivist*. Schleiermacher

3. James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 129–40, 246–96.

4. In all the discussion below, it should be evident that the term *theology* refers both to the activity of seeking knowledge and to the texts in which that knowledge is recorded.

5. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Harper, 1963).

6. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1:19.

looked inward, Hodge outward. Schleiermacher looked primarily at subjective feelings, Hodge at objective facts. To Hodge, theology seeks the objective truth about God through Scripture. He wants the “facts” and the “truths.”

Certainly Hodge’s definition of theology is better than Schleiermacher’s, because Hodge’s is Bible-centered. But Hodge, like many orthodox evangelical theologians, leaves us confused about an important question: why do we need theology when we have Scripture?

Scripture itself, given Hodge’s own view of Scripture, tells us objective truth about God. We don’t need a theological science to give us that truth. So what is the role of theology?

In the statement quoted above, Hodge says that theology is an “exhibition of the facts of Scripture.” But aren’t the facts of Scripture already exhibited in the biblical text itself?

He further says that theology exhibits these facts “in their proper order and relation.” This sounds a bit as though the order and relation of the facts in Scripture itself are somehow improper, and that theology has to put them back where they belong. People sometimes talk about the theological “system” of biblical doctrine as if that system stated the truth in a better way than Scripture itself, or even as if that system were the real meaning of Scripture hidden beneath all the stories, psalms, wisdom sayings, and so on. I don’t think Hodge had anything like this in mind; such ideas are inconsistent with Hodge’s high view of Scripture. But his phrase “proper order and relation” doesn’t guard well against such notions. And in any case, it leaves unclear the relation between theology and Scripture.

He continues by saying that theology, together with its work of putting the facts of Scripture into proper order and relation, seeks to state “the principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves, and which pervade and harmonize the whole.” Certainly this is one of the things that theologians do, and ought to do. But again we ask: hasn’t Scripture done this already? And if it has, then what is left for theology to do?

In seeking a definition of theology, we need to emphasize not only its continuity with Scripture, but its discontinuity, too. The former is not difficult for orthodox Protestants: theology must be in accord with Scripture. But the latter is more difficult to formulate. Obviously, theology is something different from Scripture. It doesn’t just repeat the words of Scripture. So the main question about theology is this: what is the *difference* between theology and Scripture, and how can that difference be justified?

Evidently the theologian *restates* the facts and general truths of Scripture, for some purpose. But for what purpose? Hodge does not tell us.

In my view, the only possible answer is this: the theologian states the facts and truths of Scripture for the purpose of *edification*. Those truths are stated not for their own sake, but to build up people in Christian faith.

In this way, we align the concept of theology with the concepts of teaching and preaching in the NT. The terms for *teaching*—*didasko*, *didache*, and *didaskalia*<sup>7</sup>—refer not to the stating of objective truth for its own sake, but to the exposition of God’s truth in order to build up God’s people. Consider Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 14:6; 1 Tim. 1:10; 2:7; 4:6, 16; 6:3–4; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9; 2 John 9. These passages contain words of the *didasko* group, translated “teacher,” “teaching,” “doctrine.” Notice the frequent emphasis in these passages that teaching has the purpose of building people up in faith and obedience to God. Notice also the phrase *sound doctrine*, in which *sound* is *hygiainos*, “health-giving.” The purpose of teaching is not merely to state the objective truth, but to bring the people to a state of spiritual health.

In defining theology, it is not strictly necessary to align it with a single biblical term, but it is certainly an advantage when we can do this. I propose that we define theology as synonymous with the biblical concept of teaching, with all its emphasis on edification.

So theology is not subjective in Schleiermacher’s sense, but it has a subjective thrust. We need theology in addition to Scripture because God has authorized teaching in the church, and because we need that teaching to mature in the faith. Why did Hodge not state this as the reason we need theology? Perhaps he wanted to encourage respect for academic theological work, so he stressed its objective scientific character. Perhaps he was worried that reference to our subjective edification would encourage the disciples of Schleiermacher. But such considerations are inadequate to justify a definition of theology. Scripture must be decisive even here, and Scripture commends to us a kind of teaching that has people’s needs in mind.

Theology, on this basis, responds to the needs of people. It helps those who have questions about, doubts about, or problems with the Bible. Normally we associate theology with questions of a fairly abstract or academic sort: How can God be one in three? How can Christ be both divine and human? Does regeneration precede faith? But of course, there are other kinds of questions as well. One might be confronted with a Hebrew word, say *dabar*, and ask what it means. Or he might ask the meaning of a Bible verse, say Genesis 1:1. A child might ask whether God can see what we are doing when Mom isn’t watching. I see no reason to doubt that all these sorts of questions are proper subject matter for theology.

Nor would it be wrong to say that theology occurs in the *lives* of people, in their behavior, as well as in their speech. Behavior consists of a series of human decisions, and in those decisions believers seek to follow Scripture. Behavior, too, as well as speech, can be edifying or unedifying. Example is an important form of teaching. Imitating godly people is an important form of Christian learning, and the behavior of these people is often a revelation to us of God’s intentions for us (1 Cor. 11:1). Their application of the Word in their behavior may be called theology. So theology is not merely a means of teaching people how to live; it is life itself.<sup>8</sup>

7. *Didaskalia* is translated “doctrine” in 1 Timothy 1:10; 4:6; Titus 1:9; 2:1. Of course, we today often use *doctrine* as a synonym for *theology*.

8. Another way of bringing out the practicality of theology is to note that the term has often been used (by Abraham Kuyper, for example) to denote the *knowledge* of God that believers receive by saving grace, as in John

There really is no justification for restricting theology only to academic or technical questions. (*How academic? How technical?*) If theology is edifying teaching, theologians need to listen to everybody's questions. My point, however, is not to divert theology from theoretical to practical questions, or to disparage in any way the theoretical work of academic theologians. But I do think that academic and technical theology should not be valued over other kinds. The professor of theology at a university or seminary is no more or less a theologian than the youth minister who seeks to deal with the doubts of college students, or the Sunday school teacher who tells OT stories to children, or the father who leads family devotions, or the person who does not teach in any obvious way but simply tries to obey Scripture. Theoretical and practical questions are equally grist for the theologian's mill.

The only term I know that is broad enough to cover all forms of biblical teaching and all the decisions that people make in their lives is the term *application*. To apply Scripture is to use Scripture to meet a human need, to answer a human question, to make a human decision. Questions about the text of Scripture, translations, interpretation, ethics, Christian growth—all these are fair game for theology. To show (by word or deed) how Scripture resolves all these kinds of questions is to *apply* it. So I offer my definition of theology: theology is *the application of Scripture, by persons, to every area of life*.<sup>9</sup>

Why, then, do we need theology in addition to Scripture? The only answer, I believe, is “because we need to apply Scripture to life.”

## Kinds of Theology

Traditionally, theology has been divided into different types. *Exegetical*<sup>10</sup> theology is interpreting the Bible verse by verse. That is application, because it aims to help people understand particular passages in Scripture. *Biblical* theology expounds Scripture as a history of God's dealings with us. It therefore focuses on Scripture as historical narrative. But if it is theology, it cannot be pure narrative. It must be application, dealing with the meaning<sup>11</sup> that narrative has for its hearers and readers.

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17:3. The early pages of John Calvin's *Institutes* discuss this saving knowledge of God in Christ. On the first page Calvin says that we cannot rightly know ourselves without knowing God, and vice versa. On this concept of theology, see *SBL*, 73–78.

9. Later, I will indicate three perspectives that we can bring to bear on many theological questions. In my definition of theology, those three perspectives are Scripture (normative), persons (existential), areas of life (situational). So my definition of theology contains these three elements.

10. *Exegetical*, *biblical*, and *systematic* theology are all misnomers. Exegetical theology is not more exegetical than the others, nor is biblical theology more biblical, nor is systematic theology necessarily more systematic.

11. *Meaning* is not something different from application. See my discussion in *DKG*, 83–84, 97–98. When someone asks, “What is the meaning of this passage?” he may be asking for a number of things, including (1) a translation into his language, (2) an explanation of its function in its immediate context or in the whole Bible, and (3) help in the personal appropriation of its teaching (what does it mean *to me*?). These forms of meaning are also forms of application, so the two terms cover the same ground. It is therefore misleading for someone to claim that items 1 and 2 represent meaning, but 3 is merely application. All of these are questions about meaning and also about application. All questions about meaning are questions about application, and vice versa.

*Systematic* theology seeks to apply Scripture by asking what the *whole* Bible teaches about any subject. For example, it examines what David said about the forgiveness of sins, and Jesus, and Paul, and John, and tries to understand what it all adds up to. Another way of putting it is to say that systematic theology seeks to determine what *we today* should believe about forgiveness (or any other scriptural teaching). Seen that way, systematic theology is a highly practical discipline, not abstract and arcane as it is often presented.

Sometimes systematic theologians have produced systems of theology—comprehensive attempts to summarize, analyze, and defend biblical teaching as a whole. When a writer calls his book a systematic theology, a dogmatics, a body of divinity, or a *summa*, we can expect to find in that book such a system. The present volume is that sort of book. But: (1) We should not imagine that any such system is the true meaning of Scripture, lurking, as it were, beneath the text. At best, the system is a summary of Scripture, but Scripture itself (in all its narratives, wisdom deliverances, songs, parables, letters, visions) is our true authority, the true Word of God. (2) This kind of comprehensive system-making is not the only legitimate form of systematic theology. Systematics is equally interested in studies of individual doctrines and answers to individual questions.

*Historical* theology is the analysis of past theological work. It is truly theology when it does this study in order to better apply biblical teaching to the church of the present day. Without this goal, it is something less than theology, a mere academic discipline among others. I define historical theology as a study of the church's past theology, for the sake of its present and future.

*Practical* theology is, in my understanding, a department of systematic theology. It asks a particular question of Scripture, among the other questions of systematics. That question is: how should we *communicate* the Word of God? Thus, it deals with preaching, teaching, evangelism, church-planting, missions, media communications, and so on.

## Theological Method

In *DKG* I discussed many aspects of theological method. Here I want to make only a single point, that theology should be Bible-centered. That is obvious, given the definition of theology that I have presented. If we are to apply the Bible, we must be in constant conversation with the Bible. If we are to argue adequately for a theological view, we must be able to show the biblical basis of that view.

There are, of course, many auxiliary disciplines that aid the work of theology. God's revelation in creation illumines Scripture, as well as the reverse. So to do theology well, we need to have some knowledge from extrabiblical sources: knowledge of ancient languages and culture, knowledge of how past theologians have dealt with issues. The creeds and confessions of the church are especially important theological sources because they reflect important official agreements on doctrinal issues. It is also useful for a theologian to know the various alternatives available in the theological literature of the present and for us to have some knowledge of secular disciplines, such as



psychology, sociology, politics, economics, philosophy, literary criticism, and the natural sciences. Some of these aid us directly in the interpretation of Scripture. Others help us to understand the contemporary situations to which we intend to apply Scripture.

I think, however, that theology today has become preoccupied with these auxiliary disciplines to the extent of neglecting its primary responsibility: to apply Scripture itself. Theological literature today is focused, especially, on history of doctrine and contemporary thought. Often this literature deals with theological questions by comparing various thinkers from the past and from the present, with a very minimal interaction with Scripture itself.

I cannot help but mention my conviction that this problem is partly the result of our present system for training theologians. To qualify for college or seminary positions, a theologian must earn a Ph.D., ideally from a prestigious liberal university.<sup>12</sup> But at such schools, there is no training in the kind of systematic theology that I describe here. Liberal university theologians do not view Scripture as God's Word, and so they cannot encourage theology as I have defined it, the application of God's infallible Word. For them, one cannot be a respectable scholar unless he thinks autonomously, that is, rejecting the supreme authority of Scripture.

When I studied at Yale in the mid-1960s, *systematic theology* was defined as a historical study of theology since Schleiermacher. (Theology before Schleiermacher was called *history of doctrine*.) In such a school, systematics was a descriptive, not a normative, discipline. It set forth what people have thought about God, not what we *ought* to think about God. Of course, some normative content seeped through: not the normative content of Scripture, but normative content that emerged from the modern mind, from an autonomous rejection of the supreme authority of Scripture.

Students are welcome at such schools to study historical and contemporary theology, and to relate these to auxiliary disciplines such as philosophy and literary criticism. But they are not taught to seek ways of applying Scripture for the edification of God's people. Rather, professors encourage each student to be "up to date" with the current academic discussion and to make "original contributions" to that discussion, out of his autonomous reasoning. So when the theologian finishes his graduate work and moves to a teaching position, even if he is personally evangelical in his convictions, he often writes and teaches as he was encouraged to do in graduate school: academic comparisons and contrasts between this thinker and that, minimal interaction with Scripture itself. In my judgment, this is entirely inadequate for the needs of the church. It is one source of the doctrinal declension of evangelical churches, colleges, and seminaries in our day. Evangelical denominations and schools need to seek new methods of training people to teach theology, educational models that will force theologian candidates to mine Scripture for edifying content. To do this, they may need to cut themselves off, in

12. Full disclosure: I do not have an earned doctorate. I completed all requirements for the Ph.D. at Yale University except for the dissertation. In 2003 I received an honorary D.D. degree from Belhaven College. So critics are welcome to dismiss my comments here as sour grapes if they prefer. I trust that other readers will respond in a less *ad hominem* fashion.

some degree, from the present-day academic establishment. And to do that, they may have to cut themselves off from the present-day accreditation system, which seeks to make theological seminaries conform more and more to the standards of the secular academic establishment.

It is good for readers of theology to know what Augustine thought about a particular issue, or Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, or someone else. And it is often interesting to see how a theologian “triangulates” among these, going beyond Barth here, avoiding the extreme of Pannenberg there.

But no theological proposal fully makes its case until it shows itself to be biblical. This means that any theologian worth his salt must interact in depth with the Bible. Such interaction is not only the work of biblical scholars or of exegetical theologians. It is the work of systematic theologians as well. In fact, the systematic theologian, since he aspires to synthesize the teaching of the *whole* Bible, must spend more time with Scripture than anybody else.<sup>13</sup>

The application of Scripture is a very distinctive discipline. Although it depends to some extent on the auxiliary disciplines that I have listed, none of them has the distinct purpose of applying Scripture to the edification of people. To carry out that purpose requires not only academic excellence, but a heart-knowledge of Jesus, a prayerful spirit, and an understanding of the needs of people.

This present volume of systematic theology will be focused on Scripture, not on history of doctrine or contemporary theology. Of course, nobody should suppose that the ideas in this book appeared out of nowhere, with no historical context. My own confession is Reformed, and this book will certainly reflect that orientation, though I hope herein to reach out to members of other doctrinal traditions. And from time to time I will refer to secular and liberal thinkers of the past and present. But my chief interest is to state what the Bible says, that is, what it says to us.

I have no objection to theologians who want to include in their work a larger component of historical and contemporary discussion. As I said before, that is historical theology, and that discipline is often a great help to systematics. I do object to theologies in which the historical emphasis detracts from an adequate biblical focus. I question whether it is possible to do an excellent job of combining a systematic theology with a history of doctrine, though many have tried to do it. Certainly I am not competent to do it. So although I will rely on past and contemporary thinkers at many points, I will not devote much time here to expounding their views.

To say that this book is exegetical is not to say that it focuses on new exegetical ideas. For the most part, I am sticking to interpretations of Scripture that are fairly obvious and commonplace. Reformed *doctrine* has traditionally been based on the main principles of Scripture, not individual verses alone. Although new interpretations of

13. John Murray's lectures in systematic theology consist almost entirely of the exegesis of biblical passages that establish Reformed doctrines. He explains his method in his important article "Systematic Theology," in *MCW*, 4:1–21.



verses appear from time to time, this process of change in exegetical theology generally does not lead to change in the church's doctrines. Further, I think the church's problems today are not usually problems that can be solved by novel interpretations of this or that passage. Our theological problems usually arise from our failure to note what is obvious.

## Key Terms

*Note: Key terms are listed in the approximate order in which they are treated in the text of each chapter.*

Definition  
Theology (Barth)  
Theology (Schleiermacher)  
Theology (Hodge)  
Theology (Frame)  
Edification  
Application  
Exegetical theology  
Biblical theology  
Systematic theology  
Historical theology  
Practical theology  
Meaning

## Study Questions

1. "Definitions are themselves theology." Explain; evaluate.
2. Is it wrong to develop theological terminology not found in Scripture itself? Why or why not?
3. "Nor should we assume that there is only one possible definition of something." Why shouldn't we assume this? Give an example of a term that may be defined in more than one way.
4. "The definition of *theology* cannot be a condensation of all the content of the Scriptures." Explain; evaluate.
5. "But Hodge, like many orthodox evangelical theologians, leaves us confused about an important question." What question? How does Frame answer it? How do you think we should answer that question?
6. What are the advantages in defining theology by reference to the *didasko* word-group of the NT? Do you see any disadvantages?
7. Frame believes that "theology today has become preoccupied by these auxiliary disciplines to the extent of neglecting its primary responsibility." What is that primary responsibility? What have recent theologians substituted for that primary

responsibility? How is this problem related to the current methods of training theologians? How is it related to the nature of seminary accreditation?

## Memory Verses

**Ps. 34:11:** Come, O children, listen to me;  
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

**1 Cor. 11:1:** Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

**1 Tim. 4:6:** If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.

**2 Tim. 2:1–2:** You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

## Resources for Further Study

In addition to the specific suggestions that I make at the end of each chapter, it will be valuable for the student to compare the discussions here with those of other systematic theologies, such as those of Charles Hodge, Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkhof, Wayne Grudem, Robert Reymond, Douglas Kelly, and Richard Gamble.

Ames, William. *The Marrow of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997. Influential Puritan work on the basics of theology. He defines theology as “the science of living before God.”

Calvin, John. *Institutes*. This is the most influential theological text of the Reformed tradition, and an admirable example of *theology as application*. Calvin referred to this volume as his *Summa Pietatis*, “summary of piety.” Cf. Aquinas’s *ST* and *SCG*.

Frame, John M. *DKG*, 76–85, 206–14.

Murray, John. “Systematic Theology,” in *MCW*, 4:1–21.

## THE LORD'S COVENANTS

IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, or any other kind of theology, context is vitally important. Systematic theology, in a study of some topic (such as Jesus' humanity, or the believer's adoption), might gather together the teaching of many Bible passages, scattered through all parts of Scripture: one text from Deuteronomy, one from 2 Kings, one from Psalm 34, one from Ephesians. This procedure is sometimes called *proof-texting*, and it is often criticized for its failure to take the contexts of the passages adequately into account. I think proof-texting, taken in itself, is a perfectly legitimate procedure. The Westminster Assembly developed proof texts for its confession and catechisms. Their purpose was to give to their readers some idea of where in the Bible their formulations came from. That is perfectly right. Anyone who seeks to validate a theological idea must be willing to show where his idea comes from in Scripture. Of course, there is always the danger that a theologian will misuse a text when he makes it a proof text. But that danger is vitiated when the writer is able to analyze the texts he appeals to, rather than merely cite them. So systematic theologians, and occasionally confessional documents, do present exegesis of many of their proof texts, seeking to set forth their meaning in their contexts.

Note that I said *contexts*, not *context*. Each particular verse of Scripture has many contexts: the verses on either side, the book it is part of, the section of Scripture in which it is found, other passages dealing with the same topic, other books by the same author, other books (even extrabiblical books) of the same genre, other writings that come from the same setting. In the end, however, the most important context of any verse is the Bible as a whole. Every theologian writes out of a general perspective, an idea of the purpose and thrust of the Scripture as a whole. So in this part of the book, I will try to indicate the type of Book that Scripture is, and its overall message.

### Genres of Biblical Literature

As a whole, the Bible is not an example of any *genre* of literature. It is *sui generis*. It does contain literature that is like literature outside the Bible: hymns, wisdom, narratives, letters, apocalyptic. But no other book includes all of these in one volume,

written over many centuries, understood to be the Word of God. And the portions of Scripture that fall into various genres are unique within those genres.

The narratives have the purpose not merely of recording facts or interpreting events, but of telling what the unique, true God has done. And these stories are also unique in that they are situated in real calendar time and geographic places. There are, to be sure, other stories from the ancient world of gods' interacting with human beings. These are myths, stories without date and time that make no historical claim but try to convey a moral lesson. But the biblical narratives present the actions of one absolute personal being who acts in real times and places, just as historical as Nebuchadnezzar and Augustus Caesar. They are not myth.<sup>1</sup>

But they are not merely history either, as we usually think of it. Their purpose is not merely to describe and interpret world events. Rather, they tell us what God has done. And they tell us this not from a merely human point of view, but from God's own point of view. And they tell us these events not only because of their world-historical importance, but for the sake of our salvation, to restore our own fellowship with God.

No other religion contains narrative like this, unless (such as Judaism, Islam, and some others) it is deeply influenced by the Bible. Religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism do not depend on historical events. There are stories about the Buddha, especially about his enlightenment. But for a Buddhist, these stories are not the heart of his religion. For him, the heart of Buddhism is a series of eternal truths (e.g., life is suffering) that would be true even if the Buddha had never lived. But Christianity depends on historical events: God's dealings with Israel, the incarnation of Christ, his atonement, resurrection, and ascension. If Jesus is not risen from the dead, says Paul, our faith is "futile" (1 Cor. 15:17).

So even though Scripture contains narrative that is in some ways like extrabiblical narrative, it is a unique narrative. We may not interpret it merely by applying the rules we use for other examples of the narrative genre.

The same is true for other genres of literature in Scripture. The Psalms are songs, but unique songs, songs that narrate God's history, songs that express praise, lament, joy, peace, in our relationship with God. Biblical wisdom literature is like extrabiblical wisdom literature, but it calls us to trust in God and not in our own understanding (Prov. 3:5–6). Psalms and wisdom are indeed words of the true God, to be integrated into our hearts and lives. The letters of the apostles, too, are not like other letters. They, too, are the very Word of God (1 Cor. 14:37–38).

The fact that Scripture is the Word of the only true God, a fact that we will dwell on at a later point (chapters 23–28), sets it apart from all other books, even books considered holy by other religions. The uniqueness of God dictates the uniqueness of

1. There are in Scripture, to be sure, narratives that are not situated in specific times and places, such as Jesus' parables. The purpose of a parable is not to tell what really happened, but to set forth a scenario for purposes of moral and spiritual instruction. But we should heed Peter, who affirms in 2 Peter 1:16 that in the apostolic testimony about Jesus, "we did not follow cleverly devised myths."

Scripture. This fact defines Scripture as a unique genre, and all parts of it as unique within their genres. We can learn some things about how to interpret Scripture from interpreting other literature. But interpreting Scripture will never be entirely like interpreting anything else.

## **Narrative and Worldview**

And Scripture is not only a set of unique literary genres. It also sets forth a unique message. That message includes a historical narrative, as we have seen, set amid songs, wisdom, prophecy, letters, and apocalyptic. But it also includes a general view of the world, a general ontology presupposed in all its other contents. That view, as we saw in chapters 2–3, presents God as Lord of all creation, controlling all things, exercising ultimate authority, and dwelling with his creation. He is absolute, tripersonal, transcendent, immanent, Creator. This worldview is the setting for the story, and the story makes no sense if readers try to place it within a different worldview.

Many writers today hold to views of transcendence and immanence, for example, that contradict the views of Scripture. As we saw in chapter 3, this unbiblical ontology has epistemological implications: the unbiblical form of transcendence leads to epistemological irrationalism, and the unbiblical form of immanence leads to rationalism. But it is plain in the biblical narrative that, contrary to irrationalism, God and his truth can be known, for he has revealed himself clearly to us (Rom. 1:19–20). And contrary to rationalism, autonomous reasoning is foolishness (Prov. 3:5–8; 1 Cor. 1:20–30). If we approach the Bible with an autonomous epistemology, we will not be able to make sense of it. Rationalism will twist it into something that satisfies the ego of human beings. Irrationalism will remove its challenge to our sinful hearts.

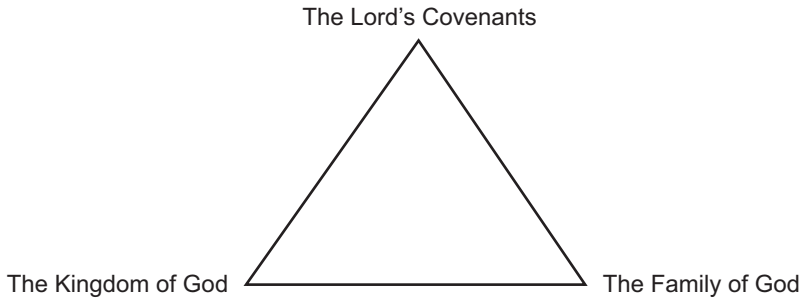
Since the mid-1600s, many biblical scholars, theologians, and philosophers have tried to force the Bible into a mold that can be accommodated to autonomous reasoning. Typically, that has led to a denial of miracles and the supernatural.<sup>2</sup> One who reasons autonomously cannot accept the supernatural; but one who accepts God as Lord over his creation cannot argue against it, for if this world is God's, he can do whatever he wants with it and in it. In fact, the Bible is supernatural through and through: not only in its miracle stories, but in everything it says about God's acts in history for our salvation. God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt was a supernatural act, as were the incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

It is not possible to expound the narrative of redemptive history as it really happened, without the worldview that history presupposes. But once we have embraced that worldview, we see the redemptive story as credible, though still wonderful. And

2. By "supernatural" events here I am referring to acts of God in the natural world and in human history. I do not define supernatural or miraculous events as "exceptions to natural law," as has often been done both in Christian and in non-Christian thought. See my discussion of miracle in chapters 7 and 8.

when we see the redemptive story for what it is, we can see that it could happen only in a world where God is Lord.<sup>3</sup>

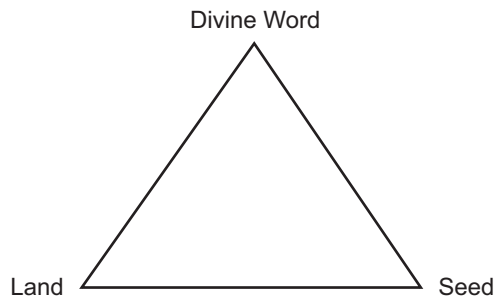
Now, I think the biblical story can be usefully expounded in three perspectives: the Lord's covenants (normative), the kingdom of God (situational), and the family of God (existential); see fig. 4.1.



**Fig. 4.1. Three Central Biblical Themes**

In this chapter, we will consider the normative perspective: the biblical story as a succession of covenants between God and his creatures. Under this perspective, the biblical story is a story of God's making covenants and the outworking of those covenants in history.

In this chapter, I will summarize the history of these covenants, focusing particularly on three themes: (1) the relationship in these covenants between God's sovereignty and our obedience, (2) the individualism and universality of the covenants, and (3) the triad of divine word (normative), land (situational), and seed (existential).<sup>4</sup> See fig. 4.2.



**Fig. 4.2. The Eternal Covenant of Redemption**

3. I resist, therefore, the movement that would confine theological discussion to "redemptive history" and leave worldview aside. Certainly Scripture is more like a history than like a philosophical metaphysics. But the metaphysics, ontology, or worldview is the setting in which the history takes place, and it is essential to rightly understanding the history.

4. This triad corresponds somewhat to the covenant-kingdom-family triad.

## The Eternal Covenant of Redemption

The events of the biblical story do not begin in history, or even with God's first act of creation in Genesis 1:1. Other passages tell us things that happened before<sup>5</sup> that creative act. So the story of Scripture begins with God existing in the eternal, glorious fellowship of the Holy Trinity (John 17:5).

I will later discuss the actions that God performs in eternity, what we call his *eternal decrees* (chapter 11). Every event in history is something that God has planned, and the planning goes back to eternity. For now I am particularly interested in one particular decree, the agreement between the Father and the Son, often called the *covenant*<sup>6</sup> of redemption, or in Latin the *pactum salutis*. In this covenant, before the world was even made, God the Father gave a people to his Son, chosen "in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). It was then that "he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will" (v. 5; cf. John 10:29; 17:6).

The Holy Spirit is also a party to this agreement, for the Father and the Son (John 15:26; Rom. 1:4) agreed to send the Spirit into the world to bear witness of Christ, to teach people about him (John 14:26), and to declare to them things to come (John 16:13). The Spirit will be the Author of regeneration (John 3:5; Rom. 2:29), who sets God's people free from sin (Rom. 8:2). (See chapters 39–45.) All the Spirit does for God's people was planned before the foundation of the world.

The Bible, then, is the story of how God seeks these people (John 4:23), to make them his Son's prized possession. Mysteriously, God's story also includes the fall of man into sin. So God's work to bring his people to his Son is a redemption, a reconciliation between sinners and himself. From eternity, God reaches into time to redeem them, even after they have rebelled against him and lost all claim to his eternal blessings (see Rom. 5:8). In this way, God glorifies his lordship in our salvation.

Now I will expand the three themes that I distinguished earlier in this chapter as pertaining to all the covenants, as they apply to the *pactum salutis*:

1. *Sovereignty and Obedience*: As a covenant, the *pactum* is verbal, a word of God, a communication between the members of the Trinity that they all affirm. The Son and Spirit willingly accept their servant role. So even though their activity is eternally

5. Since, as I believe, time itself is a created thing, then, strictly speaking, there were no temporal categories "before" the creation: no before, no after, no simultaneity. But the expression *before creation* has often served theologians (and biblical writers, too, as John 17:5) in their attempts to locate the eternal life of God. We should remember, though, that God's eternal intra-Trinitarian life continues after creation, throughout creation, and into eternity future. It might be more precise (though still figurative) to say that God's eternal actions take place *above* time, rather than before, during, or after it. See chapter 17 for further discussion of these matters.

6. The term *covenant* usually refers to an agreement between a superior and an inferior, between a lord and a servant. Hence documents of covenant agreement are often called *suzerainty treaties*. But there are also *parity covenants*, covenants between equals, as between Laban and Jacob in Genesis 31:44. In the eternal fellowship of the Trinity, the Father and the Son are equals, and in that sense the *pactum salutis* is a parity covenant. But we should remember that part of the content of this covenant is that the Son accepts the role of a servant. So there is here something analogous to the lord-servant covenants that predominate in Scripture. Indeed, the lord-servant relation of the *pactum* is the eternal model for the suzerainty covenants that God makes in history. Jesus is the Servant of the Lord prophesied in Isaiah 52:13 and elsewhere.



determined, they receive their mandate in faithful obedience. God's blessings on his elect therefore come both through the sovereign determination of the Father and through the faithful obedience of the Son and the Spirit. In this covenant there is no discrepancy between these. We will see that the harmony between the Lord's actions and the servant's obedience is a regular feature of the divine covenants.

2. *Individual and Universal*: The *pactum salutis* focuses, of course, on God's elect people, those who are finally saved. In that sense its object is particular, not universal. But Scripture often indicates that salvation has a cosmic dimension. When man falls, he brings the rest of creation down with him (Gen. 3:17–19). Creation will not be delivered from this curse until the consummation of redemption, so it longs and groans for that day (Rom. 8:18–22). Through Jesus, God reconciles all things to himself (Col. 1:19–20) and makes “all things new” (Rev. 21:5). So the *pactum* has a universal meaning.

3. *Blessing, Seed, and Land*: Because that universality includes blessings for the earth as well as its inhabitants, we can find in the *pactum* three elements that we will note in all the covenants: (a) divine blessing (normative), (b) land (cosmic reconciliation) (situational), and (c) seed (the people given by the Father to the Son) (existential).

## The Universal Covenant

That universal perspective persists when we move from eternity into time, when we consider God's covenant with the created world.

God is Lord, the King<sup>7</sup> over all the earth. Usually when God is called *King* in the Psalms, his covenant with Israel is in view, which we will consider later (Pss. 18:50; 29:10–11; 44:4; 48:2). But God's kingship is not limited to Israel. He is able to deliver Israel from all her enemies because he rules all the earth (Ps. 47:2, 7). The psalmist recognizes God as “my King,” and he calls God to remember his covenant with Israel; but God can answer this prayer because his lordship is not only over Israel, but over all creation, even over all of Israel's enemies.

Yet God my King is from of old,  
 working salvation in the midst of the earth.  
 You divided the sea by your might;  
 you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters.  
 You crushed the heads of Leviathan;  
 you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.  
 You split open springs and brooks;  
 you dried up ever-flowing streams.  
 Yours is the day, yours also the night;  
 you have established the heavenly lights and the sun.  
 You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth;

7. In this book, I will generally use *lordship* and *kingship* synonymously, though there are differences of nuance. *Lord* focuses on a covenant relationship, *king* on rule within that relationship. But rule is an aspect of covenant, and kingship (when legitimate) arises out of a covenant relationship. So chapter 5 will emphasize the vocabulary of kingship.



you have made summer and winter.

Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs,  
and a foolish people reviles your name.  
Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild beasts;  
do not forget the life of your poor forever.

Have regard for the covenant,  
for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence.  
Let not the downtrodden turn back in shame;  
let the poor and needy praise your name. (Ps. 74:12–21)

For the LORD is a great God,  
and a great King above all gods.  
In his hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are his also.  
The sea is his, for he made it,  
and his hands formed the dry land. (Ps. 95:3–5)

So he says through Isaiah:

Thus says the LORD:  
“Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool;  
what is the house that you would build for me,  
and what is the place of my rest?” (Isa. 66:1)

Through Isaiah, God mentions two levels of his kingship: his rule from heaven over the whole earth, and his rule over Israel, centered in the temple. The second depends on the first and is limited by the first. The people of Israel should not presume that God is their God only, or that he will always be on their side regardless of their behavior.

Anything God creates is necessarily under his lordship: under his control, subject to his authority, confronted by his presence. So his covenant lordship does not begin with the creation of man. In the creation account, from the first of the six days of Genesis 1, God controls everything as he makes the world. Creation is not a battle between God and some other deity or force. There is no struggle in Genesis 1, as there is in the creation accounts of other nations. In Genesis 1:3, God simply commands, and the light appears.

These commands indicate not only God's control, but also his authority. He speaks, and even the inanimate creation must obey his powerful word. Here, we cannot draw a line between control and authority. God controls by speaking authoritatively, and we can see the authority of his words in that everything obeys him.

Control, authority, and also, of course, presence. During the whole creation process, God is there, with the things he has made. Underscoring that presence is the reference in Genesis 1:2 to the Holy Spirit “hovering over the face of the waters.”

So God is the Lord, the King, over all the earth, before man comes on the scene. The created world is his servant. And of course, when you have a lord and a servant, you have a covenant.<sup>8</sup> When Adam is created, he automatically comes under the jurisdiction of this covenant, for he, too, is a creature of God. Before God even speaks to him in Genesis 1:28, God has surrounded him with testimonies to his sovereignty and his requirements. So the universal covenant has a moral content, and we may assume that there are blessings for obedience to God’s statutes and curses for disobedience.

So, recalling the three themes mentioned earlier: (1) God is fully sovereign over all things within the creation, but he blesses obedience and punishes disobedience. (2) The covenant is universal, but binds all individuals. (3) The covenant gives to living beings possession of the land, to fill it with their descendants, a divine blessing to all (Ps. 104).

When God through Isaiah indicts people of the whole earth because they have “transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant” (Isa. 24:5), he may be referring to the Edenic covenant, which I describe below, or to the universal covenant. I’m inclined to favor the latter, though the references in context of the curses on the earth as well as mankind could fit either covenant. The covenant-breakers here include the “host of heaven” according to verse 21, which, in contrast to the “kings of the earth,” probably refers to the rebellious angels. The angels would not be included under the Edenic covenant, but they would be part of the universal covenant. Actually, however, it doesn’t matter much what covenant Isaiah 24:5 specifically refers to, since the Edenic covenant and all later covenants are applications of the universal covenant to the human race.

Compare also Jeremiah 31:35–37 and 33:20, 25, where *berith* applies to “God’s ordering of the world of nature as described in Gen. 1.”<sup>9</sup> Kline also refers to the term *hesed*, God’s covenant faithfulness, used not only in references to God’s covenants with human beings, but also in relation to his care for the natural world (Pss. 33:5; 36:5, 10; 119:64).

## The Edenic Covenant

God’s relationship to human beings is different in many ways from his relationships to other creatures, but it is nevertheless covenantal in character. God is Lord, and human beings are his subjects.

8. I am not discussing God’s covenant lordship over angelic and demonic beings, simply because Scripture tells us very little about it. Scripture affirms often that there are such beings, and they play a surprisingly large role in the spiritual warfare that accompanies redemptive history. See Eph. 6:10–20. Satan and his “angels” (Matt. 25:41) are beings who rebelled against God and were cast out of heaven, eventually to end in the “lake of fire” (Rev. 20:10). I know of no specific reference to a covenant made between God and these supernatural beings. But clearly the angels were under obligation to honor God as Lord. Some fulfilled that obligation and were blessed; others did not and were cursed. Certainly God’s relationship with the angels indicates his control and authority over them and his presence to bless and curse. Angels are, at the very least, subjects of God’s universal covenant. For a few reflections on the value of this biblical teaching for our lives, see *DCL*, 253–56, and chapter 33 of the present volume.

9. Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 14.

I believe that the existence of a covenant specifically between God and man is implicit in Genesis 1–2, though there is no record of God's formally announcing it as in other covenants. God made Adam and Eve on the last of the six days of creation as the consummation of his creative work. In the narrative, God, in a remarkable conference with the heavenly host, makes a special announcement of this particular creative act (Gen. 1:26), and he makes human beings in his very image (v. 27), distinguishing them from all other created beings. In verse 28 he gives them distinct responsibilities, often called the *cultural mandate*, empowering them by his blessing:

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

So God as Lord defines the role of human beings as God's vassal kings over the world he has made.

Note here the triad I mentioned earlier: in this verse, there is a statement of divine *blessing*, a gift of *land* (the whole earth) to be filled with human *seed*.

This fundamental mandate pushes the human family beyond the boundaries of the garden, to the whole world. So the worldwide perspective of God's eternal covenant of redemption and of his universal covenant enters the covenants of human history. The Edenic covenant also, however, requires Adam to carry out some duties at home. He must "work" and "keep" the garden (Gen. 2:15), which is his home as well as God's holy dwelling. Further, Adam is responsible to keep God's *creation ordinances* (labor, 1:28; 2:15; marriage, 2:23–25; Sabbath, 2:1–3; Ex. 20:11)—ordinances that define human ethics for all history.<sup>10</sup>

So the covenant is individual (with Adam and Eve in their home) and universal (extending to the whole world).

Finally, the covenant contains one specific command:

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Gen. 2:16–17)

Here is a special test of Adam's covenant faithfulness, one that Adam failed. Theologians have asked what would have happened if Adam had kept this special commandment, rather than disobeying it. Typically covenants issue in blessings for obedience as well as curses for disobedience. The curses for Adam's disobedience are quite explicit in Scripture, as we will see. But strangely, this text does not explicitly mention any blessing for obedience.

But of course, merely to avoid the curse is a blessing. At minimum, the blessing is life, since death is the curse. And in the context there are some suggestions that this life-blessing

10. For more discussion of the creation ordinances, see *DCL*, 202–3.

is not just a continuation of Adam's present life, but something higher, a kind of consummate state. Genesis 3:22 implies that at some point an obedient Adam might have been invited to eat the fruit of the Tree of Life (2:9) and thereby live forever. The Sabbath ordinance (Gen. 2:3; Ex. 20:11) might also have introduced a forward-looking emphasis into human labor, suggesting that our work would lead into a consummation state that would relate to our present life as rest relates to work. The text, however, is not clear or explicit about these blessings, and we do well to avoid speculation. Even if we take the hints that God offers a consummation blessing to Adam, we should not assume that this blessing will come through Adam's obedience to the specific command of Genesis 2:17, rather than from his general obedience to all of God's commands.<sup>11</sup> It does not even say in any clear way that the prohibition is for a limited time, or, if it is, for how long it will be in effect.

Some theologians have thought that the covenant blessing is even more detailed than a general promise of life. They refer to a life in confirmed righteousness, a life in which Adam is no longer able to sin. But the text does not say this. The idea of a blessing of confirmed righteousness comes not from Genesis 1–2, but from the blessings associated with redemption: life in the new heavens and new earth. But the history of Genesis 1–3 is distinct from the history of redemption. Although the Edenic covenant is parallel in some ways to the later redemptive covenants, it represents an earlier stage in God's dealings with human beings, a stage in which we should be careful to respect God's limitations on our knowledge. It is wise to be content with what is obvious: if Adam had obeyed this command, he would have been able to continue on as God's covenant servant, enjoying whatever rewards God chose to give, if only the continuing favor of his Father. There is, after all, no greater reward than God's continuing favor, given in the form he thinks best for us.

Many theologians have described the covenant in Eden as the *covenant of works*. This phrase is found in WCF 7.2, which reads:

The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.

WLC 20 (cf. WSC 12) speaks of God's

entering into a covenant of life with [Adam], upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience.

In the WLC, we find *covenant of life* rather than *covenant of works*. These titles, however, are essentially the same, the former emphasizing the covenant blessing, the latter the means of attaining it. Earlier Reformed statements such as the Belgic, French, and Second Helvetic Confessions and the HC do not use the language of covenant but make clear that Adam disobeyed God's commandment and thereby lost God's blessing. In chapter 14 of the Belgic Confession, we read:

11. The Sabbath ordinance pertains to all of man's work, not only to his obedience to the command of Genesis 2:17.

For the commandment of life, which [Adam] had received, he transgressed; and by sin separated himself from God, who was his true life; having corrupted his whole nature; whereby he made himself liable to corporal and spiritual death.

I don't think there is much difference between the actual teaching of the WCF and the Belgic Confession. The advantage of using the covenant terminology as in the WCF is to reiterate what we have been emphasizing, that all of God's relations with creatures are covenantal.

The disadvantage of the phrase *covenant of works* is that it has led to a controversy over the nature of the covenant agreement between God and Adam. Two problems especially have entered the discussion: (1) The terminology is reminiscent of a commercial exchange. This suggests that eternal life is a kind of commodity, and that if Adam pays the price, "perfect obedience," "works," or "merit," God will turn that commodity over to Adam and his posterity. (2) The works are Adam's works, not God's, so one gets the impression that Adam is left entirely on his own. These two contentions are used to maintain a clear contrast between *works* and *grace*.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly the focus of the Edenic covenant is on what Adam does rather than on God's action as the ground of Adam's blessing or curse. And certainly whatever blessing Adam received would have been appropriate to his obedience: he would have *deserved* the blessing. But it would be wrong to claim as in issue 2 above that had Adam successfully resisted temptation, God would have had nothing to do with it. It was God who created Adam and all his surroundings. God made him in his image and made him his vassal king over the earth. God gave him abundant food and drink, a wife, and above all fellowship with himself. And indeed Adam's decision was foreordained by God, as we will see. As for issue 1, Adam did not earn any of these things by his works. These were gifts of God's unmerited favor. So if Adam had passed his test successfully, he would not have boasted as if he had done it all on his own. He would have praised God for his unmerited favor. The term *covenant of works*, therefore, may mislead us by suggesting that Adam possessed an autonomy that no other creature has ever possessed. Best to regard this covenant, like the others, as a sovereign blessing of God, calling Adam and Eve to respond in obedient faith.

There is, however, nothing wrong with what the Westminster Standards actually say about the covenant of works. So we say nothing wrong when we use the phrase as did the Westminster divines. But when we choose extrabiblical language to describe biblical truths, we should take into account the impressions that this language would be likely to make on contemporary readers. And indeed there are some problems of possible misunderstandings and misuses of this language, such as issues 1 and 2 above. I do not, therefore, object to the phrase *covenant of works* as long as the use of that

12. *Grace* in Protestant theology usually refers to unmerited divine favor where wrath is deserved. On that definition, grace presupposes sin, and there can be no grace before the fall. But there is no reason to deny that God showed unmerited favor (apart from deserved wrath) before the fall, before God's wrath came into play. Some, speaking somewhat loosely in my judgment, define grace as unmerited divine favor without reference to deserved wrath. On that looser definition, God did give grace before the fall. For Adam did not merit or deserve his creation, his surroundings, his vassal kingship, or his fellowship with God. Those were God's gifts to him.

phrase is kept within the limits of the Westminster definitions, but I prefer to refer to the covenant under discussion as the *Edenic covenant*.

But Genesis 3 tells the tragic story of how Adam and Eve, tempted by Satan, violated this command, bringing a curse on themselves and on the earth itself (Gen. 3:1–19; Rom. 8:19–23). God expels the guilty couple from Eden, and from this point their labor becomes toilsome and their childbearing painful.

Does the Edenic covenant continue today? Since Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden, human beings no longer have the responsibility to work and keep it. Nor do we need to worry about eating prematurely from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, for that, too, is closed off from us. But the creation ordinances continue, and Scripture demands faithfulness in our work (as 2 Thess. 3:10), marriages (Ex. 20:14), and Sabbath observance (Ex. 20:8–11; Mark 2:27–28). And Scripture never repeals the mandate defined as the very purpose of our existence in Genesis 1:26–28; indeed, God reiterates that mandate in Genesis 9:1.

Negatively, since Adam was the federal head of the human race, we have sinned “through” him (Rom. 5:12–21). This means that his sin is our sin (v. 19), his guilt our guilt (vv. 16–17). So, with Adam, we are part of the Edenic covenant, as covenant-breakers, condemned to death. Cf. chapter 36.

## The Covenant of Grace

We cannot be saved from sin and its consequences by keeping the creation ordinances, for such obedience can never erase the sin of Adam in which we are implicated. And as I said earlier, God never intended these ordinances to be a means by which Adam would somehow *purchase* eternal life for himself. So after the fall, Adam could not achieve divine forgiveness by keeping God’s commands.

But following the narrative of the fall, Scripture indicates that God intends to save his fallen people. There is good news mixed with the bad. God curses Satan, the serpent (Gen. 3:14–15), but at the end of this curse he indicates that Satan will be crushed by a child of Eve (v. 15). Though labor and childbearing are to be painful, they will preserve the human race until the time when the special child of the woman will gain this victory and save his people. Adam and Eve received this promise in faith. Adam named his wife *Eve*, “mother of all living” (3:20), expressing his confidence that God would keep mankind alive until the Deliverer should come, and Eve named her first son *Cain*, honoring childbirth as a gift of God (4:1). So the promise of seed (the child promise) correlates with the promise that Adam’s work will continue to feed the human race (the land promise), bringing God’s blessing out of curse.

The good news that a child would be born to redeem mankind is the same gospel by which we today may be saved from God’s wrath. As Adam and Eve looked forward to that child, we look back upon him, Jesus Christ, who died for our sin, rose again, and ever lives to intercede for us. This is the gospel, the good news of God’s grace. Though we are doomed by our disobedience, and though we cannot save ourselves, God promises in Genesis 3 that he will give salvation as a gift, the gift of the child.



So there is a covenant of grace. We are saved from the death we deserve because of sin, not by anything we do, but by God's sheer gift of the Redeemer child. In Genesis 3, it is a covenant of promise. Adam and Eve simply believe that God will give his gift. Death and sin remain in the world, and eventually Adam and Eve will die without seeing the child of the promise. So they live by faith, not by sight (as 2 Cor. 5:7).

But their faith in this covenant was a living and active faith,<sup>13</sup> not a dead orthodoxy. Their second son, Abel, by faith

offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. (Heb. 11:4)

God saves his people apart from their works, but they must respond in faith. Cain responded with hatred and murder, bringing God's rebuke.<sup>14</sup> But Abel's sacrifice brought God's commendation. Grace does not eliminate responsibility. In every covenant there are blessings for obedience, curses for disobedience. This is true even within the covenant of grace.

God's covenants are unconditional in the sense that God will always carry out the purposes for which he made the covenants. In the covenant of grace, God the Father will certainly save all those he has given to belong to his Son. But they are conditional in that those who would receive those blessings must respond to God with a living and active faith (James 2:14–26). By God's sovereign plan, however, he sees to it that the conditions are met in those he has ordained for salvation.

As I indicated in chapter 2, the covenants are unconditional because of God's lordship attribute of complete control over the creation. They are conditional because of God's lordship attribute of authority, his right to command and be obeyed.

So as in all of God's covenants, we see here (1) God's sovereignty, now manifested as grace, but received by a living and obedient faith; but also (2) God's way of saving individual people as the means of redeeming the whole creation; and (3) God's blessing coming through land and seed.

## God's Covenants with Noah

The covenant of grace continues throughout Scripture, to its account of the final judgment. Salvation from sin is always by God's grace, not by human works. But God always demands a living and active faith as a human response. While the covenant

13. The phrase *living and active faith* is a recurring phrase, even a theme, in the writings of my former colleague Norman Shepherd. Although I don't agree with all of Shepherd's formulations, I mean to support his basic contentions, that (1) biblical faith is a working faith, but (2) the works of faith do not *earn* salvation for us. See Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), and *The Way of Righteousness* (La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2009).

14. I don't mean here to suggest that Cain was a saved person. First John 3:12, to the contrary, describes him as "of the evil one." But he was part of the original family that received God's covenant of grace. Cain's lack of faith showed that God had not elected him to salvation.

of grace continues in effect through Scripture, God makes additional covenants to further his redemptive purposes.

Cain's descendants continued and increased his disobedience, until God determined to judge the human race (Gen. 6:5–7). There had been a few faithful ones, particularly Seth and his descendants (4:26–5:32). But in the end, God's favor rested only on Noah and his family (6:8). God establishes a covenant with Noah (6:18), promising to save them from the waters of judgment. Noah, by his living and active faith, "constructed an ark for the saving of his household" (Heb. 11:7). After the flood, Noah brings an offering to God (Gen. 8:20–22) and God promises never again to destroy the earth by a flood (8:21–22; 9:15–17). In 9:1 and 7, he renews the cultural mandate given to Adam in the Edenic covenant.

God makes this covenant not only with Noah and his family, but with "every living creature of all flesh" (Gen. 9:16). Again, we see that God's historical covenants continue his universal covenant.

Some have thought, following Meredith G. Kline, David VanDrunen, and others,<sup>15</sup> that Genesis 4–9 establishes a secular order, not subject to the requirements of special divine revelation, but only to "natural law." These writers think that the purpose of the Noachic covenant is secular as opposed to sacred, that it establishes a civil, not a religious, society. But there is no suggestion in the text of any such purpose. God's postflood covenant follows Noah's act of building an altar and sacrificing animals to God, certainly a religious act (8:20–22). Indeed, Scripture regards all human activities as religious, in the sense of being governed by all of God's words (Matt. 4:4; 1 Cor. 10:31). The Noachic covenant, embracing all flesh, certainly embraces all human beings as well, whether believers or not. In that sense it is a *covenant of common grace*.<sup>16</sup> But it is not indifferent as to how they respond to God. Even Noah's grandson Canaan receives a curse for the lack of respect shown to Noah by Canaan's father Ham (Gen. 9:20–27). Unbelievers within the covenant are called to become believers and to walk by faith as Noah did. And the passage never mentions natural law or natural revelation, though we may assume that these continue to convey the same moral content as they do in the universal covenant. In the Noachic covenant, God sets the standards of the covenant by his own words, his "special revelation."

In the NT, the flood is a type of God's final judgment on sin (Matt. 24:37–39; Heb. 11:7; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5; 3:5–6), and also of the baptism of believers (1 Peter 3:21). Noah is for us a model of saving faith. By constructing an ark, "he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (Heb. 11:7). God's promise to Noah is an encouragement to believers that the apparent delay of Jesus' return is part of God's redemptive plan (2 Peter 3:4–13).

15. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*; David VanDrunen, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2006). See my reviews of these and other books of this school of thought in my *The Escondido Theology* (Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Media, 2011).

16. Common grace is God's favor and gifts given to those who will not be finally saved (see chapter 12).



All of this is religious through and through, even on the narrowest definition of what constitutes religion.

The Noachic covenant continues the covenant of grace as well as the universal covenant. God saves the human race by his grace, promises that there will not be another universal destruction by water, and calls on Noah and his descendants to live by obedient faith. God brings life out of death, anticipating the work of Christ. So he preserves the human race until the Redeemer child should complete the work of redemption and the Holy Spirit should draw all the elect into the kingdom.

Again we note the themes of divine sovereignty and human obedient faith, God's dealings with individuals to bring redemption to the whole world, and the triad of *blessing*, *seed* (Noah's descendants), and *land* (the renewal of the cultural mandate in Genesis 9:7).

### God's Covenant with Abraham

We have seen that God's purpose for mankind has always been that they should fill the earth. He commanded Adam and Eve to fill the earth (Gen. 1:28), and he renewed that command to Noah (9:1, 7). The story of the Tower of Babel, however (11:1–9), indicates man's sinful reluctance to obey this command. Those who built the tower preferred to huddle together in a central place, and God judged them for it.

Again, God chooses a single family to carry out his covenant purpose. His blessing, as with Noah, however, is not for that family alone, but through them to bless "all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:3). As with previous covenants, God's perspective is both individual and worldwide. So the Abrahamic covenant carries forward the interests of God's universal covenant.

It also carries forward, like the Noachic covenant, the interests of God's covenant of grace. Notice the intense emphasis in the covenant on what God will do, the *I wills* in the following quotation:

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:2–3)

Three times in the Abraham story God makes promises of what he will do for Abraham and his family. The second is in Genesis 15:

Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." (Gen. 15:13–16)

The four-hundred-year span between this promise and its fulfillment indicates that the blessing will come about through God alone, for only he controls history over such a great expanse of time. In the third group of covenant promises, note again the *I wills*:

Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God. (Gen. 17:4–8)

Nevertheless, God expects Abraham to respond with living and active faith. In Genesis 12 and 17, in fact, God's command precedes his promise. Genesis 12 begins:

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." (Gen. 12:1–2)

Abraham must obey God's command if he is to receive his inheritance in the Land of Promise. Similarly, God's formulation of the covenant in Genesis 17 begins not with the section quoted above, but with this:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." (Gen. 17:1–2)

Given the emphasis on grace, it is hard to understand why God's command would come before his promise. In these two passages, indeed, Abraham's obedience is actually a condition of God's making his promise. Genesis 26:5 says that God would fulfill the covenant "because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."

But as we have seen, all covenants require obedient faith. This is not a condition of one covenant or another; it is essential to all human dealings with God, simply by virtue of who God is. It is a requirement of what I have called the universal covenant. Individual covenants require specific forms of obedience, but obedience itself, springing from faith, is simply a requirement of all relations between God and human beings. This requirement is implicit in the very distinction between Creator and creature.

So it is not the case, as some have argued, that in the Abrahamic covenant God's promises are *unconditional*, as opposed to the Mosaic covenant in which the promises

are *conditional*. One argument to this effect is that the Abrahamic covenant is a “land-grant” type of treaty, God’s giving the Promised Land to Abraham and his seed. Some scholars believe that land-grant treaties are unconditional, but many do not.<sup>17</sup>

In any case, it is clear that the Abrahamic covenant in Scripture is conditional, simply because God himself attached conditions to it. Besides the general requirements of obedience noted above, God demanded that Abraham circumcise his household (Gen. 17:9–14). And Scripture is very specific in saying that God demanded from Abraham a response of obedient faith (Gen. 15:6; 26:4–5; Heb. 11:8–12, 17–19; James 2:21–23).<sup>18</sup>

This emphasis on faithful obedience does not compromise grace at all. For we can never begin to earn God’s forgiveness of our sins through good works, and the blessings that God promises to Abraham are far beyond what any human being could accomplish. God will give to Abraham and Sarah a child when they are far beyond the time of child-bearing. He will make of Abraham a great nation, and that nation will bring blessing to all the nations of the world. These promises will be fulfilled by God’s grace alone.

Nor does the emphasis on obedience compromise the biblical emphasis that we are saved by faith and not by works. Indeed, Abraham is the great example in the NT of saving faith in Christ. Abraham did not earn his salvation by doing good works. He was saved by faith in God’s promise. In Romans 4:16–17, Paul explains that God promised that Abraham would be the father of many nations, a promise that (given the ages of Abraham and Sarah) could not be fulfilled on the basis of human expectations. So his faith was counted to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3, 22). He knew that his relationship with God could not be purchased, only received as a promise. The promise is Christ, for it is in Christ that God completes Abraham’s family (Rom. 4:16, 23–25; Gal. 3:6–9, 14, 16, 29).

Paul contrasts faith and law in Romans 10:3–6 and Galatians 3:12 in arguing against Jews and Judaizing Christians who urge law-keeping as a method of salvation apart from Christ or in addition to Christ. To disparage Christ in this way is to reject God’s promise to Abraham and to substitute for that promise salvation by works. When we try to keep the law as a substitute for Christ, or when we think our law-keeping must supplement the work of Christ, the law is “not of faith” (Gal. 3:12). When we turn from such law-righteousness and trust Christ alone, “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4).

So like all the other covenants, the Abrahamic covenant is unconditional in the sense that in it God declares that he will certainly accomplish his own purpose, the blessing of the nations through Abraham. But it is conditional in that those who would receive that blessing must trust and obey. As sovereign controller, God is the God of grace. As sovereign authority, he demands obedience of his covenant partners.

17. See Gary Knoppers, “Ancient Near Eastern Royal Grants and the Davidic Covenant: A Parallel?,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, 4 (October–December 1996): 670–97, referenced by Richard Pratt in “Reformed Theology Is Covenant Theology,” available at [http://old.thirdmill.org/newfiles/ric\\_pratt/ric\\_pratt.RTiscovenant.html](http://old.thirdmill.org/newfiles/ric_pratt/ric_pratt.RTiscovenant.html).

18. My argument here is dependent on Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, 13–22.

In this section, I have focused on the theme of divine sovereignty-grace and the human response of obedient faith. We have also seen the twin emphases of individuality (Abraham) and universality (to bless all nations). Note also the triadic structure of the promise: a divine blessing, focusing on seed (Abraham's descendants) and land (the Promised Land of Canaan).

### God's Covenant with Israel under Moses

The book of Genesis continues with accounts of Abraham's family, particularly his son Isaac, his sons Esau and Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons. At the end of the book, Jacob dies, and the family lives in Egypt. They had gained favor with the Egyptians because of the influence of Jacob's son Joseph.

But over the "four hundred years" that God described to Abraham (Gen. 15:13), the book of Exodus says:

But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. (Ex. 1:7)

A new king arose in Egypt, who did not know Joseph, and he feared the power of this new nation. So he "set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens" (Ex. 1:11) and decreed that male Israelite babies should be killed (v. 16). But they cried to God, and God delivered them under the leadership of Moses. The people left Egypt under God's miraculous protection. And when they arrived at Mount Sinai, the dwelling place of God, God made a covenant with them. He charged Moses to say to them:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. (Ex. 19:4–6)

Notice here that the covenant begins with the grace of God, his sovereign work in delivering Israel from Egypt and bringing her to himself. God's deliverance to Israel is not based on Israel's numbers or impressiveness (Deut. 7:7–8) or Israel's righteousness (9:5–6), but on God's love and on the wickedness of the Canaanite nations. But this covenant is conditional in the same way that the Abrahamic covenant was. *If* Israel is obedient, *then* she will be God's treasured possession.

I do not agree with the theory of Meredith G. Kline<sup>19</sup> that under the Mosaic covenant people were saved from sin by divine grace, but that their temporal blessings within the land of Canaan had to be earned by works. That idea draws a parallel between the Edenic covenant and the Mosaic that misunderstands the former. And it disregards the

19. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*.

fact that all of God's covenants contain sovereign divine promises, but require human responses of faith.<sup>20</sup> If we acknowledge both these aspects of the covenant, we need not think up special reasons why some part of this particular covenant (the temporal blessings) demands obedience. The biblical text, further, never says that the spiritual and temporal blessings of Israel come from different sources. The relation between God's grace and human obedience in the Mosaic covenant is the same as that in the other covenants.<sup>21</sup>

In Exodus 19:7–8, the people promise to obey all of God's words. The Mosaic covenant, then, is a fulfillment and extension of the Abrahamic:

And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. (Ex. 2:24)

Before telling Moses his mysterious name *Yahweh*, he identifies himself to Moses as “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:6), and later Moses identifies God to Israel in the same terms (v. 15).

In Genesis and Exodus, there is a process of God's narrowing, in one sense, the scope of the covenant: to the family of Noah, to that of Abraham, to that of Jacob. But God has not forgotten his universal purpose, to bless all nations. The covenant with Israel is an extension of that with Abraham, the purpose of which was to bless all nations (Gen. 12:1–3). Israel, therefore, was to be God's witness to all the nations of the world (Isa. 43:10–12; 44:8). The nations are to admire the laws that God has given to Israel, and the wisdom and understanding of the people that these laws elicit (Deut. 4:5–8). The fulfillment of Israel's covenant will bring Israel together with the other nations, particularly her worst enemies:

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.” (Isa. 19:23–25)

When God establishes his covenant with Israel, he draws near to the people in terrifying majesty (Ex. 19:16–25) and declares to them in audible words the Ten Commandments (20:1–17). Later, Moses brought down from Sinai “the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God” (31:18). These tablets were the covenant in written form, the suzerainty treaty between God and Israel. This was

20. They never demand that human beings *earn* God's favor.

21. This theory is often put in this way: that the Mosaic covenant is a “republication of the covenant of works.” That description misunderstands the theory above, which does not assert that the Mosaic covenant is a covenant of works, but only that Israel's blessings in the land were based on works. Further, it greatly misleads readers on the basis for salvation in the Mosaic covenant, which is not human works at all, but the grace of Christ mediated through the priesthood and temple sacrifices.

the written constitution of the nation of Israel, placed in the ark of the covenant, the holiest place in Israel (25:16).

Israel's life under the Mosaic covenant fills out the rest of the OT. At the Sinai meeting, God has the people build a tabernacle under a pattern that Hebrews identifies as the likeness of the true tabernacle in heaven (Heb. 8:5). In that place Moses met with God, and the people brought sacrifices to the priests, of whom the first was Moses' brother Aaron. Centuries later, under King Solomon, God replaces the tabernacle with the temple, a permanent location for God to meet with his people.

God adds to the Ten Commandments many laws concerning sacrifices, ritual cleanness, and uncleanness. There are three annual feasts (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles) and dietary restrictions. There are ethical requirements, many to help the poor in Israel.

As the narrative continues, the people distrust God's promise that they will conquer the nations in the Land of Promise, and so God condemns the whole nation to wandering in the wilderness until the unbelieving generation has been replaced by a new one. Under the leadership of Joshua, Moses' successor, Israel achieves spectacular victories in the conquest of Canaan, by the power of God; but the people's disobedience leads to some setbacks. By the time of Joshua's death, the conquest of Canaan is still incomplete. Israel gains some victories under judges appointed by God, but her unfaithfulness places her again and again under the dominion of other nations. Only when the Israelites repent and turn back to God do they again prevail.

Like the other covenants, then, the Mosaic covenant is unconditional, in that God certainly achieves the purposes for which he made the covenant. But it is conditional, in that Israel receives the blessings only by a living, obedient faith.

The covenant is particular, focused on a single nation. But it is also universal, God's means of carrying his blessings to all nations. Looking back, we can say that the primary purpose of the Mosaic covenant is to provide an environment in which Jesus, the Son of God, would be born, teach his people, perform mighty works, die, be raised, and ascend to heaven, for the forgiveness of our sins. From this environment the gospel of Christ would go forth to all the nations of the world.

And in the Mosaic covenant, like the others, we can see the threefold pattern of God's *blessing* his people, placing his *seed* in a *land* that he promised to Abraham.

In what sense, if any, do new covenant believers participate in the Mosaic covenant? It is significant that of all the covenants, this is the only one that has a terminus. The blessings and obligations of all other covenants continue through history until the final judgment. Scripture speaks of an "end" only to the Mosaic covenant: after quoting Jeremiah 31:31–34, the writer to the Hebrews says:

In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. (Heb. 8:13)

It is the Mosaic covenant that is becoming obsolete and ready to vanish. The book of Hebrews banishes all nostalgia of Jewish Christians' wanting to return to the old



ways of the Mosaic era. The writer shows that all the Mosaic institutions—the priesthood, the sacrifices, the tabernacle, and the temple—are fulfilled in Jesus in such a way that they are to be set aside in their original form. Even the law must undergo change, because much of the Mosaic law had to do with priests and sacrifices (Heb. 7:12). This doesn't mean that the Ten Commandments are no longer normative; Jesus himself (Matt. 5:17–48) and Paul (Rom. 13:9–10) affirm them. They are essentially a republication of the creation ordinances. But some of the specific laws given for Israel's ceremonial and judicial life are obsolete.

There is both continuity and discontinuity between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant (which I will discuss below). The promises given to Israel are fulfilled to us in Christ. The promise of divine forgiveness belongs to us. He is the Passover Lamb sacrificed for us (John 1:29, 36; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Peter 1:19). He is our Priest, our Temple, our King. We are the heirs of Israel, receiving the blessing of Abraham (Gal. 3:9). Indeed, we are the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16). Paul describes even Gentile Christians as wild branches grafted into the tree of Israel in place of the unbelieving branches that have been cast out (Rom. 11:11–24). So the Mosaic covenant is for us, but in a consummate way, so that many of the institutions of that covenant have passed away.

### **God's Covenant with David**

When Samuel, last of the judges, becomes old, the elders of Israel demand that he appoint for them a king “like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8:5). God had indeed promised Abraham (Gen. 17:6, 16) and later Jacob (Gen. 35:11) that their covenant family would include kings. In Deuteronomy 17:14–20, God through Moses speaks of kings as a natural development in the conquest of the land and places certain requirements on the office. The king must be an Israelite (v. 15), must not acquire many horses (for that would require him to go back to Egypt, v. 16). Nor should he acquire many wives, or silver, or gold (v. 17). He is to be a student of God's law and must never turn aside from it (vv. 18–20).

But Scripture is ambivalent about the actual workings of human kingship. The short kingship of Abimelech, son of Gideon, in Shechem (Judg. 9:1–57) showed how bad a king could be. He murdered all but one of his seventy brothers and came himself to a wretched end. Jotham, his one surviving brother, spoke a parable in which the trees sought a king and only the bramble, threatening destruction, accepted the job (vv. 7–21). Similarly, when Israel asks Samuel to appoint a king, God gives this verdict:

Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them. (1 Sam. 8:7–9)

Samuel tells them, as did Jotham, that kingship will lead to tyranny (Judg. 9:10–18). Nevertheless, he proceeds to anoint a king for them, chosen by God (1 Sam. 9:16). The king is Saul, son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin.

Saul *looks* like a king:

Saul [was] a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people. (1 Sam. 9:2)

Yet he shows a becoming modesty at the honor he receives (1 Sam. 9:21). In the early days of his kingship, Saul leads Israel to victory against the Ammonites (11:1–11) and shows mercy on his Israelite opponents (vv. 12–15). But later Saul violates a command of God, and God declares that his kingdom will not continue but will pass to a man after God's own heart (13:14). After this, Saul's relationship to God continues to deteriorate.

The man after God's own heart is David, the greatest king of Israel. He enters Saul's service, defeats the giant Goliath, becomes a great warrior, provoking Saul's jealousy to the point that Saul tries to kill David (1 Sam. 19–20). Yet when David has an opportunity to kill Saul, he refuses to lift his hand against God's anointed (24:1–7; 26:1–12).

Saul takes his own life in battle with the Philistines (1 Sam. 31), and David mourns his death (2 Sam. 1). Then the elders, first of his own tribe of Judah (2:1–4), then of all Israel (5:1–5), anoint him king. Like Saul, David sins grievously against God; but unlike Saul, David repents of his sin (2 Sam. 11–12; cf. 24:1–25; Ps. 51). God forgives him, but the end of his reign is disturbed by two rebellions and much grief. Still, under David, Israel reaches a point of great prominence among the nations. From the viewpoint of the biblical writers, David is the most deserving of respect among all the kings of Judah and Israel.

God's covenant with David establishes his throne, and that of his descendants, forever:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father,



and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever. (2 Sam. 7:8–16)

God's grace will establish David's throne forever. But he will also discipline David's heirs when they commit sin. Again, the themes of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, of grace and faithful obedience, join together.

Also, the Davidic covenant continues the theme of universality. In Psalm 72:8–11, a messianic text, Solomon prays for the Davidic king:

May he have dominion from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth!  
May desert tribes bow down before him  
and his enemies lick the dust!  
May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands  
render him tribute;  
may the kings of Sheba and Seba  
bring gifts!  
May all kings fall down before him,  
all nations serve him!

The reign of David's son Solomon exceeded that of David in earthly power and glory. Solomon had asked God for wisdom, rather than long life, riches, or the life of his enemies. God gave him wisdom, and power and riches as well (1 Kings 3:1–14). But these gifts were conditional. God said that Solomon had to “walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments” (v. 14). In keeping these conditions, Solomon was inconsistent, as his father was. He built the temple, a permanent dwelling for God and for the worship of God's people. But his own heart was turned from the Lord by foreign women, so that he built places for the worship of their gods as well (11:7–8).

When he died, the Israelites told his son Rehoboam that Solomon had “made our yoke heavy” (1 Kings 12:4). They urged Rehoboam to lighten that load, but Rehoboam chose, rather, to be harder on the people than his father was: “My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions” (v. 11). So the northern tribes chose another king, Jeroboam, and turned away from the Davidic dynasty. Rehoboam did maintain rule over the tribe of Judah in the south.

So until the exile, Israel was divided into two nations. The southern kingdom was ruled by descendants of David, the northern by a succession of individual kings and dynasties. In both kingdoms, most of the rulers receive a negative verdict from Scripture, but occasionally, especially in the south, there was a king who sought, at least for part of his reign, to be faithful to the Lord.

During this time, God raised up prophets to confront the sins of the kings and the people. A prophet is a man with God's word in his mouth (see Deut. 18:18–22, and its exposition in our chapter 24), as was Moses. The prophets were God's "covenant prosecutors" who accused Israel of breaking his covenant and declared judgment. But besides judgment, there was also grace. God through the prophets renewed the promise of the woman's child, who would bring to God's people a full redemption from sin:

For to us a child is born,  
     to us a son is given;  
 and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
     and his name shall be called  
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
     Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
 Of the increase of his government and of peace  
     there will be no end,  
 on the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
     to establish it and to uphold it  
 with justice and with righteousness  
     from this time forth and forevermore.  
 The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (Isa. 9:6–7)

In Isaiah 53, we read of a Servant of God who will come to bear our sins:

Surely he has borne our griefs  
     and carried our sorrows;  
 yet we esteemed him stricken,  
     smitten by God, and afflicted.  
 But he was wounded for our transgressions;  
     he was crushed for our iniquities;  
 upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
     and with his stripes we are healed.  
 All we like sheep have gone astray;  
     we have turned—every one—to his own way;  
 and the LORD has laid on him  
     the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:4–6)

The Servant suffers God's wrath so that his people might be healed from sin. Yet he is the King, a king like David. So the NT identifies Jesus as the great son of David (Matt. 9:27; 12:23; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15; 22:42).

But Israel did not hear the prophets, and she turned further and further away from God. The northern kingdom was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C., and the southern kingdom by Babylon in 586. Both conquerors forced many Israelites from their homes in Canaan to live in exile.

Since believers today are in Christ, we, too, are part of the Davidic covenant. God's promises to David are fulfilled in Christ and therefore given to us. We are to reign with Christ over God's creation (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 5:10; 22:5).

The psalms of David are the songs of our hearts. With David we trust God's provision each day as our only comfort in life and death.

Christ is King over all, the *seed* of the woman ruling the *lands* of the earth, spreading God's *blessing* to God's people.

## The New Covenant

So Jesus Christ is the main theme of Scripture. Jesus said to his Jewish opponents:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. (John 5:39–40)

Luke describes an encounter between Jesus and a couple of disciples who were confused by recent reports about Jesus' death and resurrection:

And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

All previous revelation, all previous covenants, are fulfilled in him. He is the Prophet greater than Moses (John 1:1–14; Heb. 3:1–6), the Priest who replaces the priests of the temple (Heb. 4:14–5:10; 7:1–8:7), the King greater than David (Mark 12:35–37). Jesus' sacrifice on the cross fulfills and replaces the animal sacrifices of the temple, for only his sacrifice took away the sins of his people (Heb. 10:1–18). It is in Jesus' death that his people have died to sin, and in his resurrection we, too, have been raised to newness of life (Rom. 6:1–11).

*New covenant* is the name for the new relationship that we have with God through Christ. Remarkably, in the Gospels Jesus comes as the Lord of the covenant, taking the place of Yahweh as the head of the covenant. Only God can take this role, so Jesus identifies himself clearly as God in the flesh, the Lord of the covenant come to deliver his people from their sins.

The Sabbath day in the OT was the day that belonged especially to the Lord. It is "a Sabbath to the LORD your God" (Ex. 20:10). But Jesus declares that the Sabbath belongs to him: "So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28). Jesus is the head of the covenant, a role that only Yahweh could play. The cup of the Lord's Supper is "the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25).

God had told the prophet Jeremiah that he would make a new covenant 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)<sup>22</sup>

Verse 32 speaks of the covenant God made with the people of Israel through Moses. In that covenant, he commanded them to write his words on their heart (Deut. 6:6; 11:18; 32:46). They were to obey God, not grudgingly, but as their greatest delight. But they failed to keep that covenant. In the new covenant, God himself will write his words on the hearts of his people. His law will be "within them." By his grace, they will indeed delight to do his will. Those without the divine writing on their hearts, who are Jews in name only (Rom. 2:28–29; 9:6), will not receive the blessings of the covenant.

In the Mosaic covenant, the people brought animal sacrifices to the priests to deal with their sins. But it was impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Heb. 10:4). The animal sacrifices were only shadows (v. 1) of the final sacrifice of Christ. When God forgave the sins of Israelites, it was not because of the deaths of animals, but because of the death of Christ, symbolized by the animal offerings.

The same is true of salvation under the Abrahamic covenant (Rom. 2:25–27; 9:7–13). And the promise of the Noachic covenant that the earth would not be destroyed before the final judgment is based on the fact that before the judgment, those belonging to Christ must be saved (2 Peter 3:9).

So the work of Christ is the source of all human salvation from sin: the salvation of Adam and Eve, of Noah, of Abraham, of Moses, of David, and of all of God's people in every age, past, present, or future. Everyone who has ever been saved has been saved through the new covenant in Christ. Everyone who is saved receives a new heart, a heart of obedience, through the new covenant work of Christ. So though it is a new covenant, it is also the oldest, the temporal expression of the *pactum salutis*.

Like the other covenants, the new covenant establishes a body of believers in covenant with the Lord. Those who enter the church with a living faith in Christ receive all the blessings of the covenant. The new covenant is unconditional in that its very

22. Compare God's promise to give his people a "new heart" in Ezekiel 11:19–21 and 36:24–38. Chapter 37 on God's Spirit's making the dry bones live is also a new covenant promise.

content is God's unconditional gift of a new heart, fulfilling all covenant conditions. But it is conditional in that those conditions are real and necessary. We are justified by faith alone, not by any effort to earn our salvation (Rom. 3:23–24; Eph. 2:8–9). But the faith by which we are justified is a living and obedient faith (Gal. 5:6; Eph. 2:10; James 2:14–26).

So as with the other covenants, it is possible for someone to join the new covenant community externally without the new heart that defines that covenant. He may be baptized and profess Christian doctrine. But if he lives a life of sin, he shows that he does not have the new heart that is the mark of the new covenant. He has wrongly entered the covenant community and ought to be disciplined by the body. He has become a Christian externally, but without inward change.

So the new covenant features both grace and responsibility, as we have seen in all the covenants. Addressing the new covenant community, Scripture contains warnings of judgment to those who would presume on God's grace (Heb. 6:1–12; 10:26–39).

The new covenant also emphasizes the principle of universality. God's grace saves people as individuals. But the main directive of Jesus sends them out into the world to make disciples of all the nations, fulfilling the promise of God to Abraham (Matt. 28:18–20). Note in this Great Commission (1) the *blessing* of Jesus' presence, (2) the spread of the gospel to all *lands*, (3) to be filled with the *seed* of baptized believers.

Only when all of God's elect (those given to the Son in the *pactum salutis*) are saved will Jesus return, utter the final judgment, and establish the new heavens and new earth (2 Peter 3:9–13). So the blessing will be full: the seed of the woman (Christ and his people) ruling over all of God's new creation.

This is the story of the Bible: God the Father securing the fellowship of those he has given to his Son. For those people, Christ the Son atones for their sin, and the Spirit gives them new hearts to love God and one another. So God glorifies his lordship in the salvation of his people.

## Covenants and Perspectives

Of the covenants that we have discussed, most are time-specific. The Noachic covenant begins at a specific time, when Noah builds an altar to the Lord after the flood (Gen. 8:20–9:17). Before that, there was no Noachic covenant, though we all benefit from its provisions until the final judgment. Similarly for the covenant of grace (Gen. 3:14–19), the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–21; 17:1–21), the Mosaic covenant (Ex. 19:1–9; 20; 21), and the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:4–17).

But three of the covenants that I have described above are not time-specific in this way: the eternal covenant of redemption (the *pactum salutis*), the universal covenant, and the new covenant. All believers partake equally in the benefits of these three covenants, regardless of when in time they live.

The eternal covenant of redemption is entirely supratemporal, so it has no beginning in time, no datable ratification ceremony. Its benefits come to all of those of all times

who are elect in Christ. The universal covenant also has no temporal restriction. God is always Creator and Lord, so this covenant is always in effect.

The new covenant does have a temporal inauguration. Covenants are typically inaugurated by the shedding of blood, and that is certainly the case with the new covenant, by the blood of Christ, the blood that fulfills all the blood of bulls and goats in the other covenants.

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Heb. 9:11–14)

This passage follows the writer's quotation from the new covenant passage in Jeremiah (Heb. 8:8–12). So the shedding of Jesus' blood, a datable historical event, is the substance of the new covenant, the covenant that purifies not only the flesh, but the conscience, the heart.

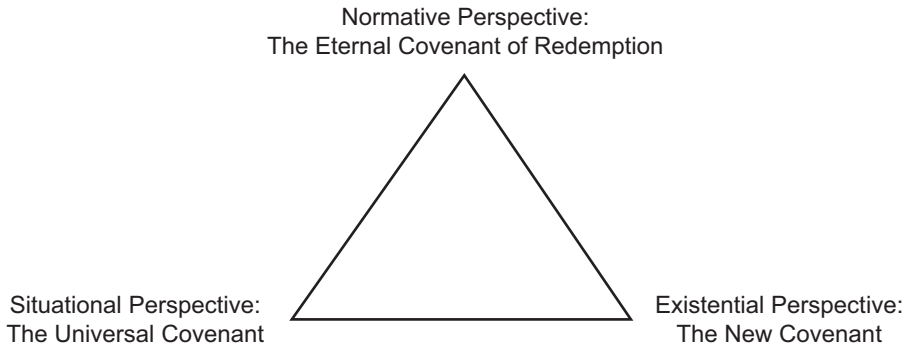
Nevertheless, as we saw earlier, the efficacy of the new covenant, unlike that of previous covenants, extends to God's elect before Jesus' atonement. When believers in the OT experienced "circumcision of the heart," or when they were Jews "inwardly," they were partaking of the power of the new covenant.

So there are three covenants that extend to all of God's people. Not all believers benefit specifically from the Noachic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, or Davidic covenant. But all benefit from the eternal, the universal, and the new covenants.

It may be useful to give some further attention to these time-transcending covenants. The eternal covenant of redemption is nothing less than the triune God's eternal plan for history. It determines that history will be the outworking of a story of creation, fall, and redemption. In that covenant, the Father gives a people to the Son, to be renewed by the Spirit. All history must follow that plan. So the eternal covenant is *normative*, as I defined it in chapter 2.

The universal covenant is the prerogative of God to be Lord over everything he creates. By that creation, he establishes the setting in which the story of the eternal covenant will be played out. Creation as a whole is the *situation* for the fulfillment of the *pactum salutis*. This covenant, then, is the *situational* perspective in relation to the *pactum salutis*.

The new covenant determines that on the basis of the work of Christ, God's people will be saved to the uttermost, given a new heart of complete faithfulness to the Lord. This is the *existential* perspective of God's great plan. See fig. 4.3.



**Fig. 4.3. Time-Transcending Covenants**

These three covenants are related perspectively. (1) The eternal covenant (normative) ordains the role that the universal and new covenants are to play. (2) The universal covenant (situational) displays God's relationship to every fact in creation, including the hearts of his people (existential), with the interpretation of those facts that extends into eternity (normative). And (3) the new covenant guarantees, based on the universal and eternal covenants, that nothing can separate the heart of the believer from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35–39). So one cannot define any of these three without reference to the others. And to understand each is to understand all. The three are perspectives for thinking about God's comprehensive redemptive lordship: an eternal plan formulated by God's eternal wisdom, carried out by God's mighty power in history, applied to the hearts of the people whom the Father has given to the Son.

The other covenants apply these to different historical situations, announcing what God has determined in his eternal plan (normative), for each situation (situational), for the benefit of his people (existential).

### Living in God's Covenant

In chapter 2, I indicated the typical elements of biblical covenants, following the suzerainty treaty pattern: the name of the lord, the historical prologue, and so on. These not only are formal elements of a literary genre, but are directions for the lives of God's covenant servants.

*The Name of the Lord:* The Lord is the One with whom we have to do. In every decision, we should take account of the fact of who he is. Our life is, as Calvin said, *coram deo*, in the presence of the living God. This means that Christian ethics is profoundly personal, the outworking of our relationship with an absolute person.<sup>23</sup>

*The Historical Prologue:* The redemptive history of God's covenants speaks of grace. As the Lord brought Israel out of the house of bondage (Ex. 20:2), so Jesus has brought

23. See *DCL*, 251–53, on the ethical importance of God as the most important fact of our life-situation.



us out of slavery to sin, into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). This is our motivation to obey God's commands. We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

*The Stipulations:* These are the laws of the covenant. They tell us what to do. Grace doesn't replace the law; rather, as we have seen, grace motivates our obedience to God's law. God's laws vary somewhat from one age to the next. In the new covenant, for example, we do not bring sacrificial animals to worship, as did those under the Mosaic covenant. But in every age, God's law is "holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12), a delight to the wise man (Ps. 1:2).<sup>24</sup> It is not a terror and threat except to one intending to rebel against God.<sup>25</sup>

*The Sanctions:* These are the blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. One in covenant with God knows that our decisions have consequences, and the Lord is right to impose those consequences upon us.

*Administration:* God's covenants are not abstract ideas, but they function in the real world. So in the covenants are roles for covenant mediators, judges, elders, kings, priests, prophets, apostles, elders, deacons, and so on. Our life in the covenant is not merely between the individual and God. It is a humble service in which we work with others, honor those who rule, and accept the structures and procedures that govern our relationship with God and with others.

## Key Terms

Proof text  
Genre  
Myth  
Narrative  
Worldview  
Individualism  
Universality  
Autonomous reasoning  
Supernatural  
Suzerainty treaty  
Eternal covenant of redemption  
*Pactum salutis*  
Universal covenant  
Edenic covenant  
Cultural mandate  
Covenant of works  
Covenant of life

24. For more on the role of law in the Christian life, see *ibid.*, 176–250.

25. Here I am opposing Martin Luther's law-gospel distinction. See my *The Escondido Theology*, 45–46 and elsewhere; *DCL*, 182–92; and P. Andrew Sandlin, *Wrongly Dividing the Word: Overcoming the Law-Gospel Distinction* (Mount Hermon, CA: Center for Cultural Leadership, 2010).

Covenant of grace  
God's covenants with Noah  
Common grace  
God's covenant with Abraham  
God's covenant with Israel under Moses  
God's covenant with David  
New covenant

### Study Questions

1. Is there any value in citing proof texts for doctrinal formulations? What are the dangers associated with this?
2. "As a whole, the Bible is not an example of any *genre* of literature. It is *sui generis*." Explain; evaluate.
3. Frame says that the biblical stories are not myth. Respond.
4. He also says that "they are not merely history either, as we usually think of it." Explain; evaluate.
5. Does the Bible teach a unique worldview? If so, why is this worldview important to its message?
6. In each of the biblical covenants, describe the relationship between God's blessings and human obedience.
7. In each of the biblical covenants, describe its individualism and universality.
8. In each covenant, describe the elements of blessing, seed, and land.
9. In each covenant described in this chapter, list the parties, the terms, the promises, and the threats.
10. Why does Frame hesitate to say that the Edenic covenant promised to Adam a life of confirmed righteousness if he remained faithful?
11. Should the Edenic covenant be described as a covenant of works? Explain your answer.
12. Does the Noachic covenant establish a *secular* order? Explain and argue your position.
13. Is the Abrahamic covenant unconditional? Explain; evaluate.
14. Do you believe that the temporal blessings of the Mosaic covenant were to be earned by works? Why or why not?
15. How does each of the biblical covenants point forward to Christ?
16. Distinguish the three covenants that are not time-specific.
17. Frame says that the eternal, universal, and new covenants are perspectives on God's entire redemptive work. Explain; evaluate.
18. Summarize how the covenantal character of our relation to God affects the Christian life.

## Memory Verses

**Isa. 66:1:** Thus says the LORD:

“Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool;  
what is the house that you would build for me,  
and what is the place of my rest?”

**Jer. 31:33:** 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.

**John 5:39–40:** You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

**Rom. 4:19–22:** [Abraham] 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.

**Eph. 1:3–4:** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

## Resources for Further Study

Kline, Meredith G. *Kingdom Prologue*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006. My review of this book in *The Escondido Theology* takes issue with his view of the covenants at several points, but I have learned much from Kline.

Murray, John. *The Covenant of Grace*. London: Tyndale Press, 1950. See also his essay “Covenant Theology,” in his *MCW*, 4:216–40, which deals with the history of these ideas in the Reformed tradition.

Shepherd, Norman. *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000. Shepherd’s view is opposed to Kline’s at many points. See also his *The Way of Righteousness*. La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2009.

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD

WE HAVE SEEN that the Bible story can be told as the story of covenants that God has made, within the Trinity and with his creatures. But there are other ways in which the story can be told, other perspectives from which it can be seen. One of these is *the kingdom of God*. I think of covenants as normative, the kingdom as situational. The covenants establish the normative constitution of God's people. The kingdom describes the dynamic movement of history.

For some readers, that may be a surprising way to describe the kingdom. Often we think of *kingdom* as a geographical sphere of rule, such as the United Kingdom or the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Of course, God's rule is over everything he has made. And his rule remains constant; he always rules everything. So what dynamism is there in the kingdom image?

But Geerhardus Vos formulated Jesus' view of the kingdom as follows:

To him the kingdom exists there, where not merely God is supreme, for that is true at all times and under all circumstances, but where God supernaturally carries through his supremacy against all opposing powers and brings men to the willing recognition of the same.<sup>1</sup>

On this definition, the kingdom is dynamic, indeed dramatic. It is a world-historical movement, following the fall of Adam, in which God works to defeat Satan and bring human beings to acknowledge Christ as Lord. It is, preeminently, the *history* of salvation.

God could have remedied the fall in an instant, sending his Son in an accelerated time frame, bringing him to death, resurrection, ascension, and triumphal return in a matter of seconds. Or he might have accomplished this work in a matter of decades, allowing for a somewhat more normal kind of historical development. But instead he determined a process spread over millennia. He spent centuries narrowing the messianic line to a chosen family, bringing them into the Land of Promise, ordaining

1. Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 50.

the birth of his Son in the “fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4), accomplishing redemption in thirty-three more years, and sending his disciples on a journey of several thousand years at least to bring this good news to all the nations.

Why he chose to stretch out the drama of salvation over so long a time is a mystery. The length of this time is related to other mysteries of Scripture, such as the problem of evil. We would not cry, “How long, O LORD?” (Pss. 6:3; 13:1; 80:4; 90:13; Hab. 1:2; Zech. 1:12; Rev. 6:10), if God had determined to complete his purposes in an instant, and the sting of pain and suffering would be much less if God were to abbreviate his story to a few decades. But God’s decision is clear: that the history of redemption will take millennia, leaving space for dramatic movements, ups and downs, twists and turns, longings and astonishments. Salvation is to be a great epic, not a short story. God will glorify himself, not by measuring his kingdom in time spans appropriate to human kings, but by revealing himself as “King of the ages” (Rev. 15:3 NIV).

So in Scripture one event will picture, foreshadow, even motivate another event a thousand years later. The rebellion of Israel against God in the wilderness (Num. 14) is a warning to Christian believers in the first century A.D. (Heb. 3:7–19). Indeed, the accounts of that ancient history have the purpose of edifying believers in the new covenant period (Rom. 15:4).

## The Two Ages

At every point in this great history, then, we look backward and forward. We look back on what God has already done, and we look forward to the fulfillment of his promises in the future. So at every stage of redemption, there is (to employ the theological jargon) an *already* and a *not yet*.

Biblical theology, which focuses on the history of redemption, has emphasized especially the “two-age” structure of the NT. In Matthew 12:32, Jesus speaks of a sin that will not be forgiven “either in this age or in the age to come.” Paul also refers to these two ages in Ephesians 1:21. The first of the two ages is “this age” (*ho aion houtos*), the period of time in which we live, a period that is to end at the second coming of Christ and the final judgment (Matt. 13:39–40, 49; 24:3; 28:20). This is the age in which sin and the curse continue in the earth, before God’s final victory. So Scripture describes this age in ethical terms. It is “the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4) from which Christ’s redemption delivers us.

Nonbelievers are caught up in the affairs of “this age,” unwilling to be bothered by the demands and promises of God. Jesus speaks of “the sons of this age” (Luke 20:34), Paul of “the debater of this age” (1 Cor. 1:20), the “rulers of this age” (1 Cor. 2:8), and the “wise in this age” (1 Cor. 3:18).

Some Christians, to be sure, are “rich in this present age” (1 Tim. 6:17), that is, they have acquired things that are valued by this age. That is not necessarily sinful, but Timothy must give them a special charge “not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything

to enjoy.” So all believers must take heed “to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:12). The present age, even to believers, is a source of temptation.

The “age to come,” however, is the age of fulfillment. Jesus contrasts the “sons of this age” (Luke 20:34) with “those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead” (v. 35). In the understanding of those Jews who believed in resurrection, “that age” follows our death and God’s final judgment. In “the age to come,” God’s people have “eternal life” (Mark 10:30).

But the remarkable thing about NT teaching, in contrast with the Jewish conception, is that in one sense the “age to come” has already appeared in Christ. Believers in Christ are those “on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11). The closing of the holy places in the temple to worshipers is symbolic of the present age, so that when the veil is torn and we enter boldly into God’s presence through Christ, another age has begun (Heb. 9:8–9). Christ “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (9:26). For believers, then, the “coming age” has begun in Christ. He has dealt with sin once for all.

The resurrection of Jesus is the crucial sign that the “last days” are here. The Pharisees associated the last days with the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked. So Jesus associates that time with resurrection in John 6:39–40, 44, 54. But when the grieving Martha says that her brother Lazarus “will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” (John 11:24), Jesus replies, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (vv. 25–26). Then he proceeds to raise Lazarus from the dead, indicating that the life-giving power of the age to come is present in himself. So in Luke 17:21 Jesus tells the Pharisees that the kingdom is already in their midst, certainly referring to himself. Wherever Jesus is, there is the age to come.

After Jesus himself has risen, and signs of the Spirit’s presence abound (sent from the throne of Christ), Peter announces that Joel’s prophecy of the “last days” has been fulfilled (Acts 2:17). The writer to the Hebrews proclaims in the past tense that “in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:2).

The same conclusion follows from NT teaching on the kingdom of God. Recall the definition of the kingdom that I quoted earlier from Vos. The kingdom of God, long awaited, has come in Christ (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 12:28). The gospel is the gospel of the kingdom (4:23; 9:35; 10:7); the Sermon on the Mount, the ethic of the kingdom (5:3, 10, 19, 20; 6:33); the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer of the kingdom (6:10); the parables, the mysteries of the kingdom (13:11). The church has the keys of the kingdom (16:19). The kingdom of God has come. Christ the King has been raised to God’s right hand, where he has authority over all things (28:18).

Yet some biblical expectations for the last days and the kingdom are still unfulfilled. The bodily resurrection of the just and unjust has not taken place. The return of Christ and the final judgment remain future. The saints pray, “Thy kingdom come” (Matt. 6:10 kjv). That prayer assumes that the coming of the kingdom is future to some extent,

though the prayer contains petitions for the near future, not only for the ultimate consummation.

Sin and the curse continue on the earth. Indeed, these “last days” are “times of difficulty” (2 Tim. 3:1; cf. 2 Peter 3:3). They are times in which false teaching abounds, in which unscrupulous people try to undermine the doctrine and holiness of God’s people. Indeed, they are times when “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12).

So the biblical data is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, the last days are here in Christ. On the other hand, much remains future. The age to come is present; the present age lingers. From Jesus’ ministry until his return, the two ages exist simultaneously. Our present existence is, as Vos put it, “semi-eschatological.”

Below is Vos’s diagram of the two ages.<sup>2</sup> “This age” runs from the fall of Adam to the return of Christ (parousia). “The age to come” runs from the resurrection of Christ through all eternity. During the period between the resurrection and the parousia, the two ages exist side by side. See fig. 5.1.



**Fig. 5.1. The Two Ages**

It is important for us to understand the dynamic and the tension of the semi-eschatological age in which we live. Our salvation is complete in Christ, but sin will not be destroyed until his return. Or again, as biblical theologians often put it, salvation is *already*, but also *not yet*. Christ has all authority, but Satan still has some power. We can draw confidently on the power and love of God, yet there are perils in the way. We have died to sin and have been raised to righteousness in Christ (Rom. 6), and yet we must “put to death . . . what is earthly in you” (Col. 3:5). The battle is won, but there is much mopping up to be done.<sup>3</sup>

This historical paradox is a current form of the larger paradox of the relation of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. God has saved us through Christ, by his

2. Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 38.

3. Oscar Cullmann used World War II language to illustrate this paradox: Christ’s atonement and resurrection are like D-Day, his return and the final judgment V-Day. But of course, the resurrection of Jesus guarantees its final outcome in a way that D-Day could not.



own sovereign power. We must rely on him for all our provision. But this fact does not allow us to be passive. There is a battle to be fought (Eph. 6:10–20), a race to be run (1 Cor. 9:24–27). We are not to “let go and let God.” Rather, as Paul says, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13). God’s sovereign action does not discourage, but rather motivates us to fight the spiritual battle, confident that ultimate victory is God’s.

Some theologians present the semi-eschatological age as a time of suffering, pain, and defeat. Others present it as a time of victory for the gospel. In fact, both positions are correct. The history of the church has been full of suffering and persecution. But the blood of the martyrs has been the seed of the church, and often the worst persecutions have given rise to the strongest churches. And through history, Christian people have brought profound change to society, in the treatment of widows and orphans, the growth of learning, and the development of democracy, to mention only a few areas.

The *already* of the kingdom is not only the work of Christ in the past (his death, resurrection, and ascension). It is also what he is doing now, through the Spirit, in the church. The kingdom is to be “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). It is like yeast, or a seed, that grows large through a temporal process (Matt. 13:24–33). In this time, believers do suffer defeats. The growing kingdom brings growing pains to its subjects. But they also experience the wonderful blessings of living under God: the green pastures, still waters (Ps. 23:2), the table that God prepares for us in the presence of our enemies (v. 5), the return of houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and lands (Mark 10:30). And believers become “salt” and “light” to the rest of creation (Matt. 5:13–14).

## God the King

The kingdom of God (defined as a historical program, as we have done) is essentially the coming of the King. Very close to the image *Lord* is the image *king*. The Hebrew and Greek words for *king* occur over twenty-eight hundred times in Scripture. Add to those the references to *kingdom*, the corresponding verbs, and related forms, and we can see that kingship is indeed pervasive in Scripture. These references include, of course, references to human kings as well as to the divine one. But as images, human kingship and divine kingship influence each other. Human kingship is to some extent an image of the divine. But negatively also: God’s kingship stands in contrast with the corruption and tyranny of earthly kings.

That God is King is a major theme of Scripture, from Exodus 15:18 on. The Psalms speak often of the rule of God. Psalms 93–99, especially, provide concentrated reflection on the fact that God reigns over all. He is especially the King of Israel (Isa. 41:21) and over Israel’s human king (Pss. 5:2; 145:1; and elsewhere). When the Israelites ask Samuel to appoint them a king “such as all the other nations have” (1 Sam. 8:5 NIV), the Lord tells Samuel, “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king” (v. 7 NIV).

Recall from chapter 2 that the covenant relation is between a great king and a lesser king. So God rules by virtue of his covenant. In this context, *king* and *lord* are close synonyms. The lord is the head of the covenant, the supreme norm; the king is the supreme power, the controller, who leads his people to battle against the foe. So it makes sense to relate covenant to kingdom as authority to power, as normative and situational perspectives. And we should always remember that the Lord is the King, and the King is the Lord (Pss. 10:16; 24:8, 10; 29:10; 47:2; 84:3; 98:6).

God's throne is the ark of the covenant, between the cherubim and beside the book of the covenant (1 Sam. 4:4; Ps. 99:1; cf. Isa. 6:1–5). As the Lord, the King controls his realm and speaks with authority. He also stands with his people, to protect and defend them, to provide justice and mercy.

But God is King not only of Israel, but of all the nations, indeed of the whole earth (Ex. 15:18; Pss. 22:28; 96–99; 145). God rules all because he is God and brings all things to pass, but also, as I indicated in chapter 4, because he is related to the whole creation by covenant.

His kingdom is eternal (Ex. 15:18; Ps. 93:2), but also historical and temporal. God is King eternally by virtue of his divine nature. But the narrative of Scripture is a history of the coming of the kingdom.

God is not an absentee King. He is also the Warrior who defends his people Israel against his and their enemies (Ex. 15:3; cf. Deut. 33:26; Ps. 68:5). He is the “Lord of hosts,” as we have seen, the Lord of the angelic armies. When Israel is faithful to the Lord, she does not need to worry about her own resources (Deut. 20; Judg. 7:1–8). God fights for his people, often with no effort on their part (as 1 Sam. 7:10–13). Israel's victories are notable mainly for the supernatural assistance given to her. So the spiritual warfare is one that is fought by the “whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:10–20), the armor of faith, God's Word, righteousness, peace, salvation, and especially prayer. God himself wore this armor (Isa. 59:15–17) because there was no man who could deliver Israel from her sins. So Jesus, who delivers from sin, is the rider on the white horse, the Faithful and True, who “judges and makes war” (Rev. 19:11).

## Christ the King

God advances his kingdom by choosing the families of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as his special people, through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed and would come to know that he is Lord. So in the Psalms, the earthly king, David, advances the work of Yahweh, the King over him. As we saw in chapter 4, the Davidic covenant is the covenant of the kingdom. But David must also confess his sin (Pss. 32; 51). He looks forward to a greater King, One who is both his son and his Lord (Ps. 110:1). God is to set his King upon his holy hill, to rule all the nations (Pss. 2:1–12; 45; 72).

Jesus confounds the Pharisees by asking them how the messianic son of David could also be David's Lord (Matt. 22:41–46). It is evident that Jesus himself is the son of David greater than David himself. In him, God himself comes to rule his people. So, following John the Baptist (3:2), Jesus begins his preaching ministry by proclaiming, “The

kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17). It is he who will carry through God’s “supremacy against all opposing powers and [bring] men to the willing recognition of the same.”

The wise men who visit Jesus at his birth identify him as the “king of the Jews” (Matt. 2:2). Jesus resists the public demand that he become an earthly king (John 6:15), but in Luke 19:38, his disciples welcome him to Jerusalem with the song “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” When Pontius Pilate asks him whether that title is appropriate, he responds affirmatively (Matt. 27:11). Pilate and the Roman soldiers then use that title to taunt the Jews (Matt. 27:29, 37; Mark 15:9, 12), and in time the Jewish leaders themselves turn the taunt against Jesus (Mark 15:32). And the Jews formulate Jesus’ claim as a challenge to Rome, justifying his crucifixion (John 19:12, 15).

During his earthly life, Jesus did not reign in such a way as to challenge the political supremacy of Rome. But because of his atonement and resurrection, Paul is able to say:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9–11)

And Jesus himself announces, after his resurrection:

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

He is King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16; cf. 17:14).

Since Jesus’ ascension, the kingdom of God is the work of God through his people, bringing Jesus’ kingship to bear on the whole world. It is bringing people to bow the knee to him, and every tongue to confess his lordship. It is turning people into disciples, baptizing, and teaching them to observe everything that Jesus has taught us. Note that our teaching is not just any “teaching” (*didasko*), but a teaching “to observe” (*tereo*). The focus is not on propositions, but on actions. The discipleship class leads not only to “knowing that,” but to “knowing how.” Insofar as the teaching remains at the intellectual level, the work is not done. The teaching is to be kept, observed, applied.

So the Great Commission is a program for cultural change. As individuals bow the knee to Christ, they discover that worshiping Jesus must lead to action, bringing Jesus’ teachings to bear on everything. So the kingdom brings individuals to Christ and also brings those individuals to exalt him in every area of life. It is both individual and social change, until God consummates the kingdom at the return of Jesus to judge the living and the dead.<sup>4</sup>

4. In this respect I differ strongly from the view of the Escondido theologians that the kingdom in the present age is limited to the sermons and sacraments of the institutional church. See my *The Escondido Theology*

## The Gospel of the Kingdom

As the disciples go to all the nations, teaching them the things of Christ, their words are “good news,” “gospel.” Paul writes to the church of Corinth:

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. (1 Cor. 15:1–2)

In the OT, the phrase “good news” often refers, as in English, to any kind of welcome report, or any report that one might expect to be welcome (2 Sam. 4:10; 18:27; 1 Kings 1:42; 2 Kings 7:9). The prophecy of Isaiah, however, is the most important background for the NT gospel, for there the good news is specifically of divine redemption:

Get you up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good news;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;  
lift it up, fear not;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
“Behold your God!” (Isa. 40:9)

I was the first to say to Zion, “Behold, here they are!”  
and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news. (Isa. 41:27)

How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of him who brings good news,  
who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,  
who publishes salvation,  
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” (Isa. 52:7; cf. Nah. 1:15; Rom. 10:15)

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor;  
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;  
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn. (Isa. 61:1–2)

At Jesus’ birth, the angel proclaims this gospel to the shepherds:

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(Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Media, 2011).

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.  
For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.  
(Luke 2:10–11)

The gospel, then, is the good news of redemption through Christ. But this redemption is specifically through Christ as King. It is the message “your God reigns” (Isa. 52:7) and the royal act of freeing captives and executing vengeance (61:1). The angels’ message presents Christ as the new David, David’s son and David’s Lord. Jesus’ coming is the coming of the Lord, the coming of the King.

So the first preaching of the NT, by John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2) and by Jesus (4:23), is the “gospel of the kingdom,” that is, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17).<sup>5</sup> The first preaching by Jesus’ disciples is the same (10:7). Throughout the NT, the kingdom is the focus of the good news: see Matt. 9:35; 24:14; Luke 8:1; Acts 1:3; 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31.

But the kingdom in the NT is *already* and *not yet*. When Jesus chose to read Isaiah 61:1–2 in the synagogue at Nazareth, his hometown, according to Luke 4:16–21, announcing that the passage was fulfilled in him, he ended his reading before “and the day of vengeance of our God.” Jesus, at his first coming, does not carry out God’s vengeance, but only “the year of the Lord’s favor.” The Lord’s favor is *already*, his vengeance *not yet*.

“The Lord’s favor” is preeminently Jesus’ death on the cross, bearing our sins, and his resurrection, in which we rise to newness of life (Rom. 6:4). So when Paul formulates the contents of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11, he focuses on Jesus’ atonement and resurrection:

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. (1 Cor. 15:1–4)

Indeed, Paul can say that when he first preached the gospel at Corinth, he “decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Similarly, Paul in Acts 20:24 describes his preaching as “the gospel of the grace of God.”

Theological writers have not always found it easy to reconcile the *kingdom* emphasis in the gospel with its *grace* emphasis. But it is not difficult to bring the two together. Kingdom is a broader concept than grace, for it includes both grace and vengeance. Even Paul, who stresses grace, speaks of

that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Rom. 2:16)

5. “Kingdom of heaven” is the phrase preferred by Matthew, “kingdom of God” by the other NT writers. There is no reason to think of these as anything but synonymous. Perhaps Matthew’s Jewish readers were more comfortable avoiding direct reference to “God.”

Paul's gospel, like the gospel of Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Jesus, is a gospel of the whole kingdom, both grace and judgment. Acts 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23; and 28:31 describe Paul's preaching as a kingdom gospel.

So in the Great Commission, Jesus sends his disciples through the world to make disciples, not only teaching them about the cross and resurrection, important as those are, but also "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). The kingdom is *already* and *not yet*, but also growing through the world, like grain sown in a field (13:1–9), a mustard seed growing into a large tree (vv. 31–32), yeast growing through bread (v. 33), as Jesus' disciples apply to their lives all the things that Jesus taught. Today, in our own experience, people are finding the kingdom as a hidden treasure (v. 44) and as a costly pearl (vv. 45–46). They are caught up (with, to be sure, nonelect people) in God's dragnet (vv. 47–50). The kingdom is established in the work of Jesus and will be consummated at his return to judge at the end of this age. But the kingdom is also something that expands through the world between those two great events. The growth of the kingdom, its expansion, is a present reality. That growth is given by God's sovereign grace, through the work of believers as they obey Jesus' Great Commission.

## Law and Gospel

Much has been said in the theological literature about the relationship of gospel to law. Martin Luther, for example, argued for a very sharp distinction between these. He said that God's law tells us what we must do to be right with God. But the gospel tells us how we can be saved from God's wrath against those who have not kept his law. God's law includes all his commands; the gospel contains all his promises. Luther warned against any confusion of law and gospel. In his view, there should be no gospel in the law, no law in the gospel. For him, what is most important in theology is to "properly distinguish" law and gospel. John Calvin also spoke of the law-gospel distinction, but the distinction never became as central in Reformed theology as in Lutheran theology. Indeed, Lutherans regularly criticized Calvinists for confusing law and gospel.<sup>6</sup>

It makes sense to say that we should not confuse God's demands with his promises. Nevertheless, the kind of sharp distinction that Luther proposed is not biblical. For one thing, biblical proclamations of gospel include commands, particularly commands to repent and believe (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38). And God gave his law to the children of Israel in a context of gospel: he had delivered them out of Egypt; therefore, they should keep his law (Ex. 20:2–17). The law is a gift of God's grace (Ps. 119:29). There is more to be said, evidently.<sup>7</sup>

6. The law-gospel distinction plays a central role in the Lutheran Formula of Concord, but it rarely if ever appears in Reformed confessions, the Second Helvetic being an exception. There is a similar difference between Lutheran and Reformed systematic theologies.

7. For my analysis, see *DCL*, 182–91. See also the booklet by P. Andrew Sandlin, *Wrongly Dividing the Word: Overcoming the Law-Gospel Distinction* (Mount Hermon, CA: Center for Cultural Leadership, 2010).



Traditionally, Lutherans and Calvinists have distinguished three “uses” of the law: (1) to restrain evil in society, (2) to terrify sinners in order to drive them to Christ, and (3) to provide guidance to those who believe to live the Christian life. (Sometimes the first use is called the second and vice versa.) There have been controversies among Lutherans about the legitimacy of the third use, and a number of Calvinists<sup>8</sup> have also been uncomfortable with it, thinking that the third use leads to legalism or moralism. But in fact, the Bible abounds with commands that God expects believers to obey. We are not saved by keeping the law, but we are always obligated to keep the law, and once we are saved and raised from death to life, we desire to keep the law out of love for God and for Jesus. The law not only is a terrifying set of commands to drive us to Christ, but also is the gentle voice of the Lord, showing his people that the best blessings of this life come from following his will.

In the preaching of the kingdom, law and gospel come together. The coming of the kingdom is the coming of a King to enforce his law on a disobedient world, that is, to enforce his covenant against covenant-breakers. But the King who comes is full of love and forgiveness. So his coming is good news, gospel, not only because he judges the wicked, but because he brings redemption, forgiveness, and reward to his redeemed people. When God brought Israel out of Egypt, he spoke good news to her: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2). And then, very naturally, he proclaimed his commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image,” and on through the tenth commandment (vv. 3–17). The commandments were indeed terrifying to the Israelites (vv. 18–21), but they were part of the good news, setting forth a way of life for Israel in fellowship with her Lord and Savior. As I said in the previous chapter, the Decalogue was a covenant between God and Israel, and Israel was to receive it by a living, obedient faith.

## One Kingdom or Two?

Having drawn a sharp distinction between law and gospel, Luther also distinguished two kingdoms, in effect a kingdom of law and a kingdom of gospel. The kingdom of law was the civil order, ruled by the state. The kingdom of gospel was the order of salvation, ruled by the church. The civil order is secular, the church sacred. The civil order is governed by natural law, the sacred order by Scripture. Every believer belongs to both kingdoms, but the two do not overlap in their functions. So modern advocates of the Two Kingdoms theory maintain that the church should never (or very rarely) try to influence the secular world, nor should it allow itself to be influenced by secular culture.

It should be evident from our study so far that Scripture speaks of only one kingdom of God. That kingdom is the historical program of God coming to overcome his enemies, to redeem his people, and to bring his lordship to bear on all areas of created

8. For examples, see my book *The Escondido Theology*, cited earlier.



reality. There is no “secular kingdom,” no kingdom ruled only by natural law and not by Scripture. All people, all institutions, all spheres of human life have a responsibility to hear God’s Word, to respond to it obediently, and to accept the renewal of God’s grace.<sup>9</sup>

After Cain killed his brother Abel (Gen. 4:1–15), his family moved to Nod, east of Eden, and built up cities and culture. These people ignored and disobeyed God, to such an extent that eventually their wickedness came to characterize the human race as a whole, to such an extent that God determined to destroy it, except for righteous Noah and his family. But even after the flood, even after God’s covenant with Noah (8:21), human beings drifted far from God. It would be wrong to describe their cultures as *secular*. These cultures were religious, but devoted to false gods. *Secular* societies, societies that pretend to exist without religion, are a modern phenomenon. But even modern secular culture is rebellion against God. It is not a religiously neutral social order, as Luther and others have evidently imagined. For there is no neutrality. A society that tries to live without God inevitably worships something, whether a false god, an ideology, human reason, or the state. These are idols as certainly as were Baal and Astarte. To develop a culture apart from God’s Word is sin. And sin is always religious. It is rebellion against the true God, embracing an idol.

Crime is always the expression of false religion. A criminal rejects God’s law and places himself above it. That is a religious choice. Similarly, righteousness involves a choice to worship God in one’s actions. Wickedness and righteousness are religious through and through.

So Scripture never remotely suggests that such a neutral order is possible. We should not imagine that God commanded such neutrality as a means of restraining sin. Such societies may indeed restrain sin to some extent (as agents of God’s common grace), but they cannot be justified for that reason. The kingdom of God asserts God’s rule over all people, all areas of their lives, all human institutions, all human culture. Anyone who is not on God’s side is against him.

## Life in the Kingdom

In Matthew 6:33, Jesus tells his disciples to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” “These things” are things such as food and clothing mentioned in the preceding context. So Jesus sets the kingdom as the goal of human life. Believers ought to make it their highest goal to contribute to the historical program of the kingdom of God. They should carry out the Great Commission, to make disciples for Jesus. They should do what they can to defeat evil and all that opposes God in the world and bring people to a willing recognition of Christ as King of kings.

Jesus devotes much of his oral teaching to our life in the kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the “Beatitudes,” the blessings given to his kingdom disciples:

9. Recall that in chapter 4, I argued against those who think that God’s covenant with Noah is a secular order.

comfort in the midst of mourning, inheritance for those who are meek, mercy to the merciful (Matt. 5:1–11). Those in the kingdom are to be salt and light in the earth (vv. 13–16). They keep the law, not just externally, but from the heart (vv. 17–48). Note that the kingdom and law are not opposed. The law continues as the standard of kingdom life, the normative perspective. But the kingdom provides direction, prioritization, a situational perspective.<sup>10</sup>

The kingdom begins in Jesus himself and in the working of the Spirit, bringing people to acknowledge him as King. So the headquarters of the kingdom is the church, the community of those who worship and follow God in Jesus. But God's intention is that believers will not keep the kingdom to themselves, but will bring it into all spheres of human life: Paul says, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). As believers take their faith into their workplaces and culture, they take the kingdom with them. They reach unbelievers with the gospel, as Jesus commanded. But even when their associates remain unconverted, they seek to do their work in line with Jesus' standards, and this brings about changes in culture. I hesitate to use the term *transform* to describe these changes, for often the changes are small and fragmentary. Only at the Lord's return will the transformation of the creation be complete. But it begins now. Jesus compares the kingdom to little things that grow large: a mustard seed (Matt. 13:31), leaven (13:33). He compares them to common things that have uncommon importance: believers are salt (5:13) and light (5:14) in the world. He teaches his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (6:10): the coming of the kingdom here is not only the final judgment, but the growing influence of God's will on earth, paralleling the obedience of angels and departed saints in heaven.

The Two Kingdoms view maintains that the kingdom came in Jesus and will come again in Jesus' return, but that it is confined to the church in the period between Jesus' two advents. That view goes against the passages cited above. Clearly, the kingdom has in fact deeply affected human culture over the centuries: in the sciences, the arts, the treatment of orphans and widows, education, and every other area of importance to human beings. We must continue to seek the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33) every day as Jesus has commanded, and we should expect to see the results in divine blessing.

## Key Terms

Kingdom of God (Vos)

History of salvation

The two ages

*Already* and *not yet*

Parousia

This age

The age to come

10. For elaboration, see chapters 9–17 of *DCL*.

Semi-eschatology  
 Gospel  
 Kingdom emphasis  
 Grace emphasis  
 Three uses of the law  
 Two Kingdoms view  
 Secular  
 Neutrality

## Study Questions

1. “Why did God choose to stretch out the drama of salvation over so long a time?” Show why this question is important and respond to it.
2. “So in Scripture one event will picture, foreshadow, even motivate another event a thousand years later.” Give an example.
3. “But the remarkable thing about NT teaching, in contrast with the Jewish conception, is that in one sense the ‘age to come’ has already appeared in Christ.” Explain; evaluate.
4. Reproduce Vos’s diagram of the two ages and explain every line.
5. Describe the nature of Jesus’ kingship. To what extent is he like or unlike earthly kings?
6. Describe the tension between the “kingdom emphasis” and the “grace emphasis” in the gospel. How can that tension be resolved?
7. Describe and evaluate Martin Luther’s view of the relationship between law and gospel.
8. “In the preaching of the kingdom, law and gospel come together.” Explain; evaluate.
9. Respond to the Two Kingdoms view.
10. “But even modern secular culture is rebellion against God.” Why is it important to remember this?
11. “And sin is always religious. It is rebellion against the true God, embracing of an idol.” Explain; evaluate.
12. Summarize how the kingdom makes a difference in the Christian life.

## Memory Verses

**Isa. 52:7:** How beautiful upon the mountains  
 are the feet of him who brings good news,  
 who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,  
 who publishes salvation,  
 who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

**Matt. 6:33:** But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

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

**1 Cor. 15:1–4:** 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.

### Resources for Further Study

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Sandlin, P. Andrew. *Wrongly Dividing the Word: Overcoming the Law-Gospel Distinction*. Mount Hermon, CA: Center for Cultural Leadership, 2010.

Vos, Geerhardus. *The Teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958.

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## CHAPTER 6

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# THE FAMILY OF GOD

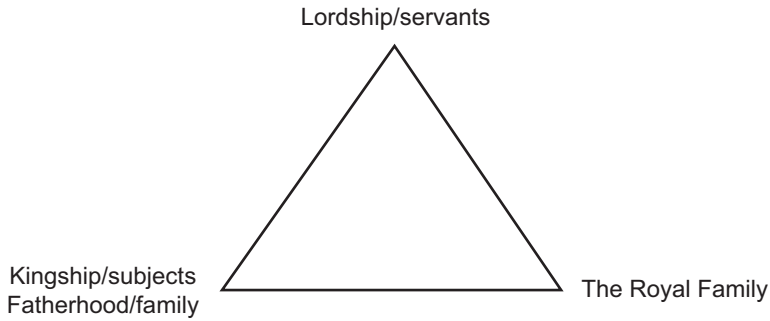
SOME PEOPLE HAVE QUESTIONED why I chose God's lordship, rather than his fatherhood, as the main theme of my four-book series. At one level, the question was easy to answer. In Scripture, *Lord* is far more frequent than *Father* as a title of God. *Father*, applied to God, is rare in the OT, becoming common only in the NT; but God's covenant lordship is a theme that pervades both Testaments, OT no less than NT.

At another level, however, the question is a serious one. *Father*, though infrequent in the OT as a title of God, emerges in the NT as Jesus' own name for the One who sent him. (He does not address God as *Lord* or as *King*.) The relation of the Father to the Son reveals the communion of the Trinity itself.

But then, Jesus also authorizes his disciples to call on God as their Father (Matt. 6:9). So *Father* is the name of God most closely associated with Jesus. Further, this is our most intimate way to speak of, and with, God. It is the child's expression *Abba* (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6), sometimes interpreted "Daddy." So the question becomes: Shouldn't theology focus on the name of God most associated with Christ himself and most richly evocative of the special relation between God and the NT believer?

This is a persuasive argument, but not persuasive enough to make me change the theme of the Theology of Lordship series of books or of this one. Nevertheless, God's fatherhood must receive our full appreciation. In this book I will treat it as a perspective on God's relation to us, coordinate with his lordship and his kingship. God's lordship is the normative perspective, which stresses God's authority as head of the covenant. His kingship is the situational perspective, identifying God as the One who pursues the purposes of his redemptive history. His fatherhood is the existential perspective, his intimate, personal relationship to each of his people.

Corresponding to these titles of God are three titles of God's people. Corresponding to God's lordship, we are servants. Corresponding to his kingship, we are subjects. Corresponding to his fatherhood, we are his family, his sons and daughters. See fig. 6.1.



**Fig. 6.1. Titles of God's People**

Although *Father* is not a frequent name of God in the OT, Scripture from the beginning presents the history of redemption not only as the history of covenants or of the kingdom, but of the royal family. The cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 included a command to reproduce, so that the seed of our first parents was to “fill the earth.” God renewed that command to Noah’s family after the flood (9:7). Through reproduction, indeed, was to come the One who would deliver mankind from sin, the offspring of the woman (3:15). So Scripture is full of genealogies, indicating not only the development of culture through the nations, but also the progress of the history of redemption, the ancestors of the family from which the Deliverer would come.<sup>1</sup>

And so the history of redemption moves from generation to generation within that family. Its focus moves from the family of Adam to that of Noah, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Israel as that family become a nation. Then, as we saw in chapters 4 and 5, David’s family becomes especially prominent during his lifetime and later, and much is said about Christ’s belonging to David’s line. David is important as the subject of God’s messianic covenant, as the model head of the kingdom of God, and as the most illustrious ancestor of Jesus’ genealogy.

Then in the NT, believers are God’s family, under his fatherhood. *Brother* is the most common way of referring to a believer after Jesus’ resurrection. The term distinguishes the believer from the world. For example, in 1 Corinthians 5:9–11, Paul tells the church that he has no objection to their associating with immoral people in the world. But he says:

I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. (1 Cor. 5:11)

1. Not only are there literal genealogies in Scripture, lists of names indicating who begat whom, but the history of redemption itself can be described as a genealogy or generation. The book of Genesis is divided into sections headed by the phrase “these are the generations of” (Gen. 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; and so on). The “generations of the heavens and the earth” (2:4) show what transpired on the earth after it was created. The “generations of Adam” (5:1) describe Adam’s descendants and tell stories concerning them. The history of Genesis is a family history. Luke’s genealogy of Jesus traces him back to Adam and identifies Adam as “the son of God” (Luke 3:38).

The name *brother* (which, of course, includes sisters) is a precious title, indicating fellowship in the holy family. We should not give any credence to those who claim the name of brother and yet engage in immorality.

Paul extends the family metaphor to refer to himself as father:

I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (1 Cor. 4:14–15; cf. Philem. 10)

This may appear contrary to Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees:

They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. (Matt. 23:5–10)

But Jesus here speaks somewhat hyperbolically to say that the error of the Pharisees, claiming a level of authority that belonged to God alone, should never be found among his disciples. In 1 Corinthians 4:14–15, Paul does claim authority, but only the authority of the One who first brought the gospel to the church and who through that gospel brought the church into fellowship with Christ. Here the father image conveys gentleness and love rather than domination.

The family image also indicates that in salvation God calls not only individuals, but families, households, even nations. God's covenant with Noah was also a covenant with his family. The same was true of Abraham, indicated especially by God's command to Abraham to circumcise all the males in his household (Gen. 17:8–14). When Abraham's family grows into the nation of Israel, God insists that their children be circumcised as well (Ex. 4:24–26; Lev. 12:3; Josh. 5:2). In the same spirit, Peter on the day of Pentecost says:

For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. (Acts 2:39)

So in the new covenant also, God is calling families, and explicitly children (Matt. 19:14),<sup>2</sup> to himself. Conversions in the NT are commonly of household units (Acts 11:14; 16:15, 31–34; 1 Cor. 1:16). The church's meetings were commonly in someone's house (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2).<sup>3</sup>

2. When Jesus lays hands on the children and blesses them, he is performing a priestly act, placing the name of God upon them, as in Numbers 6:22–27.

3. The fact that God calls families to himself in both Testaments and the household nature of both circumcision and baptism are relevant to the question of the subjects of baptism, which I will discuss in chapter 49 of



So the church is not only the covenant people of God, and the subjects of the king, but also the family of God. Through Christ, our Father “sets the lonely in families” (Ps. 68:6 NIV). So clearly it is appropriate for this family to address God as Father, as Jesus taught us to do.

## The Fatherhood of God

How is God’s fatherhood related to his lordship and kingship? The line between political and family images in Scripture is not sharp. The human race began as a family, with the father or patriarch playing the roles of prophet, priest, and king. As the human race increased in numbers, these roles became more differentiated. When the family of Israel became a nation, Moses, on the advice of Jethro his father-in-law, set up a system of judges over “thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens” (Ex. 18:21 NIV), with himself at the top of the hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> So civil government in Scripture is an expansion of family government. And, appropriately, Scripture uses *father* as a metaphor for civil and military rule (Gen. 45:8; Judg. 5:7 [mother!]; 2 Kings 5:13; Isa. 49:23). Indeed, the metaphor extends to prophets, wisdom teachers, and church leaders (2 Kings 2:12; 13:14; Ps. 34:11; Prov. 1:8, 10, 15; 1 Cor. 4:15; Gal. 4:19 [mother, again]. Paul presses the analogy to say that a man should not be an elder in the church if he is not a good father (1 Tim. 3:4–5; Titus 1:6). So the Westminster catechisms understand the fifth commandment, “Honor your father and your mother,” as a principle applying to all human relationships.<sup>5</sup>

So in Scripture God’s fatherhood is not sharply distinct from his lordship. Sometimes it is linked with creation, as in Deuteronomy 32:6, where God rebukes Israel for its corruption:

Do you thus repay the LORD,  
you foolish and senseless people?  
Is not he your father, who created you,  
who made you and established you?

Cf. Mal. 2:10. Similarly in Acts 17:28, where Paul quotes the words of the pagan Aratus, “We are indeed his offspring.” God is Father of all by virtue of creation.

But God exercises a special kind of fatherhood toward his chosen people by virtue of his covenants with them. In such contexts, Scripture emphasizes more specifically the qualities of a good family head: the father as protector, provider, and guide (Deut. 1:31), showing compassion to his children (Ps. 103:13), especially toward the fatherless (Ps. 68:5). The Father is the Redeemer (Isa. 63:16).<sup>6</sup> He reaches out with joy to the

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this book.

4. See *DCL*, 593–602, for a longer account of the relation between family and state.

5. *WLC* 123–33; *WSC* 63–66.

6. But in the context of Isaiah 63:16, the prophet knows that redemption has not yet been accomplished. He calls God to cease withholding his tenderness and compassion.

returning prodigal (Luke 15:11–32). Discipline, too, is important (Prov. 3:11–12; Heb. 12:4–11). Though sometimes painful, it is evidence of the Father’s love. Indeed, without it, we would not be children of God at all, but illegitimate (Heb. 12:8). Even as a Father, God is not to be trifled with. Intimate and compassionate as he is, he requires the honor of the fifth commandment (Mal. 1:6): “If then I am a father,” he asks, “where is my honor?” Cf. Jer. 3:4–5, 19.

The father image, applied to God, is somewhat rare in the OT, as we have seen, but it becomes quite central to the NT, because of Jesus’ teaching and because of his special relationship to God.<sup>7</sup> Regularly, he refers to God as “the Father” and “my Father,” and to himself as “son.” Jesus is “Son of God” in a unique sense, one that can be expounded only in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Jesus, the Son of God is no less than God.

But remarkably, Jesus teaches his disciples also to address God as Father, as in the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). God is not our Father in the same sense as he is the Father of Jesus; we are not God. Jesus delicately distinguishes the two fatherhoods of God when he speaks with Mary Magdalene after his resurrection: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (John 20:17). Elsewhere in the NT, the term *adoption* is used to describe our relation to the Father (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). Jesus is the Son by nature; we are sons by adoption. Jesus is the eternal Son, but God confers sonship upon us in time (cf. John 1:12–13). But the distinction is not a separation. We are “fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17). We “suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”<sup>9</sup>

We are sons for Jesus’ sake, because of him, and in him. He has redeemed us so that we might receive the rights of sons (Gal. 4:5). All believers in Christ, therefore, are sons of God; none are more or less so. In the body of Christ, the Gentiles are coheirs with the Jews (v. 7).

So to know God as *Father* is a special privilege of God’s family, of those who know Christ. A special sign of this relationship is the intimate Aramaic word *Abba*, sometimes described as a child’s word for “Daddy,” used among the early Christians. Jesus used the term (Mark 14:36), and Paul teaches that God has sent upon us the Spirit of his Son, of Jesus, enabling us also to address God in that way (Gal. 4:6; cf. Rom. 8:15).

In a related family image, God is also related to his people as *husband*.<sup>10</sup> To the barren woman, deserted by her husband, Isaiah says that “your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name” (Isa. 54:5). God is the One who found Israel “wallowing in your blood” (Ezek. 16:6), abandoned. He said to her, “Live!,” saved her life, and married her. But she was unfaithful. Adultery images idolatry, and in Hosea 1–3 the

7. Of course, the concept of adoption, of God’s taking a people to bear his name, is not foreign to the OT, as we saw in the previous chapter. But in the NT the image of God’s fatherhood to describe this relationship is far more pervasive.

8. See my discussion in chapters 21–22 of this book.

9. See the discussion of adoption in chapter 42.

10. Both *father* and *husband*. Biblical teachings are always consistent with one another, but biblical images are not necessarily so.

prophet himself becomes the image, marrying a prostitute, taking her back despite her unfaithfulness. In the NT, Christ is the Bridegroom, the church the bride:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, so that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25–27)

As father and husband, God identifies himself as head of the family. They are terms of authority, but also of love, compassion, and grace.

### Father and Mother?

Much recent theology has focused on the appropriateness of feminine language for God. The late evangelical theologian Paul K. Jewett made this question central to his *God, Creation, and Revelation*.<sup>11</sup> Although he denied in his preface that “I have any thought of accommodating the exposition of the Christian faith to the canons of modernity,”<sup>12</sup> he sometimes used *she* to refer to God<sup>13</sup> and gave much space to the defense of feminist arguments. Elizabeth Johnson’s *She Who Is*,<sup>14</sup> a comprehensive treatise on the doctrine of God, has as its main thesis the necessity of using feminine language (more or less exclusively, for the time being<sup>15</sup>) in reference to God. These titles are typical of many.

This question is certainly not a major concern of Scripture itself, nor is it a high priority of this volume. But since theology is application, it is important for us to apply biblical principles to issues of concern to contemporary people. And there certainly are biblical principles that are relevant to this question.

### What Would a Female God Be Like?

First, we should be clear that this question is a question about *imagery*. No one argues that God is literally male or female, for the general consensus among Christians (and, in my view, the biblical teaching) is that God is incorporeal.<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Johnson does believe that God is physical in the panentheistic sense: God’s body is the world.<sup>17</sup> But even she does not base her argument for the femininity of God on physical characteristics.

Further, although Scripture sometimes represents God anthropomorphically by using images of bodily parts, those parts never include sexual organs.<sup>18</sup> So sexuality as

11. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.

12. *Ibid.*, xvi.

13. *Ibid.*, 336 and following unit.

14. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996. I will interact with some of Johnson’s arguments in this section.

15. *Ibid.*, 54.

16. See my later discussion of God’s incorporeality, chapter 25.

17. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 230–33. She introduces her panentheism toward the end of the book. Her main arguments don’t depend on it in any obvious way.

18. The Hebrew verb *racham* (“have compassion”) is related to the noun *rechem* (“womb”). So some have thought there was an allusion to God’s “womb” in Psalm 103:13 and Jeremiah 31:20. Similarly with the corresponding

such is not part of Scripture's *visual* imagery. The issues concerning "feminine images of God," therefore, are subtle. They are questions about analogies between God's status, character, personality, and actions and those we associate with women.

The very nature of this question raises problems for feminism. Are there traits of character or personality distinctive to women in some degree? Sometimes feminists have said no. In their view, all human character and personality traits are common to men and women, and to think otherwise is to engage in stereotypes. Other times, they have recognized that there are differences (in degree, at least), but have wanted society to give greater honor to those traits associated with women.

Johnson and some others want to have it both ways. Johnson insists that our notion of the feminine (and therefore the feminine God) should include "intellectual, artistic," and "public leadership," even "pride and anger."<sup>19</sup> She praises the religion of Ishtar (in the OT, Astarte or Ashtoreth, the wife of Baal, Judg. 2:13; 10:6; 1 Sam. 7:3–4; 12:10) for finding in its goddess "a source of divine power and sovereignty embodied in female form," who wages war and exercises judgment.<sup>20</sup> On this basis, male and female traits are essentially the same. What society needs to understand is that they can be found in women as well as men.<sup>21</sup>

This emphasis conflicts, however, with Johnson's distaste for the notions of "power-over,"<sup>22</sup> rule, and submission.<sup>23</sup> She sees these as typically male characteristics that feminist theology should avoid ascribing to God. Is "power-over" a male trait that feminist theology would displace in favor of female traits? Or is it a trait that feminists should embrace as properly feminine and find its archetype in a female deity?

It is not clear, therefore, what kind of god a female deity would be. Would she be far more nurturing, kind, hospitable, friendly than the male deity of patriarchal theology? Or would she be just as powerful, dominant, aggressive as any male, but nevertheless somehow female? Johnson usually seems to favor the latter alternative, with some inconsistency, as we have seen. But then what is distinctively female about this female deity? If her femininity is not physical, we can judge her sexuality only by traits of character and personality. But on Johnson's description, the goddess's traits are common to males and females. So it is hard to judge what Johnson really means to assert in saying that God is female.

### *Feminine Images of God in Scripture*

Nevertheless, we should proceed to look at the biblical data. It should be agreed that though God is the Creator and therefore the exemplar of both "masculine" and

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NT term *splanchnizomai*. This term and its cognate forms never clearly refer to a womb in the NT. I believe this argument presses etymology too far.

19. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 53. Cf. 181–85, 256–59.

20. *Ibid.*, 55–56. Johnson frequently appeals to non-Christian religions to commend their theology of gender. That practice raises legitimate questions about the biblical integrity of her theology.

21. Note also her critique of stereotypes in *ibid.*, 47–54.

22. As in *ibid.*, 21, 69, 269–71.

23. *Ibid.*, 69.

“feminine” virtues (however these are defined), the biblical images of God, insofar as sexuality is relevant to them, are predominantly masculine. The pronouns and verbs referring to God in Scripture are always masculine, and the images used of him (Lord, King, Father, husband, etc.) are typically masculine.<sup>24</sup>

There are, however, some feminine images of God in the Bible. In Deuteronomy 32:18, God through Moses rebukes Israel, saying:

You deserted the Rock, who fathered you;  
You forgot the God who gave you birth. (NIV)

In this image, God plays both male and female roles in Israel’s origin. In Numbers 11:12, Moses, frustrated by the grumbling of the Israelites, denies before God that he (Moses) had conceived these people and brought them forth. So he asks, “Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant?” (NIV). Perhaps the thought of Deuteronomy 32:18 lies in the background of Moses’ words: it is God who conceived Israel and gave her birth, and so God is the One who should be her nursemaid. These two passages are often mentioned in the feminist literature, but the female imagery is very brief in the contexts of the verses. Nothing much is made of the fact that God gives birth or might be nursemaid. The imagery here is less striking than that of Galatians 4:19, where the apostle Paul describes himself as being in the pains of childbirth for the church, and 1 Thessalonians 2:7, where he says that the apostles were “gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.” No one ever suggests because of these passages that we should regard Paul as female, or as “mother.” Nor do Numbers 11:12 and Deuteronomy 32:18 require us to rethink God’s gender.<sup>25</sup>

In Isaiah 42:14–15, God declares impending judgment:

For a long time I have held my peace;  
I have kept still and restrained myself;  
now I will cry out like a woman in labor;  
I will gasp and pant.  
I will lay waste mountains and hills,  
and dry up all their vegetation.

Feminist writers often present this passage as a feminine image of God. The image here is certainly feminine. An expectant mother may spend many months in modest

24. The image *judge* has one female exemplar, Deborah (Judg. 4–5).

25. Nor, even more obviously, should we draw such a conclusion from Isaiah 46:3. The passage mentions Israel’s conception and birth, but does not suggest at all that God conceived and bore the nation. Of course he did, in a way, and the passage may recall Deuteronomy 32:18; but Isaiah 46:3 certainly does nothing to strengthen the theological case for a feminine God. The same should be said of Isaiah 49:15, often mentioned in the feminist literature. In this passage, God places his love for his people far above and beyond the love of a mother for her baby. There is a resemblance between God and the mother, but the note of contrast is more predominant. In the verse God claims not to be a mother, but to be far greater than any mother. And in Isaiah 66, it is Zion who is in labor (v. 8) and who will nurse (vv. 11–12). God’s only motherly function in the passage is to comfort (v. 13).

quietness, but when her time comes to give birth she will scream! So God delays his judgment, but when the right time comes he will certainly make his presence known. Of course, Scripture often mentions the pain of childbirth as God's curse (Gen. 3:16) and, proverbially, the worst pain imaginable. So as metaphor it applies naturally and frequently to both men and women. Psalm 48:4–6 reads:

For behold, the kings assembled;  
they came on together.  
As soon as they saw it [Zion], they were astounded;  
they were in panic; they took to flight.  
Trembling took hold of them there,  
anguish as of a woman in labor.

The kings are male, but they tremble like a woman giving birth. Cf. Isa. 13:8; 21:3; 26:17; Jer. 4:31; 6:24; Mic. 4:9. So although we should acknowledge Scripture's use of this feminine metaphor for God, we should not derive any broader consequences from this fact. This image gives us no encouragement whatever to think of God as female. The feminine imagery used for God in Isaiah 42:14–15 is common in Scripture, often used for male persons.

In Luke 15:8–10, Jesus tells a parable about a woman who lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully to find a lost coin. When she finds it, she calls her friends together to rejoice. Some believe the woman represents God, perhaps specifically in the person of Jesus, as do the shepherd and the father in the other two Luke 15 parables, though the point of the parable focuses more on the rejoicing of the friends (= the angels, v. 10) than on the homemaker's efforts. In Matthew 23:37, Jesus compares himself to a hen who gathers her chicks under her wings. A feminine metaphor, but certainly not one that calls into question the gender of Jesus.

Beyond these specific passages, there are some broader biblical ideas thought by some to presuppose a feminine element of some kind in God. One is the use of *racham* and *splanchnizomai* for divine compassion, a use that I discussed briefly in footnote 18. See chapter 12 for more discussion.

Another is the use of *Spirit* (Heb. *ruach*, Gr. *pneuma*). *Ruach* is a feminine noun, and Genesis 1:2 may picture the Spirit "brooding" as a mother bird. Scripture also represents the Spirit as the Giver of Life (Ps. 104:30), particularly new birth (John 3:5–6).

Not much can be derived from the grammatical point. Feminine nouns do not necessarily denote female persons,<sup>26</sup> and the corresponding Greek term *pneuma* is neuter. "Brooding" is a possible interpretation of the word *rachaf* in Genesis 1:2. The word *born* (*gennao*) can mean "beget" as well as "bear," so it can refer to the male role in reproduction as well as to the female. Nevertheless, the interpretation "bear" is preferable in John 3:5 because of Nicodemus's response in verse 4. I would conclude that there

26. Since examples can sometimes help to get us out of the habit of relying too much on etymology, I point out here that the Latin *uterus* ("womb," as in English) is masculine.



are a couple of feminine images of the Spirit in Scripture, but that is not sufficient to suggest as some do that the Spirit is the feminine person of the Trinity.<sup>27</sup> If the group of images that we discussed earlier is insufficient to justify talk of divine femininity, certainly these two images are not sufficient to prove the femininity of the Spirit.

Another concept under discussion is that of *wisdom* (Heb. *hokmah*, Gr. *sophia*). Both Greek and Hebrew terms are feminine nouns, and in Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman (Prov. 7:4; 8:1–9:18). Wisdom is a divine figure in Proverbs 8:22–31, and the NT identifies it with Christ (1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Col. 2:3; cf. Isa. 11:2; Jer. 23:5), as it also uses the closely related term *Word* (John 1:1–18). So some have concluded that the second person of the Trinity is feminine.<sup>28</sup>

But that is a poor argument. For one thing, Jesus is unquestionably male. The suggestion, therefore, that the nature of wisdom requires female embodiment is simply wrong. As for the female personification of wisdom in Proverbs, there is a perfectly obvious reason for that, one that has nothing to do with a female element in the Godhead. Proverbs 1–9 presents the reader with two women, sometimes called “Lady Wisdom” and “Lady Folly.” Lady Folly is the harlot who entices a young man to immorality. Lady Wisdom also cries out to men in the city (8:1–4), urging on them the alternative, a godly life. Wisdom is a lady, not because the writer wants to assert a feminine element in the Godhead, but simply as a literary device presenting a positive alternative to the obviously female prostitute.

My conclusion from these biblical references is that there are indeed feminine images of God in Scripture, but they are rather few and suggest no sexual ambivalence in the divine nature. They do not necessitate, or even encourage, the use of *mother* for God, or the use of feminine pronouns for him. Nor do they justify attempts to suppress the masculine images or pronouns.

### *Theological Importance of Masculine Imagery*

But the feminist might reply here that since God is not literally male, and Scripture contains some female imagery as well as male, we should be free to speak of God in either male or female terms. Johnson asks, “If it is not meant that God is male when masculine imagery is used, why the objection when feminine images are introduced?”<sup>29</sup>

This reply would be cogent if the biblical preponderance of male imagery were theologically unimportant. So feminists often argue that Scripture places little importance on the maleness of Jesus, or on the importance of speaking of God in masculine terms. The masculine imagery, they argue, is understandable in view of the patriarchalism of ancient culture, but it makes no difference to the essential message of Scripture.

There are, however, a number of reasons to think that the overwhelming preponderance of masculine imagery has some theological importance:

27. For some references, see Johnson, *She Who Is*, 50–54. Johnson herself prefers not to limit the femininity of God to the person of the Spirit, though she discusses the Spirit extensively (124–49).

28. *Ibid.*, 150–69.

29. *Ibid.*, 34.



1. As we have seen, God's names are of great importance theologically. They reveal him. There is no reason to assume that the proportions of male and female imagery are not part of this revelation of his nature. As Johnson and others insist, a change of the balance of sexual imagery is not a theologically neutral change; it does change our concept of God.<sup>30</sup> Do we have the right to change the biblical concept of God?

2. To underscore the last point, it is also important to recognize that in Scripture God names himself. His names, attributes, and images are not the result of human speculation or imagination, but of revelation.<sup>31</sup> He has not authorized change in the balance of male and female imagery, and we should not presume to make such changes on our own authority.<sup>32</sup>

3. Female deities were well known to the biblical writers. Ashtoreth (Judg. 10:6; 1 Sam. 7:4; 12:10) was worshiped by the Canaanites as the wife of Baal. The coupling of male and female deities was an important aspect of pagan fertility worship. So in writing about Yahweh, the OT writers did not choose masculine language unthinkingly, unaware of any alternative. They were not determined by a unanimous cultural consensus. Rather, they distinctly rejected worship of a goddess or of a divine couple.

4. As we will see in chapter 10, creation is a divine act that produces a reality outside of God himself, a *creaturely other*. The world is not divine, nor is it an emanation from his essence. Nor does God create by "making room 'within' himself for the nondivine."<sup>33</sup> As a metaphor for this biblical view of creation, the male role in reproduction is superior to the female.

5. In Scripture, the most central name for God is *Lord*, which indicates his headship of the covenants between himself and his creatures. In Scripture, rule in the covenant community is typically a male prerogative. Kings, priests, and prophets are generally male. Authority in the church is given to male elders (1 Cor. 14:35; 1 Tim. 2:11–15).<sup>34</sup>

30. So they really do not believe, though they sometimes claim to, that sexual imagery concerning God is unimportant.

31. Johnson's view is different. In her view, God is a great mystery and no language is entirely appropriate to describe him (see *ibid.*, 6–7, 44–45, 104–12). He has "many names" (117–20), so we should be as open to feminine as to masculine names for him. Here I see the nonbiblical concept of transcendence that I opposed in chapter 3. In my view, God has revealed himself in language appropriate to his nature.

32. I do not mean to say here, of course, that we must reproduce the emphasis of Scripture with mathematical precision. Theology and preaching always change the emphasis of Scripture, for they apply biblical truth to people, rather than simply reading the Bible. But it would not be good application to speak of God regularly as *she*, or to raise the level of feminine imagery to, say, 80 percent of our references to God.

33. *Ibid.*, 234. Johnson is quoting William Hill, *The Three-Personed God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 76n53. This is, of course, the panentheistic model of God's relation to the world.

34. I cannot, of course, begin here to enter the controversy surrounding this point. I do believe there is room for debate about whether, and in what circumstances, a woman may "speak in church" (1 Cor. 14:35), and whether women may be deacons. But it seems to me obvious from these passages that women are not admitted to that office that makes the final decisions on the affairs of the church. For sound discussions of these issues, see Susan Foh, *Women and the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979); James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981); Orthodox Presbyterian Church, General Assembly Committee Report on Women in Office (Minutes of the General Assembly, 1987–88); John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991); Mil Am Yi, *Women and the Church: A Biblical Perspective* (Columbus, GA: Brentwood Christian Press, 1990).

The husband is the head of the covenant formed by marriage.<sup>35</sup> A switch to feminine imagery for God would certainly dilute the strong emphasis on covenant authority that is central to the biblical doctrine of God. This is one reason why, as I indicated in chapter 2, some feminist theologians, including Johnson, actually oppose the idea of God's lordship.

6. As we saw earlier in this chapter, God relates to his people as husband to wife. Obviously, this profound image would be obscured if we were to regard God as female. This is important not only for the doctrine of God, but also for the doctrine of man, theological anthropology. It is important for both male and female Christians to know, and to meditate deeply on the fact, that in relation to God they are female—wives called to submit in love to their gracious husband. It is the church, not God, that is feminine in its spiritual nature.<sup>36</sup>

7. One frequent suggestion of compromise is that we eliminate *all* sexually distinctive language, either male or female, in referring to God. Instead of *Father*, we would then refer to God as *Parent* or *Creator*.<sup>37</sup> Unisex language, however, inevitably suggests that God is impersonal, and that is completely unacceptable from a biblical standpoint.<sup>38</sup> Certainly to eliminate *Father* in favor of more abstract terms would be to eliminate something very precious to Christian believers.<sup>39</sup>

8. Has the use of preponderantly male imagery for God resulted in the oppression of women?<sup>40</sup> There is a deep divide between feminist and nonfeminist Christians as to what constitutes oppression. In traditional Christianity, it is not degrading for a woman to be submissive to her husband and excluded from the office of elder in the church. Often in the view of feminist writers, it is degrading for anybody to be subject to the authority of other persons, even of God. But submission to the

35. Marriage is a covenant in Scripture (Ezek. 16:8, 59; Mal. 2:14) strongly analogous to the covenants between God and man. In marriage, the husband is head of the wife (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23). Feminists sometimes argue that *head* means "source" and has no connotations of authority. But see Wayne Grudem's strong argument to the contrary: "The Meaning of *Kephale*," app. 1 in Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 425–68. And in any case, Scripture asserts the authority of the husband over the wife in many places, even when the word *head* is not used. See Num. 30:6–16; Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; 1 Tim. 3:12–13; Titus 2:5.

36. Thanks to Jim Jordan (in correspondence) for this observation.

37. Some have made the suggestion that we describe the persons of the Trinity by titles such as *Creator*, *Redeemer*, and *Sanctifier*, respectively, for Father, Son, and Spirit. But this proposal is mistaken: (1) because it reduces the ontological Trinity (the eternal persons, Father, Son, and Spirit) to the economic (the actions of these persons in and for the world), and (2) because it ignores the *circumincessio*, the involvement of each person in every act of the others.

38. Even more obvious is the impersonalism that would result if we substituted neuter for masculine pronouns. But something must be done with the pronouns if our goal is to eliminate sexually distinctive language for God. Or do we try the impossibly awkward course of avoiding pronouns altogether?

39. One author (I apologize for not remembering who) comments that we do not, after all, address our own fathers as "parent." Indeed, the connotations of such an address would be entirely inappropriate to the relationship.

40. "Wittingly or not, it undermines women's human dignity as equally created in the image of God." Johnson, *She Who Is*, 5. Note her examples on 23–28, 34–38. She wants to argue that the use of feminine language for God is actually truer than the alternative, for it will convey the biblical truth that women are not to be oppressed. In my view, that truth is important; but it should be expounded by biblical texts that are actually relevant to the issue, not by distorted renderings of the biblical imagery for God.

authority of others is unavoidable in human life, for both men and women; this is one of the hardest lessons that fallen human beings have to learn. Much more can be said on this issue. Certainly men have abused women to a terrible extent through history. And certainly both men and women have sometimes justified this abuse by a misunderstanding of male headship and of the Bible's male imagery for God. But it would be hard to show that any better understanding of God, or any more wholesome relationship between the sexes, would result from the substitution of female or impersonal imagery for male.

My conclusion, then, is that we should follow the Bible's pattern of predominantly male imagery for God, with occasional female imagery. I would not object to a preacher's occasionally saying that God is the "mother" of the church. As in Deuteronomy 32:18, we can observe that although our physical birth comes from two sources, our spiritual birth comes from only one: Yahweh, who is both mother and father to us. Nor is it wrong to use childbirth, homemaking, mother birds, and even extrabiblical female images as images of God and illustrations of his actions. And as we will see, I think much more should be made of the submission of the persons of the Trinity to one another, as the archetype of the godly wife's submission to her husband. But there is no biblical justification for using predominantly female imagery for God or representing him with female pronouns.

### Living in God's Family

The story of the Bible is the family history, the story of how the family was founded, nurtured, and disciplined, and the extraordinary things that happened to it and through it. It is our genealogy, showing how we became children of God, our book of generations, showing what the family has done over the years. Like *kingdom*, *family* is a dynamic metaphor. Our sonship today is different in important ways from the sonship of OT Israel. Paul speaks of the Mosaic covenant as a time of imprisonment (Gal. 3:22–23), captivity (v. 23), guardianship (v. 24). To Paul, these restrictions leave little distinction between sonship and slavery (4:1–3). But in Christ, we become free:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Gal. 4:4–7)

The new covenant age is a time of maturity for the family. We are no longer little children, but adults, though we need to be reminded of this (Gal. 4:8–11). That means that we are closer to our inheritance, the new heavens and the new earth.

Because we are members of God's family, we are called to love God and obey him, but also to love one another. The spiritual gifts of each member are for the use of the whole body (Rom. 12:1–8; 1 Cor. 12:1–13:13; Eph. 4:1–16).

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph. 4:11–16)

There should be among us no spirit of competition or jealousy, but a desire to “stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb. 10:24).

So we practice the faith always in community. Our brothers and sisters play a vital role in building us up in Christ, and their needs have a special call on our compassion. As we have a special responsibility to support our families (1 Tim. 5:8), so we should use our resources and gifts to support our Christian brothers and sisters. Paul says:

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Gal. 6:10)

## Key Terms

Abba  
 Divine fatherhood (Trinitarian)  
 Divine fatherhood (over human beings)  
 Servants of God  
 Subjects of God  
 Family of God  
 Generations (in Genesis)  
 Adoption  
 God as husband

## Study Questions

1. Is divine fatherhood a better concept than divine lordship as an organizing concept for systematic theology? Why or why not?
2. How does Frame understand the relationship between God’s lordship, kingship, and fatherhood? Evaluate.
3. Summarize the history of redemption as a family history.
4. Paul speaks of himself as a father to the Corinthian church. Does he thereby violate Jesus’ command to “call no man your father”?
5. “Like *kingdom*, *family* is a dynamic metaphor.” Explain; evaluate.
6. Describe some respects in which the NT family of God is different from that in the OT.

7. Are there feminine images of God in Scripture? Mention some references defending your answer. If there are feminine images, should we use them and the masculine images equally often? Why or why not?
8. Describe ways in which belonging to God's family makes a difference in the Christian life.

## Memory Verses

**Ps. 68:5–6:** Father of the fatherless and protector of widows  
is God in his holy habitation.  
God settles the solitary in a home;  
he leads out the prisoners to prosperity,  
but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

**Ps. 103:13–14:** As a father shows compassion to his children,  
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.  
For he knows our frame;  
he remembers that we are dust.

**Mal. 1:6:** A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father,  
where is my honor?

**Matt. 6:9:** Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.”

**Acts 2:39:** For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off,  
everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.

**Rom. 8:14–17:** For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

## Resources for Further Study

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## THE ACTS OF THE LORD: GOD'S DECREES

WE HAVE SEEN THAT GOD acts as Lord in miracle, providence, and creation. Now, according to Scripture, all these actions are the result of thought. We saw that God performs miracles with distinct purposes in mind, and he governs the course of nature and history with a goal in view. He creates the world, also, for his own glory and according to his own wisdom. So there is thought behind all of God's actions, a plan. Is it possible that God acts as Lord in miracle, providence, and creation, but not in the planning of these events? Certainly not. So as biblical logic leads us from God's lordship in miracle to that of providence and creation, so now it leads us beyond history, "before" creation, to consider God's lordship in the planning stages of his great historical drama.

This chapter, then, will mark a transition in our discussion from history to eternity. We have been considering God's actions in history, and in the next chapters we will consider his eternal nature. In this chapter, we will think about decisions that God makes in eternity that govern history.

So in this chapter, we will consider God's lordship in his wise plan, his eternal decrees.<sup>1</sup> I have already discussed many matters that theologians normally include under the doctrine of the decrees. In addition to the points reviewed in the previous paragraphs, we should recall especially chapter 8, in which I summarized the efficacy and universality of God's control of the world. There I concluded that God controls all things and all the events of nature and history. Later on (chapters 14, 35), I will expound the author-character model of God's involvement with the world: God does not control the world merely by setting limits for the world's free activity, as a teacher "controlling" his classroom. Rather, like the author of a well-wrought novel,

1. *Decree* can be used either in the singular or in the plural, *decrees*. The singular and plural are more or less interchangeable. The former considers God's plan for the whole creation as a unity. The latter focuses on the fact that within that single plan, God has a plan for every individual thing and every individual event.



he conceives and brings about every event that happens, without compromising the integrity of his *creaturely others*.

Also, the doctrine of providence (chapters 8, 9) and the doctrine of the decrees are perspectively related. Under providence, we considered God's sovereign direction of nature and history from below: he works in and with every event to bring it about according to his purpose. Under the decrees, we consider the same data from above, focusing on the purpose itself for which God brings about all things. God's sovereign working is not only from above (as in deism) nor only from below (as in pantheism), but both. God directs his creation both in his transcendence and in his immanence (chapter 7). The decree is God's purpose in eternity; creation, providence, and redemption are the execution of God's decree in time.<sup>2</sup>

So it might seem that our actual chapter on the decrees could be rather short. Indeed, it will not take long now to develop the biblical concept of God's decrees, but there is much more to say about one particular decree, the decree of election, by which God chooses some to enjoy the benefits of salvation.

## God's Plan

God's decrees are the wise, free, and holy acts of the counsel of [God's] will, whereby, from all eternity, he hath, for his own glory, unchangeably foreordained whatsoever comes to pass in time, especially concerning angels and men. (WLC 12)

The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. (WSC 7)

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. (WCF 3.1)

Such are Reformed confessional definitions of God's decrees. *Decree*, referring to a divine determination, is rarely found in English translations of Scripture. (Psalms 2:7 and 148:6 are two notable exceptions.<sup>3</sup>) But Scripture speaks much of God's *plans*, *counsel*, *purposes*, and so on. We saw in chapter 8 that God has plans and that those plans are efficacious: what he purposes will surely come to pass. We considered many passages, such as this one:

The counsel of the LORD stands forever,  
the plans of his heart to all generations. (Ps. 33:11)

2. I will not argue here, though I will assume, that God's decrees are eternal in the supratemporal sense. For that, see the discussion in chapter 17 on God's eternity. But it should be obvious that God's decree "precedes" creation in some sense (Eph. 1:3). If time itself is a creation, then the decree is "before" time, that is, supratemporal.

3. The term *decree* is certainly justifiable because it arises from the biblical picture of God as King, as Lord. The decrees are the sovereign commands of the Lord of all.

We also saw that these plans are universal: they govern all the affairs of nature, history, and individual lives, including sin and salvation.

I am God, and there is none like me,  
declaring the end from the beginning  
and from ancient times things not yet done,  
saying, "My counsel shall stand,  
and I will accomplish all my purpose." (Isa. 46:9b–10)

The efficacy of God's purpose is as universal as his knowledge, from the beginning to the end, from distant past through all the future.

In these verses, God's decree is his "plans" or "counsel" (*etzah*), his "purposes" (*machsheboth*), what "pleases" him (*chaphetz*). The NT expresses this idea with terms such as *boule* ("will," "counsel"), *thelema* ("will," "intention"), *eudokia* ("pleasure"), *prothesis* ("purpose"), *proorismos* ("foreordination"), *prognosis* ("foreknowledge" in the sense of commitment to bring about an event or a personal relationship<sup>4</sup>). For a sampling of passages that speak of God's purpose in these terms, see the following: Matt. 11:26; Acts 2:23; 4:27–28; Rom. 8:29; 9:11; Eph. 1:5, 9, 11; 3:11; 2 Tim. 1:9; Heb. 6:17; 1 Peter 1:2.

God's plan is also *eternal* (Isa. 37:26;<sup>5</sup> 46:9–10; Matt. 25:34; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:4; 3:11; 2 Tim. 1:9). As we will see, God's plans can be historical and temporal in the sense that he wills for things to happen at one time rather than another. And sometimes he ordains something to happen temporarily. But the plan by which he ordains these temporary states of affairs is nevertheless eternal. Therefore, his plan is *immutable*, "unchangeable." Although he wills for things to change in history, his plan for such change cannot be changed (Ps. 33:11; Isa. 14:24; 46:10; James 1:17). In our discussion of God's eternity later, we will see how God does sometimes announce policies conditionally, as when he announces judgment and then withholds it upon repentance (Ex. 32:14; Jer. 18:7–10; 26:13; 36:3; Jonah 3:8–10). But the whole course of this interaction is governed by God's eternal decree.

## The Decrees and God's Lordship

God's decrees display his lordship attributes. In an obvious way, they display his control, for they are efficacious and universal. God's intentions will certainly be fulfilled, and they will be fulfilled for everything in the created world.

4. See our discussion of foreknowledge in chapter 15. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich translate *prognosis* in 1 Peter 1:2 as "predestination." *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 710. Although some Greek lexicons translate "foreknowledge," following the etymology of the term, the idiomatic usage often breaks with the etymological root, so that the term can be simply translated "choice."

5. "Long ago" and "days of old" might not connote to everybody the theological concept of eternity, but this is typical OT language referring to an indefinite time in the past. The important point is that God's plan is not a response to current events or even based on short-term foresight of current events, but comes from far in the distant past. The NT references expand this concept, indicating that God's plan goes back before creation.

They also display his authority, for they are meaningful thoughts, wise plans, or counsels for the world. As such, they *interpret* the world; they determine the meaning and significance of everything that God makes. God's interpretations, of course, are always supremely authoritative. When he declares the significance of something for his purpose, that is the significance it has. So the doctrine of the decrees implies that God has authoritatively preinterpreted everything and every event. As Cornelius Van Til emphasized, the interpretation of the facts precedes the facts. Our world is a world that is exhaustively meaningful, because it is the expression of God's wisdom. Among human beings, interpretation is not the work of trying to assess for the first time the significance of uninterpreted facts. Rather, ours is a work of secondary interpretation, the interpretation of God's interpretation.

God's decrees also manifest his covenant presence with his creatures. For the doctrine of the decrees means that in his mind, God has established a personal relationship with every creature that reaches back into eternity. Of course, creaturely existence always has a beginning; it is not itself eternal. But to say that God decrees the course of nature and history is to say that God knows us before we begin to exist, and that even then he established his purpose for each of us, his relationship to us.

So God says to Jeremiah:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations. (Jer. 1:5)

Paul says in Ephesians 1:4 that God "chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him."

## Historical Election<sup>6</sup>

With many persons and groups, that eternal covenant presence of God takes the form of *election*. *Election* simply means "choice"; so in Ephesians 1:4, the word *chose* describes divine election. Election, therefore, is one kind of divine decree, so we can add to our list of terms indicating God's "purpose" and "intention" the biblical vocabulary of divine choice: *bachar* ("choose"), *hibdil* ("set apart"), *eklegomai* ("choose"), *proetoimazo* ("prepare before"), and *prognosis* ("foreknowledge," "choice").<sup>7</sup>

Ephesians 1:4 describes God's electing people to salvation, but God also chooses people for specific tasks, as in Jeremiah 1:5, quoted above. In Luke 6:13, Jesus "called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles." Cf. John 6:70; 15:16, 19; Gal. 1:15–16. God's election of people for his service does not necessarily imply that those people will finally receive the blessings of salvation. God chose Saul to be king (1 Sam. 9:17) and prophet (10:5–11), but Saul disobeyed God and came to a

6. Both historical and eternal election should be understood in the context of the *pactum salutis*, the eternal covenant of redemption, which I discussed in chapter 4.

7. See the earlier discussion in this chapter.

disgraceful end. Scripture does not affirm that Saul died in fellowship with God; it leaves his personal salvation uncertain. Jesus chose Judas the betrayer to be an apostle, but Jesus says of him:

“Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him. (John 6:70–71)

But woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born. (Matt. 26:24)

While I was with [the disciples], I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. (John 17:12)

Like Saul, Judas committed suicide (Matt. 27:3–5; Acts 1:18–20), and the condemnations of Scripture preclude his salvation.

God also chose the nation Israel for his redemptive purpose. He chose Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees (Neh. 9:7) and chose Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau (Rom. 9:6–13). After the exodus, Moses says to Israel:

He loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power. (Deut. 4:37)<sup>8</sup>

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. (Deut. 7:6; cf. 10:15; 14:2; Ps. 33:12; Isa. 41:8–9; 44:1; 45:4; many other passages)

God’s choice of Israel is by grace, not merit:

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut. 7:7–8)

Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, “It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,” whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you. . . .

Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people. (Deut. 9:4, 6)

8. Note in this passage the Lord’s authority (his loving choice), his control (“power”), and his presence.

God chose Israel to glorify his name and to be a blessing to all the nations (Gen. 12:3). Israel was the nation through whom the Redeemer would come, and from whom the message of salvation would go out to all other nations of the world. But throughout the OT the Israelites remain “stiff-necked.” They worship idols, they oppress widows and orphans, they show contempt for God’s law. So through his prophets God threatens judgment. Nevertheless, he also promises grace and forgiveness.

The interchange in the prophetic writings between the theme of judgment and the theme of grace and forgiveness is remarkable. Often the prophet moves from judgment to grace with no transition, with little indication of the reason for the change. But we can understand the relationship between the two themes in general terms.

In Isaiah 1:1–17, God expresses his displeasure at Israel’s rebellion. Through the prophet, he brings a “covenant lawsuit” against Israel for her violation of his covenant law. He compares Israel with Sodom and Gomorrah, the wicked cities that he thoroughly destroyed in the time of Abraham and Lot (Gen. 18:16–19:29; cf. Ezek. 16:49–58). He says that he hates the people’s offerings and holy feasts. He will not answer their prayers. But then in the midst of the condemnation comes the word of forgiveness:

Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:  
 though your sins are like scarlet,  
     they shall be as white as snow;  
 though they are red like crimson,  
     they shall become like wool. (Isa. 1:18)

In this case, God offers forgiveness at the price of repentance. If the Israelites turn from their evil ways and obey the Lord, they will receive the blessings of the covenant, but if not, they will receive the curses:

If you are willing and obedient,  
     you shall eat the good of the land;  
 but if you refuse and rebel,  
     you shall be eaten by the sword;  
     for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isa. 1:19–20)

But how likely is their repentance? Even in Exodus (33:5), God had called them “stiff-necked.” They had worshiped a golden calf while Moses was speaking to God on Mount Sinai (Ex. 32:1–35). They wandered in the desert forty years because they had not believed God’s promise of victory over the Canaanites. Again and again, God charged them with wickedness. Yet somehow God is going to “purge away your dross and remove all your impurities” (Isa. 1:25 NIV).

“And I will restore your judges as at the first,  
     and your counselors as at the beginning.

Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness,  
the faithful city.”

Zion shall be redeemed by justice,  
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.  
But rebels and sinners shall be broken together,  
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed. (Isa. 1:26–28)

Evidently there will be “a few survivors” (Isa. 1:9) from the divine judgment who will be faithful to the Lord and will be the foundation of the new city of righteousness. The Assyrians will bring disaster, but there will be a remnant (10:20–34). The remnant will return from their exile, and they will return to the Lord (10:21). It is this remnant that is the real continuation of Israel; it is they who receive the fulfillment of the covenant promises (11:11–12:6; 41:8–20; 43:1–7; Jer. 23:3–4; 31:7–14).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the return of the exiles, the remnant, back to the Promised Land. But God’s glorious promises to the remnant through Isaiah and Jeremiah are not fulfilled. The people must confess the sin of intermarrying with the pagan nations (Ezra 9:1–10:44; Neh. 13:23–27). The end of their prayer of repentance reminds God:

And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins.  
They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great  
distress. (Neh. 9:37)

During the intertestamental period, some in Israel rebel against the foreign rulers, but ultimately they are unsuccessful. During the earthly ministry of Jesus, Israel is under the domination of Roman emperors, and in his teaching Jesus speaks like Isaiah of the unbelief and disobedience of Israel. Those returned from exile are not the *faithful* remnant. Neither the Israel of Ezra and Nehemiah nor the first-century Israel is the city of righteousness of which Isaiah spoke. Rather, Israel has again become like Sodom and Gomorrah, and worse (Matt. 11:20–24).

Who, then, is the faithful remnant who inherits the promises of God to Abraham and through whom all the nations of the earth are blessed? After the remnant passage in Isaiah 10:20–34, we read:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.  
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,  
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and might,  
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.  
And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. (Isa. 11:1–3a)

The righteous Branch will rule justly for the poor and needy and will slay the wicked (Isa. 3b–5). The result will be a wonderful time of peace, when the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and:

They shall not hurt or destroy  
in all my holy mountain;  
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea. (Isa. 11:9)

It is under the rule of the righteous Branch that God's people are gathered from all the nations (Isa. 11:12–16) and join in praise to God for salvation (12:1–6).

Similarly, in the remnant promises of Isaiah 41:8–20 and 43:1–7, the people do not repent out of their own moral strength. Rather, there is a new visitation of the divine presence, a redemptive re-creation, pointing to the work of the Servant of the Lord in 52:13–53:12. Of him, the prophet says:

Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
and with his stripes we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned—every one—to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:4–6)

And in Jeremiah's prophecy of the remnant, again we see the righteous Branch (Jer. 23:5–6), whose name is "The LORD is our righteousness" (v. 6).

Ultimately, then, elect Israel is Jesus Christ. He is the faithful remnant, the righteous Branch. Through him alone comes forgiveness of sins, for he bears God's judgment in the place of his people. The OT gives us a perplexing picture, for the judgment theme seems inconsistent with the theme of grace and forgiveness. If God is fully just, then it seems that nobody can receive his blessing; all will be destroyed. On the other hand, if God's mercy fulfills the terms of his promises, it seems that his forgiveness of sin would have to violate his moral order. But through Jesus, God's justice and mercy meet together in wonderful harmony. Jesus bears the full judgment of God, so that through him God's mercy suffices to bring eternal life to all his people.

And in Christ, by his grace, all believers belong to the remnant (Rom. 11:1–6). This remnant includes both Gentiles and Jews, for God has "grafted" Gentiles into the tree



of Israel (11:17–21), having removed some of the (Jewish) “natural branches.” But the Gentiles should not boast:

They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. (Rom. 11:20–21)

As not all Israel are Israel (Rom. 9:6), so not all members of the Christian church are regenerate believers. Some are elect only as the unbelieving Israelites were: historically elect, rather than eternally elect. Like Saul and Judas, they are chosen only temporarily; they can become nonelect. So the election of the visible Christian church is similar to the election of OT Israel. It is an election that temporarily includes some within its bounds who will never come to true faith and will never have eternal life. This parallel between the church and Israel should not be surprising, because of course the church and Israel are, contrary to the views of dispensationalism, the same body. The tree of redemption is one, and God prunes it and grafts branches on to it, as he will. So the visible church participates in the “election of Israel.”

Now let us consider some frequently asked questions about the election of Israel:

1. Is the election of Israel the election of a corporate entity, or is it the election of individuals? I would say both. God chooses Israel as a family, a nation. But he also chooses *within* that family. He chooses Abraham, but not his parents and brothers. He chooses Isaac, not Ishmael. He chooses Jacob, not Esau.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. (Rom. 9:6–8, quoting Gen. 21:12)

He also chooses the remnant, not the entire nation, to receive his blessing. And ultimately, God’s choice is of one individual, Jesus.

Jesus establishes another corporate entity, the church. The church is elect in Christ. But as in Israel, some apostatize, they turn away from Jesus, and there is no more hope for them (Heb. 6:1–12; 10:26–31; 1 John 2:18–19). As Paul says, God sometimes breaks off even newly ingrafted branches. The writer to the Hebrews warns his Jewish Christian readers not to turn away from God as Israel did in the wilderness (Heb. 3–4). So in the NT, too, there is an election within an election, and we will discuss that further below.

2. Is the election of Israel to salvation or to service? Again, I would say both. God calls Israel as his servant (Isa. 44:1), his witnesses (43:10, 12). But as God’s servant, Israel has great privileges:

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. (Rom. 3:1–2)

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. (Rom. 9:4–5)

These are all blessings of salvation, the blessings of people who have turned from worshiping idols to serve the living and the true God. Not all individuals in Israel are eternally saved. But as we have seen, the true Israel is Christ and those who are in him. Those who belong to the true Israel are indeed eternally saved. This fact is the root of the second concept of election to be discussed in the next section.

3. Is the election of Israel based on works or grace? As we saw in Deuteronomy 7:7–8 and 9:4–6, it is not because of Israel's numbers (power, influence) or righteousness, but wholly because of God's unmerited love, that is, his grace. (See also Deut. 4:37; 8:17–18; 10:15; Ezek. 16:1–14.) On the other hand, Israel's continued status in God's covenant depends on obedience. God told the people at Mount Sinai, during the covenant-making:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex. 19:5–6a)

Jeremiah later reminds Israel:

But this command I gave them: "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people. And walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you." (Jer. 7:23)

The covenant relationship itself, here, is conditioned on obedience.<sup>9</sup>

In Hosea, God even announces that Israel as a whole is no longer elect, that Israel is "not my people" (Hos. 1:9). Yet (in another strange movement from judgment to grace) he immediately announces:

In the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God." (Hos. 1:10)

Israel loses its election and regains it again. God also judges many individuals in Israel, removing covenant blessings from them because of their disobedience.

This pattern does not exist only in OT Israel. We belong to Christ wholly by grace (Eph. 2:8–9). But judgments come upon faithless people in the NT church as in Israel:

9. Obviously, obedience is required for Israel to receive the blessing sanctions of the covenant rather than the curses. But these passages say more: that obedience is the condition on which the covenant itself exists. Compare my discussion of the Abrahamic covenant in chapter 4. But perhaps the difference is only perspectival. The ultimate meaning of the covenant curse is that God is not our God and we are not his people. The covenant curse is covenant excommunication.

Judas, Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–10), Simon the sorcerer (8:9–25). And we have seen the warnings of Hebrews against turning away from God’s grace in Christ and thereby falling into condemnation.

So although the election of Israel is by grace, there is an important place for continued faithfulness. In this historical form of election, people can lose their elect status by faithlessness and disobedience. Branches can be broken off “because of their unbelief” (Rom. 11:20).

When we consider this divine rejection, we should not argue that the discarded branches were “never really elect.” There is a place for such reasoning, but it pertains to a different kind of election that we will discuss in the following section. Here, however, we are talking about historical election. And in this context, it is possible to lose one’s election. The discarded branches were indeed elect at one time, for they were part of the tree of Israel. Israel as a nation was really elect, before God declared her to be “not my people”; and she became elect again, when God declared the Israelites to be “children of the living God.”

The same is true of the NT church. It would not be right to say that Judas, Ananias, or the apostates of Hebrews 6 and 10 were never elect in any sense. These were elect in the sense that Israel was elect. Indeed, when Calvinists worry about the implications of Hebrews 6 and 10, it is useful for them to consider that the apostates in these passages are very much like OT Israel: They have

once been enlightened, . . . tasted the heavenly gift, . . . shared in the Holy Spirit, . . . tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come. (Heb. 6:4–5)

Israel experienced all these things throughout OT history and particularly in the earthly ministry of Jesus. But the people rejected him and joined those who crucified the Son of God. So those church members who turn away from Christ “are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt” (Heb. 6:6).

Note how Hebrews 6:4–6 emerges out of the references to Israel in chapters 3 and 4. The Israelites, blessed as they were with God’s enlightenment, his heavenly gift, the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and the powers of the coming age, nevertheless hardened their hearts against the Lord (3:7–11, 15). The writer urges Christians to

strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. (Heb. 4:11)

So God continues to break branches off the tree of redemption. Even those freshly ingrafted can be broken off because of unbelief.

## **Eternal Election**

But in Scripture there is also an election that cannot be lost and that is not at all conditioned on human faithfulness or works. We saw earlier that the election of Israel

is in an ultimate and final sense the election of Jesus Christ as the faithful remnant. Though branches of the tree of redemption can be broken off, Christ himself can never, since the cross, lose his fellowship with the Father. He was “chosen before the creation of the world” (1 Peter 1:20 NIV).

So those who are “in” Christ, who belong to him inwardly and not merely outwardly, who are the true Israel, can never lose their salvation. They are *elect* in a stronger sense than was the nation of Israel as a whole and in a stronger sense than is the general membership of the visible Christian church.

This kind of election, like that of Israel as a nation, is covenantal: in it God chooses some to be his covenant people. But the covenant is different in character. In the prophecy of Jeremiah, the Lord describes it thus:

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)

The writer to the Hebrews quotes this passage in 8:8–12 and 10:16–17, and indicates that the new covenant is the covenant sealed with Jesus’ blood, which puts an end to all other sacrifices. Cf. Isa. 42:6; Zech. 9:11; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6. Hebrews 9:15 summarizes:

Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.

The difference between the old and new covenants is that the blood of the new covenant, the blood of Christ, actually cleanses from sin. The blood of bulls and goats under the old covenant did not actually cleanse from sin but only symbolized the coming work of Jesus. All those in the OT period who received God’s forgiveness received it on the basis of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, which of course to them was still future. They were saved by faith in God’s promise of the Messiah. So there were new covenant believers during the OT period. Abraham is an example, for, as Jesus taught:

Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad. (John 8:56)

The blessings unique to the new covenant are (1) the forgiveness of sins and (2) God's writing his law on their hearts. One who has the law written on his heart obeys God willingly. He wants, in the inmost center of his being, to love God and keep his commandments. God, in other words, creates a new disposition in his new covenant people, a desire to serve him. That is the new creation I described in chapter 10.

Membership in this covenant is, of course, by God's choice, God's election. Election in the new covenant is similar to election in the old, but there are differences appropriate to the differences between the two covenants. Most significantly, for those chosen to be "in Christ," eternal salvation is certain:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom. 8:29–30)

The logic is inevitable. Anyone whom God savingly foreknows,<sup>10</sup> he predestines to be conformed to the likeness of Christ. (That is, he writes the Word on his heart.) And anyone so predestined receives an effectual call from God sometime in his life, a summons into fellowship with Christ, an order that he cannot decline.<sup>11</sup> Those whom God calls he justifies: he declares them righteous for Jesus' sake. And those he justifies, he glorifies. No one who is foreknown, predestined, called, and justified can escape glorification. Final salvation is certain.

So Paul continues in Romans 8:31–39 in a great hymn based on the theme of the certainty of salvation for those in Christ. If God is for us, nobody can be against us (vv. 31–32), so God will certainly give us all things. No one can bring any charge against us before God (vv. 33–34), so there can be no condemnation (cf. v. 1). No one can separate us from the love of Christ (vv. 35–39), nothing in earth or heaven. The elect are Jesus' sheep, of whom none can perish or be plucked from his hand (John 10:28–29).

This kind of election is also the focus of Ephesians 1:3–14. These elect are chosen "in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (1:4). The elect here will inevitably become holy and blameless. God decided that they would be, before he created the heavens and the earth. He determined to redeem them by the blood of Christ and thereby to forgive their sins (v. 7). It is inevitable that they will hear the gospel of salvation (v. 13) and believe. And:

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:13–14)

10. I take "foreknew" in this passage to mean "befriended beforehand" or "elected." See the argumentation for this understanding in chapter 4.

11. Review the brief discussion of effectual calling in chapter 4.

God guarantees, then, the salvation of these elect.

Other Scripture passages speak of the election of individuals to salvation (see Matt. 24:22, 24, 31; Mark 13:20–22; Luke 18:7; Acts 13:48; 1 Cor. 1:27–28; Eph. 2:10; Col. 3:12; 1 Thess. 1:4–5; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:9; 2:10; Titus 1:1; James 2:5).

This kind of election is *unconditional*. As we saw in chapter 4, God chooses us before we choose him. Our faithful response is a gift of his grace. So election to salvation is not based on anything we do. It is entirely gracious. It is also *eternal*: “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), “from the beginning” (2 Thess. 2:13 NIV), “before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9).

As *election* has two different meanings, based on the distinction between old and new covenants, so does the biblical concept of the *book of life*. In Exodus 32:33, after Israel has been found worshipping a golden calf, God says to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.”

In Psalm 69, the writer asks God to judge the wicked in Israel:

Add to them punishment upon punishment;  
may they have no acquittal from you.  
Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;  
let them not be enrolled among the righteous. (Ps. 69:27–28)

Here the psalmist envisages a book in God's presence containing the names of those he has chosen for covenant blessing. Initially, it seems, the list contains everybody in Israel. But God will blot some of them out because of their sin, for not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.<sup>12</sup> The image of people's being blotted out of the book of life is parallel to Paul's image of natural branches' being broken off from the tree of redemption. Cf. Rev. 3:5.

So the *book of life* image can be an image of historical election, the election of Israel. But like the term *election* itself, the book-of-life image can also represent election in a stronger sense. In Revelation 17:8, those not in the book of life are excluded from it “from the foundation of the world,” and, implicitly, those written in the book were written in it from the world's foundation. This expression precludes the notion that one could be listed in the book and later blotted out because of something that happens in history. In Revelation 3:5 (in contrast, to be sure, with Psalm 69:28), no one can be blotted out of the book. Revelation 13:8 should also be taken this way, as is suggested by the correlation between the writing of the book and the “Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (NIV).

So election has two senses. I call the first *historical election*, because in that sense elect persons can become nonelect as a result of their unfaithfulness through human history. The second, by way of contrast, is *eternal election*, because in that sense the number of the elect is fixed from eternity. This terminology might mislead some, because the

12. Compare Ezekiel 13:9, in which the lying prophets “shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel.”



first no less than the second is the result of an eternal divine decree. But in the first, God may decree that some lose their covenant status, and in the second he decrees no such change. With that understanding, I will continue to use this language.

Historical election and eternal election are distinct, but they cannot be entirely separated. Note the following:

1. Both historical and eternal election are aspects of God's saving purpose. The election of Israel and the temporary election of individuals in history are means by which God gathers together those who will receive his final blessing.

2. As we have seen, the "remnant" of historical election is no less than Jesus Christ. Jesus himself is eternally elected by God (1 Peter 1:20), together with those God has chosen to be in him. So in the end, historical and eternal election coincide.<sup>13</sup> In history, they do not; for historical election is a temporal process and eternal election is forever settled before creation.

All the eternally elect are historically elect, but not vice versa. Historical election is the process in time by which God executes his decree to save the eternally elect. As God judges the reprobate through history, the difference narrows between the historically elect and the eternally elect. In the end, the outcome of historical election is the same as that of eternal election.

3. Thus, historical election is a mirror of eternal election. God elects Israel by grace, as he elects believers eternally by grace. He promises blessings to her that are essentially the blessings of salvation, ultimately the presence with her of the living God. God's covenant presence with Israel in the tabernacle and temple is an image of his presence with eternally elect believers in Christ. The chief difference, of course, is that among the historically elect there are some who will not be finally saved. But even the historical rejection of unbelievers from the covenant images eternal election, for it pictures the final separation between the elect and the reprobate.

4. We may think of historical election as the visible and temporal form of eternal election. We cannot see another's heart to know for sure whether he is eternally elect. But we can see whom God has led to unite with his visible body, the church. We can see who has given a credible profession of faith in Christ. By observing the process of historical election in the light of Scripture, we gain a limited knowledge of eternal election—the best knowledge possible for us today.

5. Those who join the church are historically elect, in the way that Israel was historically elect. It is possible for people in the church to apostatize, to renounce their profession. Church membership, therefore, does not guarantee membership in the new covenant. But the church is a new covenant institution in that it proclaims God's eternal election in Christ and the forgiveness of sins through Jesus' atonement. In that sense, Israel was also a new covenant institution. So the book of Hebrews reminds

13. Note that in Revelation 20:15, those whose names are "not found written in the book of life" are thrown into the lake of fire. Is this the historical book of life, from which names can be blotted out? Or is it the eternal book of life, written before the creation? We cannot tell. For by the day of judgment, all blotting will have been done, and the names in the historical book will be the same as the names in the eternal book.



its Jewish Christian readers of the new covenant to which they are called, and it also warns them not to fall away as did Israel in the wilderness.

## Reprobation

If God has chosen some for salvation, and he has not chosen everyone, then it follows that some are not elect. Since only the elect are saved, the nonelect are ultimately lost. So God's election of some implies his rejection of others. This rejection is called *reprobation*. Traditionally, within reprobation theologians have distinguished between *preterition*, in which God determines not to choose certain persons for salvation, and *precondemnation*, in which he determines to justly punish them for their sin.

This is a hard doctrine, because it seems to conflict with God's loving and merciful nature and with his desire that all be saved (Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). As to the apparent conflict with God's love, see my discussion in chapters 12–14 of God's goodness and the problem of evil. Arguably, the problem here is the most difficult form of that problem. See also our later chapters on God's love and on his will (chapters 12, 16). We will discuss there in what sense God loves the reprobate and in what sense he wills or desires to save them. I believe that there are biblical senses in which God loves and desires to save all people.

Here I will only observe that the doctrine of reprobation is scriptural. We saw in chapter 8 that God does foreordain human sin and therefore foreordains its consequence, which is always death (Rom. 6:23). God works all things after the counsel of his will, and the ultimate destiny of the lost is certainly among those things.

Like election, reprobation has both historical and eternal meanings. Historical Israel is elect in contrast with all the other nations (Deut. 4:37; 7:6; 14:2). In choosing Israel, God rejects the others. Nevertheless, some from other nations join themselves to Israel, and ultimately God's purpose is for Israel to fulfill his promise to Abraham, to be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4). He intends to graft the wild branches of the nations into the tree of Israel. So God's rejection of the nations is temporary, though it is part of his eternal plan. So Paul writes to Gentile Christians:

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Eph. 2:12–13)

Indeed, we must remember that all believers were once rejected by God, objects of wrath (Eph. 2:1–3). That rejection was genuine; we all deserved eternal punishment. But we thank God that that rejection was only temporary, for his eternal plan was to lead us to Christ.

But in addition to historical reprobation, Scripture also teaches an eternal reprobation. God has foreordained that some will not have eternal life. Scripture teaches this doctrine by implication: for if eternal life is by God's election, his grace, and his means

of grace in history, then eternal death can only be, ultimately, the result of God's withholding his electing grace. Surely when he withholds grace he is no less intentional than when he gives it. The former is no less planned than the latter. And so eternal rejection, as eternal election, is by an eternal divine plan. This, too, is among the "all things" that God works according to the counsel of his will (Eph. 1:11).

Scripture also teaches this doctrine explicitly. As there is a book of life, there is also a book of condemnation. Jude 4 refers to certain men "who long ago were designated for this condemnation."

We know that people perish because of unbelief. But people cannot believe unless God chooses them (John 8:47; 10:26; 12:39–40). God gives to some to "know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 13:11), but not to others. The others' hearts are closed by God's decision. So Jesus speaks in parables to conceal the truth from those who are not chosen to know it (Matt. 13:13–14; cf. Isa. 6:9–10). God hides the truth from the wise and learned and reveals it to his children, "for such was your gracious will" (Matt. 11:26).

The central passage on reprobation is Romans 9. The passage deals with both historical and eternal reprobation, and that fact has confused some readers. But we must acknowledge at the outset that the primary issue that Paul faces here is that of Israel's salvation. He says:

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. (Rom. 9:2–3)<sup>14</sup>

In the ministries of Jesus, the apostles, and Paul himself, salvation is offered "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). But most of the Jews rejected the gospel, and the church became increasingly Gentile. Paul himself is a Jew, and he is in anguish over the unbelief of his fellow Israelites. The issue is no minor thing; their eternal salvation is at stake. Paul's wish, *per impossibile*, that he could be cut off from Christ for the sake of Israel implies that unless God acts in a new way, the Israelites themselves will be cursed and cut off from Christ. So the issue is not just that Israel will lose its historical election as God's distinctive people. That in itself is cause for rejoicing, for it means that God now calls all nations to himself. Rather, the problem is that individual Israelites will be cut off eternally from God.

Has God's Word failed (Rom. 9:6)? Normally the Word is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (1:16). We should expect that as Paul and others preach the Word, this divine power will bring salvation to Israel. But so far, that does not seem to be happening. But no, says Paul, the Word of God does not fail.

How can the Word be powerful to salvation when its hearers do not believe? Paul's answer is that not all Israel are Israel (Rom. 9:6); not all are elect (vv. 11–12).

14. Cf. Rom. 10:1: "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them [the Israelites] is that they may be saved." Again, the issue is their eternal salvation.

Now, Paul's illustrations of election are from the sphere of historical election. Isaac is chosen over Ishmael (Rom. 9:7–9), Jacob over Esau (vv. 10–13). We cannot say on the basis of Scripture that either Ishmael or Esau, or the national groups formed by their descendants, is eternally reprobate. But Paul is not intending to distinguish between historical and eternal election. He is, rather, focusing on the principles that these two forms of election have in common: in both cases, election is by grace, apart from works (v. 11). In all these cases, election is by God's purpose (v. 11) and calling (v. 12). Esau is reprobate (whether historically or eternally) before he is born (v. 11), hated by God (v. 13). It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that Paul is making the same point concerning the eternal election of the unbelieving Israelites:<sup>15</sup> they reject Christ because God has not called them. They are reprobate by the sovereign decision of God.

Otherwise, the question of Romans 9:14, "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?" makes no sense. The question can arise only because on Paul's view Israel's unbelief is due to God's sovereign decision. If Israel's unbelief were due only to the people's free decision, no one would say that God was unjust to condemn them. And Paul emphasizes that it is God's decision (v. 15; cf. v. 18) by quoting Exodus 33:19:

And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

And he adds, "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy" (v. 16).

Then Paul brings up the example of Pharaoh. God says that he raised him up

that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. (Rom. 9:17b)

Again a question arises:

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? (Rom. 9:19–21)

Paul might have said that God is just because Pharaoh and the others made a free decision to reject God. That would have been true, as far as it goes. But Paul wants to present a deeper answer because it is also his answer to the question of Israel's unbelief.

15. One cannot, of course, assume that all those Israelites who disbelieved the preaching of Paul were eternally reprobate. Paul doubtless realized that some might come to Christ at a later time. His concern is with the great number of the Jews who have rejected the gospel. And his answer is that God has first rejected them: some perhaps temporarily, some permanently.

His answer is that Israel's unbelief comes from God's sovereign decision. In that light we can also understand the next question:

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction[?] (Rom. 9:22)

None of this compromises Israel's own responsibility. Paul stresses that, too, in Romans 9:30–10:21. But then in 11:1–10, he emphasizes again God's sovereignty. The remnant is "chosen by grace" (v. 5). The others are hardened by God's giving them a spirit of stupor (vv. 7–10).

We should note three points about what the doctrine of reprobation does *not* teach:

1. The doctrine of reprobation does not prejudice the free offer of the gospel to all. We do not know who is elect and who is reprobate, so we must proclaim the gospel freely to all. And it remains entirely true that if anybody receives Christ, he will be saved (John 1:12–13; 3:16). Jesus brings together God's sovereignty and our responsibility when he says:

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. (John 6:37)

2. Nor does the doctrine of reprobation prejudice our assurance of salvation. That assurance is not based on our reading of the eternal decrees of God, which are secret unless God reveals them, but on the promises of God.

3. Nor does this doctrine imply that election and reprobation are parallel in every respect. They are "equally ultimate," in the sense that both decrees of God are ultimately efficacious.<sup>16</sup> Yet there is between them what has been called an *asymmetry*. The blessings ordained by God's eternal election are entirely by God's grace, apart from human works. But the curses ordained by God's eternal reprobation are fully earned, based on the sins of the reprobate.<sup>17</sup>

## The Order of the Decrees

Many theologians have tried to establish an "order" among God's decrees. They agree that this order is not an order in time, for the decrees are all eternal. Rather, the order is a "logical" order, in some sense. These theologians ask us to try to picture the process of God's thinking before he created the world. When human beings make plans, they plan to do A so that they can accomplish B: they proportion means to ends. Some ends have a higher priority than others. So we "order" our plans by such principles

16. The concept *equal ultimacy* is confusing. To some writers, such as G. C. Berkouwer, it appears to deny the asymmetry mentioned in the next sentence. In Van Til's writings, however, it simply means that both election and reprobation are efficacious decrees of God; they accomplish their purpose. See CVT, 86–88; see also G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 390; G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 172–217.

17. See Canons of Dordt, First Head of Doctrine, 6.

as means to end and high priority to low priority. Those arguing for an order of the decrees call us to imagine the process of God's thinking the same way, as we consider the plans lying behind God's creation and redemption of human beings.

Another kind of order is that in which decree A creates the conditions for carrying out decree B. This appears to be the order that Paul follows in Romans 8:29–30:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

God's foreknowledge<sup>18</sup> created the relation between himself and his people so that he could predestine them to be conformed to Jesus' likeness. His predestination grounds his calling of them, and so on.

It is true that God does things with goals and purposes in mind. Genesis 3:22–23 says that God banished Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden so that they would not eat from the Tree of Life. On that basis, thinking along the lines of the post-Reformation Reformed theologians, one might say that God's decree to prevent Adam and Eve from eating of the Tree of Life "preceded" his decree to banish them from the garden. *Precede* here does not have its normal temporal meaning, but rather indicates that the first decree is the end, the second the means.

It is also true that God sets priorities. Not everything is equally important to him. Jesus speaks of some matters of God's law being more important than others (Matt. 23:23). God's Word is a "centered" Book, in which creation, fall, and redemption are events far more important than anything else that happens. So those arguing "orders" of decrees rightly ask us to imagine God's setting priorities.

And certainly God does plan event A in order to provide conditions for the realization of event B. I doubt, however, that Romans 8:29–30 is intended to teach such an order. Strictly, all that the passage teaches is that the group of people who are foreknown is coextensive with the group that is predestined, and so on. Furthermore, Paul does not speak here of a series of divine decrees, but of a series of divine actions. Some of these actions (foreknowing and predestining) are decrees, but the others (calling, justification, glorification) occur in history. They are the results of decrees, but Paul does not speak of the decrees that govern them. His purpose is not to give us a look inside God's thought process, but to give us the assurance that all elect persons will persevere to the end, that everybody whom God foreknows will be predestined, called, justified, glorified.

From these considerations, two problems emerge in talk of orders of the decrees: (1) there are different kinds of orders: means-end orders, priority orders, condition-realization orders. (2) Scripture rarely, if ever, attempts to give a broad summary of the order of God's thoughts. It does present ends and means in particular cases, priorities in others, conditions-realizations in others. But it never, to my knowledge, presents us with

18. See our account of foreknowledge in chapter 15, summarized in footnote 4 of this chapter.

any general map of God's mind. We may reasonably say on the basis of Scripture that God's highest purpose is to glorify himself. But beyond that, I think little can be said.

In Reformed theology, the two main views of the order of the decrees are *supralapsarianism* and *infralapsarianism*. The proposed orders are:

### *Supra*

1. To elect some creatable people for divine blessing.
2. To create.
3. To permit the fall.
4. To send Christ to provide atonement.
5. To send the Spirit to apply the atonement to the hearts of believers.
6. To glorify the elect.

### *Infra*

1. To create.
2. To permit the fall.
3. To elect.
- 4–6. Same as supra.

The controversy centers on the different orders of decrees 1–3, and about the odd notion in the supra order of a divine decree to elect a “creatable” people.

For defenders of the supra view, the important point is that God's foremost concern in his decrees is to display his grace in a chosen people. Everything else is, roughly, a means to that end. In order to give grace to those people, he must create them, permit the fall, and redeem them. So item 1 is related to the others as end to means. But items 2 and 3 are probably best construed as each providing the conditions necessary for the decrees that come after them to be accomplished. So there is no consistent pattern of “order” through the list. Perhaps the reason for giving priority to 1 over the others is that for supras God's care for the elect is so much more profound than his concern with the rest of creation that the other decrees are of far lesser importance.

The infra view makes no judgment as to God's foremost concern. It simply calls us to imagine the process as if God were thinking, “First I will create, then I will permit the fall,” and so on. Here the governing principle is mostly what I have called *condition-realization*. It is therefore important to understand that the meaning of *order* differs between the two lists.<sup>19</sup>

For infras, the important point to remember is that God elects people out of the race of *fallen* people and conceives them as fallen even in his planning before the creation.

19. For a somewhat more elaborate account of this issue, see *DKG*, 264, in the context of the chapter.



The supras reply that to conceive of election this way is to make election less ultimate in God's mind than it should be; it makes election somehow subordinate to creation and fall.

I believe that we should not take any position on the debate between *infras* and *supras*. In urging such agnosticism, I am standing with Herman Bavinck,<sup>20</sup> though my reasons are somewhat different from his:

1. The two positions equivocate on the meaning of *order* and therefore can't be precisely compared with each other.

2. Scripture never explicitly presents a complete and definitive order of thoughts in God's mind, in any of the relevant senses of *order*.

3. On the contrary, Scripture warns us against trying to read God's mind. His thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa. 55:8). This discussion runs great risks of engaging in speculation into matters that God has kept secret. For example, to cite a principle commonly urged in the literature, do we really know that in God's decrees the "last in execution is the first in intent"?<sup>21</sup> But it is not necessarily true of a symphony that the most important chords are the last ones. Nor is the last scene of a novel necessarily the most important. Is the final judgment more important than Jesus' atonement? Surely in these areas it is dangerous to presume that we can make value judgments. Why do we think we know so much about God's mind?

4. Surely in one sense all of God's decrees presuppose each other and exist for the sake of each other (see our discussion of *creaturely otherness* in chapter 35). God formulates each decree with all the others in view. Each influences the others. This fact makes it very difficult to list decrees according to any of the proposed principles of order.

5. In God's mind, where all decrees take all others into account, all may be considered ends and all may be considered means. They are all ends because they all represent things that God intends to do. They are all means because each decree supports the accomplishment of the others.

6. There are therefore *reciprocal* relationships among the purposes of God. God works miracles to attest prophecy, but he also ordains prophets to attest his mighty works. Creation provides the backdrop for redemption, but redemption restores creation. Redemption presupposes creation, but creation itself is in the image of redemption (see chapter 10).

7. I know of nothing in Scripture that settles the question whether God in eternity views the elect as "creatable" or as "created." I think the most likely answer is "both." He views us as creatable because before creation we haven't yet been created, and because he might have chosen not to create us. Since our creation at that point (eternity past) is only possible, not actual, God thinks of us as creatable. But he also views us as created (a) because he has in fact eternally decreed to create us, and (b) because only after the decree of creation is accomplished can anything else happen to us. God views us in all states, actual and possible.

20. BRD, 2:361–66, 388–92.

21. I take it that "first in intent" here means "of first importance," "of highest priority."



8. Does God envisage his elect as taken from a fallen humanity, or somehow apart from the fall? I'm not sure that I understand the question. Certainly God foreordains that his elect will be redeemed from Adam's fallen race, but I can't imagine that the supras would actually deny this.<sup>22</sup> And, equally certainly, God knows what they would be like without the effects of the fall. So we should not imagine either (a) God's thinking about the elect while somehow putting the fall out of his mind, or (b) that God does not have a purpose for his elect that transcends the particular pattern of history that he brings to pass. Infrass are particularly concerned to avoid (a) and supras to avoid (b). But these two concerns are not inconsistent with each other, and they should not have led to the creation of two parties in the Reformed churches.

9. Although points 4–6 above suggest a relatively equal standing for all divine decrees, I do not deny that God has priorities. His own glory, of course, has the highest priority. The eternal blessing of the elect in Christ is certainly an important means to that goal and may itself be described as the goal of history. I argued in chapter 9 that the consummation state will be so great as to eliminate all sadness over evil. Earlier in this chapter, I argued that the goal of historical election is to manifest eternal election. So all of God's decrees are ends, but some ends are higher than others. The truth stated somewhat inchoately by the supralapsarians should be honored, that the glorification of the elect in Christ, the fulfillment of the kingdom of God, is the goal of history.

10. When one tries to see the practical relevance of all of this, it seems to boil down to a question of the meaning of the fall or, more generally, the problem of evil. The supra position is in danger of making moral evil seem tame, as a mere step upward toward the glorification of the elect. The infra position understands better the horrible, inexplicable character of evil, but infrass find it more difficult to understand evil as part of a harmonious divine plan.<sup>23</sup> I will discuss the problem of evil at greater length in chapter 14.

11. Supras focus on the lordship attribute of control, emphasizing that even the fall has an intelligible role to play in God's eternal plan. Infrass focus more intently on the lordship attribute of authority, as if to say that we should not demand of God a rationale for evil, but should simply take him at his word that he is dealing with it in his own way. Both these responses are biblical, as we saw in chapter 9. Perhaps our present need is not to debate these positions as if they were alternatives, but to ask God to cure the discomforts that create such questions, to deal with our hearts, as the Lord who is present in blessing and judgment.

## Key Terms

Decree

Author-character model

22. Perhaps the problem is that the supras fear that this understanding makes predestination to depend on God's *foresight*, in this case of the fall. But (1) I will argue later that God's foreordination should not be completely separated from his knowledge, as if his foreordination were in ignorance. (2) Both positions correlate predestination with God's foresight in certain ways. The supras see God as decreeing creatable people, conceived as unfallen. But that, too, is a kind of foresight.

23. Thanks to Vern Poythress for suggesting to me this observation and the next.

Decrees  
 Election  
 Historical election  
 Eternal election  
 Remnant  
 New covenant  
 Book of life  
 Reprobation  
 Preterition  
 Precondemnation  
 Equal ultimacy  
 Free offer of the gospel  
 Order of the decrees  
 Supralapsarian  
 Infralapsarian  
 Unconditional election

### Study Questions

1. Explain the “biblical logic” that leads from miracle, to providence, to creation, to the decrees.
2. “The doctrine of providence and the doctrine of the decrees are perspectively related.” Explain.
3. “Although he wills for things to change in history, his plan for such change cannot be changed.” Explain and evaluate, referring to Scripture.
4. Summarize how the decrees of God reflect his lordship attributes.
5. Show from Scripture how Christ is the faithful remnant.
6. Is the election of Israel based on works or grace? Discuss.
7. What is new about the new covenant? What blessings are unique to the new covenant?
8. What is the biblical basis for the doctrine of reprobation? Evaluate it.
9. Frame believes there are two problems that invalidate talk of an order of God's decrees. Describe those problems and evaluate Frame's argument.

### Memory Verses

**Ps. 33:11:** The counsel of the LORD stands forever,  
the plans of his heart to all generations.

**Isa. 46:9–10:** I am God, and there is none like me,  
declaring the end from the beginning  
and from ancient times things not yet done,  
saying, “My counsel shall stand,  
and I will accomplish all my purpose.”

**Rom. 9:19–21:** You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

**Eph. 1:4:** [God] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

### Resource for Further Study

Bavinck, Herman. *BRD*, 2:337–405.

## GOD'S ATTRIBUTES: POWER, WILL

WE WILL NOW TURN TO consider the attributes of power. In the chart of chapter 12, we are moving ahead to the third column.

Certainly the immensity of God's power made a huge impression on believers during the biblical period. Consider:

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.  
Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle! (Ps. 24:7–8)

[I pray that you,] having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, . . . may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph. 1:18–23)

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20–21)

In chapter 2, I dealt with God's control as an attribute of his lordship, and in chapter 8 we looked at many passages indicating the efficacy and universality of God's control

over creation. God's control of all things in creation, providence, and redemption displays his wisdom, as we have seen, and also his mighty power. That he does all these things astounds and overwhelms human beings. Such power drives us to worship. No one else has nearly as much power as God. This is also an important element in the biblical teaching concerning miracle: in his mighty works, God displays his power, his lordship as control (chapter 7).

Nobody can frustrate him:

O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. (2 Chron. 20:6)

But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back?  
What he desires, that he does. (Job 23:13)

No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel  
can avail against the LORD. (Prov. 21:30)

Also henceforth I am he;  
there is none who can deliver from my hand;  
I work, and who can turn it back? (Isa. 43:13)

All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,  
and he does according to his will among the host of heaven  
and among the inhabitants of the earth;  
and none can stay his hand  
or say to him, "What have you done?" (Dan. 4:35)

He can subdue anybody who resists him, and eventually he will. On the way to the cross, Jesus says to his captors:

Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? (Matt. 26:53)

Paul speaks of God,

who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Phil. 3:21)

He does things that are proverbially impossible: raising from the stones children for Abraham (Matt. 3:9), bringing what is out of what is not (Heb. 11:3). He makes *all* things work together for good to those who love him (Rom. 8:28).

So his name is not only “the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 1:4; etc.), but also “the Mighty One of Israel” (Isa. 1:24; cf. 49:26; 60:16). He is *el shaddai*, *Pantokrator*, God Almighty.

There is in Scripture, therefore, a pervasive emphasis on God's mighty power, contrary to those modern theologians who object to the notion of a God who has “power over” others.<sup>1</sup>

## God's Omnipotence

The greatness of God's power is ground for religious praise, as we saw in the passages quoted from the Psalms, Ephesians, and elsewhere. False gods are weak and beggarly (Gal. 4:9). In such praise, the believer regards God's power as an absolute, the very standard of power. (As often, metaphysical assertions grow out of the stance of worship, not out of mere rational analysis.) To attribute weakness to God is incompatible with the stance of worship. God is always powerful, always competent.

So arises the doctrine of omnipotence as such. The term *omnipotence* is not in Scripture, but the term is appropriate to refer to two biblical ideas, closely related to each other:

1. *God can do anything he pleases.*

But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back?  
What he desires, that he does. (Job 23:13)

Our God is in the heavens;  
he does all that he pleases. (Ps. 115:3)

The LORD of hosts has sworn:

“As I have planned,  
so shall it be,  
and as I have purposed,  
so shall it stand,  
that I will break the Assyrian in my land,  
and on my mountains trample him underfoot;  
and his yoke shall depart from them,  
and his burden from their shoulder.”

This is the purpose that is purposed  
concerning the whole earth,  
and this is the hand that is stretched out  
over all the nations.  
For the LORD of hosts has purposed,  
and who will annul it?

1. As Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1981), 56; Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), 20.

His hand is stretched out,  
and who will turn it back? (Isa. 14:24–27)

Cf. Ps. 135:6; Isa. 55:11; Dan. 4:35.<sup>2</sup> See also the section of chapter 8 dealing with the efficacy of God's control.

2. *Nothing is too hard for God.* The difference between this idea and the previous one is that it explicitly describes what God can do in universal terms: not only can he do what he wants to do, but *nothing* is too hard for him, or, conversely, all things are possible for him. Note:

Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son. (Gen. 18:14)

Literally, the first sentence reads, "Is any word [*davar*] too wonderful [*pele*, a miracle-term] for the Lord?" The angel who announces to Mary the coming birth of Jesus echoes this language: "For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

In Numbers 11:23, "the LORD said to Moses, 'Is the LORD's hand shortened? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.'" Again, God gives a promise that seems impossible: a supply of meat in the desert. But of course, Israel should not measure the probability of God's word being true over against the unlikelihood of the event. God's word is supremely authoritative, and Israel should trust it as the very standard of truth. So the question "Is the LORD's arm shortened?" is rhetorical. Ascribing weakness to God contradicts the very nature of lordship and the authority of his word. So *of course* this task is not too hard for the Lord.

Face to face with God, brought to an end of himself, first by his sufferings and then by God's amazing knowledge and power, Job admits, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). God can do *all things*. Cf. also Jer. 32:17, 27; Zech. 8:6; Matt. 19:26 (Mark 10:27; Luke 18:27). And before his death on the cross, Jesus prayed:

Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will. (Mark 14:36)

We should not exaggerate the difference between the texts under the first principle and those under the second. Even the passages in the second list (with the significant exception of Mark 14:36) refer in context to actions that God actually carries out. But the believers' confidence in the second list of passages is based on a universal premise: God can fulfill his promise to me because he can do *anything*. So in these passages, "God can do all things" is a normative premise that should govern the thinking of his people. When God promises something seemingly impossible, God's people should

2. These are the words of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. But it is evident in context that here he is telling the truth, having been humbled by the Lord.



be thinking not only that “God’s Word is always true,” but also that “God can do all things.” So the realm of possibility for God is wider than the realm of actuality. God *can* do things that he does not actually do. We should never restrict our view of God’s power only to what he does, or has done, in history. God does not exhaust his power in his work of creation and providence.

## What God Can’t Do

The “all things,” however, requires some interpretation. The problem of defining it has engendered much controversy. The reason is that there are clearly some things that God *can’t* do, such as lying, stealing, making another God, making a square circle, making a stone so big that he cannot lift it, and so on. Therefore, philosophers and theologians have tried in one way or another to qualify the “all” in “God can do all things,” to find some alternative way of defining the concept, or to reject it altogether.

Let us look at some of the classes of actions that God cannot perform.

1. *Logically contradictory actions*, such as ultimately saving and condemning the same individual, making a round square (i.e., an object that is both square and not square at the same time and in the same respect), or making a rope with only one end.<sup>3</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, God is a logical, rational being, though he does not necessarily conform to the laws of any human system of logic. The laws of logic are an aspect of his own character. Being logical is his nature and his pleasure. So the fact that he cannot be illogical is not a weakness. It may not be fairly described as a lack of power. Indeed, it is a mark of his great power that he always acts and thinks consistently, that he can never be pushed into the inconsistencies that plague human life.

We note here, as we will do with other “qualifications of omnipotence,” that there are problems of language in this discussion. Not every “inability” is a lack of power; indeed, again, some inabilities are marks of extraordinary power. Imagine a baseball player who hits a home run whenever he comes to the plate. Someone might say of him, “He can’t hit singles or doubles.” That *sounds* like a weakness, until you look at the broader context.

Remember also my point in the previous chapter that abilities presuppose possible barriers (sometimes called *preventers*) that the abilities overcome. In the case of God’s inability to be illogical, what prevents his illogicality is his righteousness, faithfulness, truth, rational speech, knowledge, and wisdom. God’s incapacity here is not due to illness, injury, lack of strength, a crowded schedule, and so on. It is due to traits that are wholly admirable. This sort of reasoning will help us to see how alleged divine inabilities are really strengths. The term *inability*, therefore, is misleading in this context, though it is literally applicable. *Inability* is usually a pejorative, but in this case there is nothing deserving of criticism.

3. Assuming the principle that it is logically impossible to generate an actually infinite object out of finite material parts.

2. *Immoral actions*, such as lying, stealing, coveting, breaking his promises. God is *apseudes* (Titus 1:2), nonlying:<sup>4</sup>

God is not man, that he should lie,  
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.  
Has he said, and will he not do it?  
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Num. 23:19)

Balaam's questions are obviously rhetorical. It is unthinkable that God should lie or fail to keep his promise. He "cannot deny himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). He "cannot be tempted with evil" (James 1:13). God does, of course, have some moral prerogatives that human beings do not have, such as the right to take human life for his own reasons. But for the most part, human morality is an imaging of God: "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16, quoting Lev. 11:44; cf. Lev. 11:45; 19:2; 20:7; Matt. 5:48). God is the standard for human morality, so he cannot be less than perfect in his holiness, goodness, and righteousness.

Again, we may speak of God's inability here, but we are really talking about something admirable—moral excellence and consistency. These are the only qualities that "prevent" God from engaging in immoral actions. So again, the term *inability* is misleading.

3. *Actions appropriate only to finite creatures*, such as buying shoes, celebrating his birthday, taking medicine for a cough. Again, God's inability to do these things is not due to any lack of power. Remember, however, that God is quite capable of taking on human form and doing all these things. His "inability" exists only in his disincarnate existence.

4. *Actions denying his own nature as God*, as making another god equal to himself, abandoning his divine attributes, absorbing the universe into his own being. God necessarily exists as the one true God. If God were to perform any of these actions, he would no longer exist as the one true God. The world would then no longer be a theistic universe, but rather a chaos. But in fact, there could be no such world. So these actions are impossible. Even God cannot perform them. But that fact is good for everybody. It does not deserve the pejorative *inability*.

5. *Changing his eternal plan*: His eternal plan is unchangeable (see chapter 11). There has been some discussion about whether God can change the past. I prefer to deal with this issue without getting into the complications of current scientific theories about time. The most relevant point is simply that just as God's eternal plan has determined what will happen in the future (to us), so he has determined once for all the events of time that to us is past. Since that plan does not change, God cannot change the past or the future.

4. One can argue whether this means one "that *cannot* lie" (KJV) or merely one "who *does not* lie" (NIV). But clearly, *apseudes* characterizes all of God's actions. A god who lies is not the God of the Bible. So I take *apseudes* as an essential attribute. Thus the KJV translation is appropriate.

6. *Making a stone so large that he cannot lift it*: This is the famous “paradox of the stone,” beloved of philosophers.<sup>5</sup> We are at first inclined to say that this is a logically contradictory action, such as making a round square. What gives us pause is that (a) the description is not formally contradictory in any obvious way, and (b) this is in fact an action that some human beings can perform. There is no incoherence in the idea of a human being’s making an object too big to lift. People do it all the time. So why should this action be incoherent in the case of God? And is this a case in which human beings can do something that God can’t do?

But we have seen in 3 above that there are many acts that are appropriate only to finite beings: getting medical treatment, studying books to gain knowledge, paying taxes, and so forth. The act in question here is, I think, one of those. I mentioned earlier that when God takes on human form, he may do any number of these things, and that is also true in this case. Indeed, Jesus himself, during his days as a carpenter, might have made an object (say a house) that as man he was unable to lift. The question is really whether God could do this in his nonincarnate state.

So the preventer here, what keeps him from making the stone, is God’s infinity—not a weakness, but a strength. But the issues of 1 and 4 enter here, too. For God to make an object so large that he cannot lift it would involve either a contradiction of his omnipotence (1) or an abandonment of it (4). For God is omnipotent, and however we choose to define *omnipotence*, it certainly entails that he can lift any stone of any weight. So the preventer here is his infinity, together with his logical nature or his power itself. These are all, of course, strengths, rather than weaknesses. Perhaps what makes this puzzle so fascinating is that the three issues of power, logic, and infinitude need to be sorted out before a satisfying solution can be found.

## Definitions of Omnipotence

But how, then, shall we define *omnipotence*, granted all these qualifications? Some philosophers have decided that because of the complications mentioned above, *omnipotence* cannot be defined. It must be either denied or replaced by a different concept.<sup>6</sup>

We are tempted, perhaps, to say that *omnipotence* means that God can do anything with the exceptions of the classes of actions listed in 1 to 6. But that would be a rather unwieldy definition, and it certainly would not express clearly that insight into God’s power that drove the biblical saints to worship.

5. Some of the significant essays in the recent discussion are gathered in Linwood Urban and Douglas N. Walton, *The Power of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 131–68, by George I. Mavrodes, Harry G. Frankfurt, C. Wade Savage, and others. The same considerations mentioned here, I think, bear also on the question whether God can “make a chair not made by God,” and similar examples. This action is coherent and possible for human beings, but it is not appropriate for God. Were he to perform it, it would compromise his nature as God.

6. See, for example, Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 95–96.

Anthony Kenny<sup>7</sup> discusses some of the alternative definitions available in the philosophical literature. Here is my own list with comments, influenced somewhat by his, avoiding too much technical complication.

1. *God is able to do whatever he wants.* But this is also true of the elect angels and glorified saints, whom we would not describe as omnipotent.

2. *God is able to do anything logically possible.* But some of the actions excluded in the previous discussion are logically possible.

3. *God can do what is possible.* This definition would incorporate different kinds of possibility, other than logical possibility. But possible for whom? Not creatures, because in Scripture God's omnipotence includes actions that are *impossible* for creatures. Possible for God, then? But this definition would be tautological: God can do what God can do. That definition would be true, but not informative.<sup>8</sup>

4. *God has infinite power.* *Infinite power* requires further definition, if it is not to include power to perform the actions excluded earlier. So this phrase doesn't help us.

5. *God has power over all things.* Certainly he does have this power, according to Scripture. He is supreme, in control, the Lord of all. But this attempted definition really changes the subject. Our original question was: what can God *do*, in the course of exerting this power?

6. *God has more power than anyone else.* Also scriptural, but it poses the same problem as 5.

7. *God can do anything compatible with his attributes.* This is Kenny's solution,<sup>9</sup> and I think it is the best available at present. There is a problem here, however, and that is that all of God's attributes can be construed as powers, as I illustrate in this volume.<sup>10</sup> So this definition (like 3 on the second interpretation) lands in tautology, telling us that God can do what he can do.

This, however, is the same kind of circularity we considered in chapter 12, in the section dealing with the *Euthyphro* problem. There we saw that God's goodness, for example, is defined by his whole nature, and also that God's whole nature is good. Good is what he is, says, and does; but what he is, says, and does is good. Here we are saying the same about God's power. His power is defined by his whole nature, as in Kenny's proposal. But his whole nature should be defined as power; for power is not ultimately something abstract, but a concrete divine person. God's power is everything that he is; all his attributes manifest his power.

7. *Ibid.*, 91–99.

8. Alvin Plantinga illustrates this problem by reference to Mr. McEar, who is capable only of scratching his ear. If omnipotence means that someone can do anything possible for him to do, then McEar is omnipotent. See Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 170.

9. My formulation is, of course, a simplified paraphrase. Kenny's version: "the possession of all logically possible powers which it is logically possible for a being with the attributes of God to possess." *God of the Philosophers*, 98. I consider logic itself to be an attribute of God, so the references to logical possibility are superfluous.

10. Kenny says, in parentheses, "If the definition is not to be empty 'attributes' must here be taken to mean those properties of Godhead which are not themselves powers: properties such as immutability and goodness." *Ibid.*, 98. But is it not the case that immutability is God's power to remain the same through change in the world, and that goodness is his power to do good and avoid evil?

The reason for this problem is that there is no one or no thing higher than God by which to define his attributes. Nor are his attributes really separable from one another; each is a perspective on his whole nature. This is the *doctrine of simplicity*, which I will expound in a chapter 20.

So our definition boils down, in one sense, to “God can do what he can do.” The definition is circular, as, ultimately, are all definitions of divine attributes. But the circle need not be a *narrow* circle.<sup>11</sup> For we learn of God’s nature through his revelation, which is rich in content. God’s righteousness is “everything he is,” but it is also his mighty acts to redeem his people from unjust oppression. Similarly, God’s power is “everything he is.” But it is also his marvelous work of creation, providence, and redemption, as well as his power to conceptualize possibilities beyond the actual world.

In the end, we cannot define precisely what God is able to do. But we are confident that he can do everything Scripture describes him as doing, and much more. And we know that the only “preventers” are his own truth, righteousness, faithfulness, and so on. That fact should assure us that God is entirely competent to accomplish all his righteous, loving purposes.

## Omnipotence and Redemption

All the controversy about the definition of omnipotence and the various theological distinctions made about it may distract us from the actual purposes of God in revealing his power to us. God does not reveal his omnipotence merely so that we can engage in philosophical games or speculate on what he might or might not do. As with all his revelation, God wants the doctrine of omnipotence to edify his people (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

As I said earlier, God’s power drives his people to worship. It also warns us against governing our lives by our own expectations of what is possible, leaving God out of account. We may, for example, like the disciples, wonder how certain classes of people could be saved: the very rich (as in Luke 18:23–27), hardened criminals, persecutors of Christians, and so on. So we may be tempted to ignore such people in the course of our gospel witness, focusing only on those who from our human perspective we deem to be “winnable.” But the words of the Lord Jesus would turn us from such despair and favoritism: “What is impossible with men is possible with God” (Luke 18:27).

Redemption itself contradicts all human expectations. It is God’s mighty power entering a situation that from a human viewpoint is hopeless. God comes to Abraham, who is over a hundred years old, and to Sarah, far beyond the age of childbearing, and he promises them a natural son. Sarah laughs. But God asks, “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” (Gen. 18:14). God’s omnipotence intervenes, and Isaac is born. The omnipotence is the power of God’s covenant promise: the Hebrew literally reads, “Is

11. In discussing apologetics, I have often made a distinction between broad and narrow circularity, as in *DKG*, 131; *AGG*, 14. A “narrowly” circular argument would be a tautology such as “Scripture is true because Scripture is true.” A “broadly” circular argument enlarges the circle by mentioning facts, as “Scripture is true because Jesus’ resurrection is verifiable.” Within a biblical worldview, however, the second argument is as circular as the first, for it assumes that Scripture is the chief criterion for determining what is verifiable.

any word of God void of power?" God's powerful word comes into our world of sin and death and promises salvation. Isaac will continue the covenant, and from him in God's time will come the Messiah, who will save his people from their sins. When the Messiah comes, he will be born not to a barren woman like Sarah, but to a virgin—an even greater manifestation of God's omnipotence. So the angel echoes to Mary God's promise to Abraham: "nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

So God's Word never returns to him void (Isa. 55:11). It is God's omnipotence, doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. Apart from God's power, we could expect only death and eternal condemnation. But God brings life in the place of death. So the resurrection of Christ becomes a paradigm of divine power in Ephesians 1:19–23, quoted earlier. A God who can raise people from the dead can do *anything*. He is a God worthy of trust.

### Power and Weakness

I have so far emphasized, as Scripture does, the obvious forms of divine power as seen in creation, providence, miracle. But by focusing on such spectacular exhibits of God's power, we might tend to think of God's power as a kind of brute strength that can overpower any obstacle by sheer force. As Paul Helm says:

It is tempting to think of God as a Herculean figure, able to outlift and out-throw and outrun all his opponents. Such a theology would be one of physical or metaphysical power; whatever his enemies can do God can do it better or more efficiently than they.<sup>12</sup>

But, he adds, we should resist this temptation, "for the Christian view of providence reveals not only the power of God, but his weakness also."<sup>13</sup> How is God weak? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:25 that "the weakness of God is stronger than men." He is thinking here of the cross of Christ (see 1:18, 23–24). Jesus was delivered up to death by wicked men, so that God would raise him up in glory, having made him an offering for the sins of his people (Acts 2:23).

Jesus refuses to be an earthly ruler, or to bring in his kingdom by the sword. Rather than kill his enemies, he dies at their hand. All of this gives every appearance of weakness. But Paul says that the cross is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). Clearly, God used this time of weakness to accomplish his most amazing, indeed his most powerful, work: bringing life from death and defeating Satan and all his hosts.

So also in our own time, the most powerful work of God, the gathering of people out of Satan's clutches into Christ's kingdom, comes not through warfare or politics, not through the influence of money or fame, but through "the folly of what we preach" (1 Cor. 1:21). Jesus sends his people through the world, to all nations, bearing only his

12. Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 224. Much of my discussion in this section is based on Helm's, with thanks.

13. *Ibid.*



Word (Matt. 28:18–20). But that Word is the “power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). God’s power lies in the humble medium of preaching, and indeed in the suffering of his people (1 Peter 2:13–3:22; 4:12–19). They defeat Satan through the armor that God supplies: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the Word of God, prayer (Eph. 6:10–20). Thus we are “strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might” (v. 10).

Some writers today believe that God is weak in the sense that he is unable to do what he would like. On this view, he cannot eradicate evil, though he would like to, and he cannot make any progress without our help.<sup>14</sup> Scripture does not teach the weakness of God in this sense. Indeed, such a view of God contradicts a vast amount of biblical teaching on God’s sovereignty, control, and power.

But it is important for us to recognize that God’s sovereign, controlling power appears not only in spectacular displays like the miracles of Jesus, but also in events in which people perceive him as weak. As I indicated in *DG*,<sup>15</sup> the spectacular in Scripture is typically preparation for the “ordinary.” But God is at work in the ordinary as much as in the extraordinary. He often works behind the scenes, and he often does his most wonderful works through apparent defeats. So he tells Paul that “my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). And Paul says:

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:9b–10)

## God’s Will

God’s power works according to his will. Theologians tend to regard God’s will as his faculty for making decisions, as they regard his mind as his faculty of thought. But as we saw in the preceding chapter, Scripture rarely if ever speaks of a divine faculty of thought in distinction from the thoughts themselves, or in distinction from other faculties such as will. Similarly, though Scripture often refers to God’s will (much more often than to God’s mind), it does not typically speak of the will as some metaphysical or psychological entity in God that enables him to make decisions and exercise power. Rather, God’s will is the decisions themselves. The decision-maker, as we would expect from the doctrine of simplicity, is not some part of God, or some faculty within God; it is God himself, the person. God is the One who acts; his will is what he decides.

Although, as we will see, God’s will has many dimensions, a simple but accurate definition would be this: God’s will is anything he wants to happen.

OT English translations rarely use “will” in reference to God, though *ratzon* (“pleasure,” “delight,” “favor”) is so translated in Psalms 40:8 and 143:10. In the NT, *thelema*

14. Note the references to Rabbi Kushner and the process theologians in chapter 14 for examples of this view.

15. *DG*, 264–66.



(“wish,” “will”) is used fairly often in this way, *boule* and *boulema* (“counsel”) much less so. But the concept is often expressed also by the term “pleasure” (or “good pleasure”), found predominantly as translations of the Hebrew root *hafetz* (as Isa. 44:28; 46:10) and the Greek *eudokeo* (as Eph. 1:5, 9; Phil. 2:13). God’s will is what pleases him. The vocabulary of “thinking” and “planning” (Heb. *hashav*) and “choosing” (*bachar*) is also relevant. And “way” (Heb. *derek*, Gk. *hodos*) is found many times in Scripture referring to God’s will (almost always in the preceptive sense; see below). And (also in the preceptive sense) “will” and “way” are often interchangeable (though not entirely synonymous) with the broad vocabulary of revelation: “ordinances,” “testimonies,” “laws,” “statutes,” “commandments,” “words,” and so forth.

These terms are used more or less interchangeably. The differences of nuance between the terms are not, I think, of doctrinal importance. One could not argue, for example, that one term more typically denotes God’s will as decree and another God’s will as precept. If this distinction is legitimate (see below), both sides of it are expressed by each of the biblical terms.

### Decree and Precept

Among human beings, there are many different kinds of wants and pleasures, and of course we tend to arrange them in priorities. Some things we want more than other things. Some we cannot achieve, so we settle for others. We postpone fulfilling some desires until others are realized. Sometimes one must be realized before another. Some are not compatible with others, so we must choose between them. For these reasons, some of our desires are unfulfilled, temporarily or permanently.

Here we see some analogy to the complexities of God’s will. God, too, has many desires, variously valued and prioritized. Some of God’s desires he achieves immediately. But since he has determined to create a world in time and has given to that world a history and a goal, some of his desires, by virtue of his own eternal plan, must await the passing of time. Further, there are some good things that, by virtue of the nature of God’s plan, will never be realized.

So theologians have made various distinctions within the larger concept of the will of God. God’s will is, of course, one; but since it is complex, some have distinguished different aspects of it as *wills*, plural. We should be careful with this language, but it does make it easier for us to consider the complications of our topic.

One distinction is between God’s *antecedent* and *consequent* wills. God’s general valuation of some things as good we may call his *antecedent will*; his specific choices among those goods (in view of the overall nature of the world that he intends to make) may be called *consequent*. That distinction is legitimate, since God’s eternal plan respects the integrity of the beings that he intends to create and takes them into account. Again, God might genuinely value many states of affairs that are simply not compatible with the “story” that he has chosen to tell.

God's thinking, of course, is not a temporal process. All his thoughts are simultaneous, as we will see in the following chapter. Nevertheless, it is helpful to represent God's thought *as if* it were in two stages: (1) God evaluates every possible state of affairs, and (2) God chooses among these values, rejecting some and accepting others for the sake of his historical drama.

But Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Arminian theologians have used the antecedent-consequent distinction to make a place for libertarian freedom. On their view, God's antecedent will includes the salvation of all men. His consequent will, however, awaits the (libertarian) free decisions of human beings. Those who choose to believe, God blesses; those who do not, he condemns to eternal punishment. These blessings and curses come by his consequent will.

In my view, these theologians are right in saying that God antecedently wants everyone to be saved. We will look more closely at this question later, but certainly universal salvation is a good, a desirable state of affairs. They are also right to claim that in view of the actual historical situation, God does not bring that result to pass. There is no harm in calling this second volition *consequent*. In his eternal plan, God does determine not to achieve certain goods, at least partly because of the nature of the creatures that he intends to create.

The Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Arminian theologians are wrong, however, in saying that God's consequent will is dependent on the (libertarian) free decisions of man. I have given reasons (chapter 14) for denying the truth of libertarianism and will present many more in our discussion of the doctrine of man (chapter 35).

Reformed theologians have typically rejected the antecedent-consequent distinction because of its association with libertarian freedom. But they have adopted a rather similar distinction, between God's *decretive* and *preceptive* wills. God's *decretive will* is simply what in chapter 11 we called God's decree. It is his eternal purpose, by which he foreordains everything that comes to pass. God's *preceptive will* is his valuations, particularly as revealed to us in his Word (his *precepts*). The decretive will focuses on God's lordship attribute of control, the preceptive will on the lordship attribute of authority. God's decretive will cannot be successfully opposed; it will certainly take place. It is possible, however, and often the case, for creatures to disobey God's preceptive will.

The decretive will is sometimes called the *will of God's good pleasure (beneplacitum)*. This is somewhat misleading, because Scripture speaks of God's "pleasure" in both decretive and preceptive senses—decretive, for example, in Psalm 51:18 and Isaiah 46:10 *κῆν*, preceptive in Psalms 5:4 *NIV* and 103:21 *κῆν*. Some have also called the decretive will God's *hidden* or *secret* will, but that, too, is misleading, since God reveals some of his decrees through his Word.

For that reason I hesitate also to call the preceptive will the *revealed will (signum, "signified" will)*, though that language has often been used for this concept. *Preceptive* is also somewhat misleading, for it does not always have to do with literal precepts (God's laws, commandments). Sometimes God's preceptive will refers not to precepts but to states of affairs that God sees as desirable, but that he chooses not to bring about

(as Ezek. 18:23; 2 Peter 3:9). Still, I will use *preceptive* because of customary usage, and because I don't know of superior terminology available.

How is this distinction similar to the antecedent-consequent distinction? God's preceptive will, like the antecedent will, consists of his valuation of every possible and actual state of affairs. His decretive will, like the consequent will, determines what will actually happen. The difference is that the concept *decretive* is intended to exclude libertarianism. God's decision as to what will actually happen is not based on his foreknowledge of the libertarian free choices of men. It is rather based on his own decision to write his historical drama in a certain way.

It is therefore disingenuous for Arminians to criticize Calvinists for teaching "two wills" in God. Arminianism, indeed all theologies, recognizes some complexity in God's will (though confessing its ultimate unity), and theologians of all persuasions have sometimes talked about multiple wills in God. Arminians and even open theists also like to distinguish God's *will of permission*, concerning which Paul Helm says:

Suppose . . . there are areas of human action (including human evil action) which God not only does not will, but which he does not know will happen until the events occur. Nevertheless, the events in these areas are *permitted* by God, albeit in a very loose and weak sense. For if God did not allow them, and in some sense support them, then they would not occur . . . . God then wills (permits) what he does not will (command) . . . . So it is not an advantage of that view that it avoids having to think of God having two "wills."<sup>16</sup>

Does Scripture warrant this distinction? Below are some passages using the vocabulary of "thought," "intent," "pleasure," "purpose," "counsel," and "will" to refer to God's decretive will:

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. (Gen. 50:20)

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will." (Matt. 11:25–26)

Cf. Pss. 51:18; 115:3; Isa. 46:10; Jer. 49:20; 50:45; Dan. 4:17; Acts 2:23; Rom. 9:18–19; Eph. 1:11; James 1:18; Rev. 4:11. I would say that God's "ways" in Romans 11:33 should also be taken in the decretive sense, though elsewhere the term is almost always preceptive.

16. Helm, *Providence of God*, 132. The Arminian exegete I. Howard Marshall admits the duality within the will of God in "Universal Grace and Atonement in the Pastoral Epistles," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 56: "We must certainly distinguish between what God would like to happen and what he actually does will to happen, and both of these things can be spoken of as God's will."

Here are some instances of these same terms used in a preceptive sense:

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 7:21)

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. (Eph. 5:17; cf. 6:6)<sup>17</sup>

Cf. Pss. 5:4; 103:21; Matt. 12:50; John 4:34; 7:17; Rom. 12:2; 1 Thess. 4:3; 5:18; Heb. 13:21; 1 Peter 4:2. These passages literally refer to “precepts” of God. The following refer not to precepts, but to desirable states of affairs that God does not ordain, states of affairs that I include within the general category *preceptive*:

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? (Ezek. 18:23)

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

Note other passages where God desires repentance from human beings, which may or may not be forthcoming: Isa. 30:18; 65:2; Lam. 3:31–36; Ezek. 33:11; Hos. 11:7–8.

## Does God Desire the Salvation of All?

If God desires for people to repent of sin, then certainly he desires them to be saved, for salvation is the fruit of such repentance. Some Calvinists, however, have denied this conclusion, reasoning that God cannot possibly desire something that never takes place. But I have dealt with that objection already. Scripture often represents God as desiring things that never take place. As we have seen, he wants all people to repent of sin—but we know that many people never repent. And there are many, many other examples. God desires that all people will turn from false gods and idols, hold his name in reverence, remember the Sabbath, honor their parents, and so on. But those desires are not always fulfilled.

The reason is that God’s “desires” in this sense are expressions of his preceptive will, not his decretive will. His decretive desires always come to pass; his preceptive desires are not always fulfilled. So there is nothing contrary to Calvinistic theology in the assertion that God wants everyone to be saved.

Further, there are specific passages that lead to this conclusion. We saw in chapter 12 that in some senses God is gracious and loving to all his creatures, including those that are unrighteous (Matt. 5:44–48).<sup>18</sup> God sends rain and fruitful

17. “Will” here is *thelema*, which in Ephesians 1:11 is clearly decretive.

18. For further discussion of these passages, see John Murray, “The Free Offer of the Gospel,” in *MCW*, 4:113–32. In this section I am much indebted to Murray’s article.

seasons to everybody and even fills their hearts with gladness (Acts 14:17). God desires the best for his creatures, and of course, what is the very best for them is salvation in Christ.

Then in Deuteronomy 5:29, God expresses his desire in passionate terms:

Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!

Cf. Deut. 32:29; Ps. 81:13–14; Isa. 48:18. In these passages God expresses an intense desire not only for obedience, but also for the consequence of obedience, namely, the covenant blessing (cf. Ex. 20:12) of long life and prosperity. Ultimately the covenant blessing is nothing less than heaven itself, eternal fellowship with God.

Divine passion is even more obvious in Matthew 23:37 (Luke 13:34), where Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, saying:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!

The gathering here certainly includes the blessings of salvation. Jesus wants the people of Jerusalem to be gathered to him.

In the prophecy of Ezekiel, God's desire for human repentance is also a desire that the repentant one will have life. "Life" is often a biblical summary of God's salvation that brings us out of death (as Eph. 2:1–7). Through Ezekiel, God says:

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? (Ezek. 18:23; cf. vv. 31–32; 33:11)

In Isaiah 45:22, God again cries out:

Turn to me and be saved,  
all the ends of the earth!  
For I am God, and there is no other.

Murray argues<sup>19</sup> that the range of this plea is not universal in a merely ethnic sense (all nations, but not all individuals), but embraces all individuals. Part of his argument is based on the fact that the verse (and the context) emphasizes the uniqueness of the true God and his prerogatives over his entire creation. His plea must be as broad as his own lordship authority.

Second Peter 3:9 teaches the same desire on the part of God:

19. *Ibid.*, 4:126–27.

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Those wanting to limit the reference of this passage to the elect sometimes focus on the “you,” suggesting that this limits the reference to believers. Like other NT letters, this one is written to the church, and it presumes faith on the part of its readers. Yet, also like other letters, this one recognizes that professing believers are subject to many temptations in this life and that some do fall away. When they fall away permanently, they thereby show that they never had real faith. So in addressing believers, Peter is not assuming that all his readers are among the elect. And “patient” (*makrothumei*) here is an attitude that, according to other passages, God shows to the reprobate (Rom. 2:4; 9:22). The passage itself makes no distinction between elect and reprobate.

So in 2 Peter 9b, Peter may be expressing God's desire that everyone in the church will come to repentance; but if his focus is thus on the church, he is not distinguishing between elect and reprobate within the church. My own view, however, is that his thought in this verse goes beyond the church: The “any” and “all” of verse 9b are not necessarily included among the “you.” So after describing God's patience with his people in the church, Peter looks beyond them, asserting God's desire for *universal* human repentance.

Murray does not deal with 1 Timothy 2:4, but it is much discussed in this connection. That verse speaks of God, “who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” It is certainly plausible to take the “all” here to refer to ethnic universalism<sup>20</sup> (see above in the discussion of Isaiah 45:22), especially since verses 1 and 2 urge prayer “for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” Reformed commentators typically insist that verses 1–2 cannot be universal except in the sense “all sorts.” They then draw the conclusion that God desires the salvation of “all men without distinction of rank, race, or nationality,”<sup>21</sup> but not the salvation of every individual.

But the parallel between the language here and that of passages such as Isaiah 45:22 might lead us to question this interpretation. And in my view, verses 1–2 do not have to be taken *only* as a universalism of classes of people. To pray for a king is at the same time to pray for his people as individuals. William Hendriksen thinks it impossible that in verses 1–2 Paul could be asking prayer for “*every person on earth*.”<sup>22</sup> There is no time, he thinks, to do this in more than a “very vague and global way.” But it would also be impossible to pray specifically for every king and magistrate on the face of the earth. In any case, Paul's desire is simply that we pray for the nations in the spirit of

20. Of course, there are many passages of Scripture in which “all” does not refer to every human being. “All” is often limited by its context. Examples: Mark 1:37 KJV; 5:20 NIV; 11:32; Luke 3:15; John 3:26; Rom. 5:18; 1 Cor. 15:22; Titus 2:11.

21. William Hendriksen, *A Commentary on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus* (London: Banner of Truth, 1960), 95.

22. *Ibid.*, 94 (emphasis his).



God's blessing to Abraham, that God's grace will be applied to all people throughout the world and produce peace.

The real barrier to taking 1 Timothy 2:4 in a way similar to the other passages we have discussed is not verses 1–2, but verses 5–6:

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

If we see 2:4 as indicating God's desire for the salvation of every individual, must we not then take Jesus' "ransom" also in a universalistic sense, contrary to the Reformed doctrine of limited atonement? But the point of verses 5–6 in my view is very similar to the point made in Isaiah 45:22 and its context. Notice how in both Isaiah 45:22 and 1 Timothy 2:4–6, the thought moves from God's desire that all be saved to the exclusiveness of God's prerogatives and saving power. My own inclination is to take verses 5–6 not as enumerating those for whom atonement is made, but as describing the *exclusiveness* of the atonement, of God's saving work in Christ. His is a ransom *for all men* in the sense that there is no other.

If we read the passage this way, there is no reason, dogmatic or exegetical, why we should not take verse 4 (which is so like the other verses we have explored) to indicate God's desire for the salvation of everyone. I am inclined to take this position, though I don't regard the question as fully closed. My main point, however, is that we should not allow our exegesis of this passage to be prejudiced by the dogmatic view that God *cannot* desire the salvation of all. If this passage does not teach such a desire, many other passages do.

### Which Is the *Real* Will of God?

Herman Bavinck says:

Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Remonstrants, and others, proceed from the "revealed" or "signified" [preceptive] will. This is then the "true" will, which consists in that God does not will sin but only wills to permit it; that he wills the salvation of all humans and offers his grace to all, and so on. Then, after humans have decided, God adjusts himself to that decision and determines what he wants, salvation for those who believe and perdition for those who do not believe. The "consequent will" follows the human decision and is not the actual and essential will of God, but the will of God occasioned by the conduct of humans. The Reformed, by contrast, proceeded from the will of God's good pleasure [decretive], viewing this as the actual and essential will of God. That will is always carried out, always effects its purpose; it is eternal and immutable. The "expressed" or "signified" will [preceptive], on the other hand, is God's precept, concretely stated in law and gospel, the precept that serves as the rule for our conduct.<sup>23</sup>

23. BRD, 2:243.



Bavinck here presents an adequate summary of the differences between the Reformed and their major opponents. I cite him only to dissent from both parties in their desire to identify what will of God is the “real” will.

God's decrees and his precepts both represent divine values. It is true that the decrees always take effect; the precepts do not necessarily do so. That seems to give special honor to the decrees above the precepts. But one can also argue the other way: God's precepts represent his ideals, ideals that describe states of affairs often far more excellent than the present world as it has been decreed. God's precepts, for example, demand a world in which everyone honors the true God, in which everybody honors his parents, in which there is no murder—or murderous anger, and so forth. Would not such a world be better than the one we now live in?<sup>24</sup>

God's precepts also express goals, to which his decrees are means. The new heavens and new earth are a place where righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13; cf. Matt. 6:33). So one could argue that God's preceptive will is his “real” will, the one that he seeks to achieve in this world through the history of redemption.<sup>25</sup>

But I will not argue that point. Rather, I will insist that Scripture does not value one will above another, or compare one unfavorably to the other. The fact is that both these precepts and decrees are divine desires and should be given the highest honor. God's precepts are an object of worship in the Psalms (Ps. 56:4, 10), and are worthy of the most profound meditation (Ps. 1) and obedience (Ps. 119). God's decrees represent his control, his precepts his authority. We honor both equally as we honor the Lord.

### A Third Will?

Christians have, however, often spoken of “God's will” in ways that escape the classifications *preceptive* and *decretive*. A typical case is when a church member asks his pastor how he can find “God's will for my life.” In answering this question, the pastor would be rather unkind to take it decretively (“God's will for your life is whatever happens”). And to take it preceptively (“God's will for you is found entirely in the Bible, *sola Scriptura*”) seems to miss the point. The parishioner is not asking for God's law or gospel. He is asking whether and how he can get guidance from God in making practical decisions: whether or whom to marry, what to study in school, what field of work to enter, and so on. So we ask: is “God's will for my life” a third aspect of God's will, coordinate with the other two?

This kind of question has opened the door to dangerous subjectivism. Christians have sometimes been told that the will of God in this sense comes through a strong feeling given by God. I do believe that feeling plays an important role in human

24. See chapter 14 for an argument that this is not necessarily the “best of all possible worlds.”

25. I have argued in previous chapters that God's decision to make a world in time lies behind some of the more difficult problems of theology. See chapter 14 on the relevance of this consideration to the problem of evil. So here we should note that the temporality of creation has some bearing on the problem of understanding the duality of will in God.

knowledge,<sup>26</sup> in our knowledge both of Scripture and of other things. But *sola Scriptura* means that Scripture alone is the complete transcript of God's words to us. Emotions (together with reason, imagination, sense-perception, etc.) can help us to understand and apply Scripture to our circumstances, but they cannot add anything to the words of God in the Bible. That is to say that emotions can sometimes make us aware of data relevant to a decision. But apart from Scripture, they cannot obligate us to make one decision rather than another. Only Scripture provides divine norms, norms establishing an ultimate obligation.

Further, Scripture itself never advises God's people to expect God to lead through feelings apart from his Word. To walk in God's ways is to walk according to his testimonies, his ordinances, his words.

It would be wrong, however, to tell an inquirer that God does not guide his people in making specific life decisions. Scripture has much to say about *wisdom*, which God gives liberally to his people (James 1:5). As we saw in the preceding chapter, wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord (Ps. 111:10) and the following of his precepts. A godly person seeks, through wisdom given by the Spirit, to *apply* the precepts of the Lord to the circumstances of life.<sup>27</sup>

Sometimes wisdom dictates or rules out a particular course of action: a wise person will not fail to worship the true God, and he will not commit adultery, for example. But sometimes wisdom leaves open a range of options: it calls for a man to support his family (1 Tim. 5:8), but it does not dictate precisely what kind of shelter, clothing, or food to provide for them. One reason for the confusion about "God's will for my life" is that the phrase suggests only one possible course of action. We might think that if we have a choice between living in San Diego or Philadelphia, God will require one choice and forbid the other. But as a matter of fact, either choice might well be acceptable to God. If our motives are right and neither move would involve us in conflict with God's law, then we can assume that either decision is within the will of God.

But that choice may need some refinement. For example, my choice to live in Philadelphia may not conflict with God's Word in any big, obvious ways. But after prayerful meditation it may become evident that I could make much better use of my gifts in San Diego. Or it may be that the situation in Philadelphia would offer more temptations to sin, temptations that, knowing myself, I would be best off avoiding. Or it may be that there are better opportunities for Christian growth or service in one place or the other. All of these must be weighed in the decision, and there might be several pluses and minuses on each side.

Wisdom is not only obeying Scripture in the big, obvious ways. It is also, according to Proverbs, intelligence, knowledge, skills, understanding circumstances (including their likely consequences), self-knowledge, understanding of other people. It is a discernment that comes through reading Scripture, but a reading arising out of spiritual

26. See DKG, 152–64, 335–40.

27. For discussion of the concept *application*, see DKG, 81–85, 93–98, and DCL, *passim*.

maturity and experience.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it is the ability to weigh pluses and minuses of the alternatives before us. This, too, is obeying Scripture, for Scripture requires us to be wise, to redeem opportunities.<sup>29</sup>

God wants us, then, to make our decisions as wisely as possible. This is his preceptive will. In the example above, taking into account all the pluses and minuses of moving to Philadelphia or San Diego, it may well be that one decision is wiser than the other. That is not necessarily the case; perhaps neither choice is wiser than the other, as we saw above. When I choose one cabbage over another in the supermarket, it usually is the case that neither choice is wiser than the other. But if one decision is wiser than the other, then it is correct to say that that choice is the will of God, in the preceptive sense. For God's preceptive will includes not only the words of Scripture itself, but the "good and necessary consequences" of Scripture.<sup>30</sup> When one choice is wiser than the other, God's preceptive will tells me to make the wiser choice.

On the other hand, if the two possible decisions are indistinguishable in terms of wisdom, then we may say that either decision is *within* God's will.

It is thus that God guides his people: through Spirit-given wisdom, based on Scripture, wisdom that enables us to understand what is at stake in our choices and to evaluate those circumstances in a godly way. Through such guidance God reveals to us our *vocation*, to invoke a good Reformation term.

I do not, therefore, believe that we absolutely need a third category in addition to *decretive* and *preceptive*. But we should not oversimplify our understanding of God's preceptive will. It includes not only the explicit words of Scripture, but the words of Scripture applied to each of us, using the God-given gifts of intelligence, spiritual discernment, and so on.

But though a third category is not strictly necessary, it might be helpful. We do, after all, have some leeway as to how to divide the pie of biblical teaching. Strictly speaking, of course, only one category is needed: God's "wants" or "desires." But as we have seen, God has many different kinds of desires, so that some analysis is helpful. Scripture does not explicitly distinguish between decrees and precepts, but as we look at Scripture, we see that it speaks of God's will in these two ways. So to help students of theology, we create the categories *decretive* and *preceptive*. Perhaps it would be helpful to make *wisdom* or *vocation* a third category, in order to avoid misunderstandings. After all, it would be wrong, as we have seen, to tell an inquirer that God's will includes only his decrees and the Bible, as if to imply that God does not guide us in specific ways.

So I suggest the following teaching for such inquirers: God guides us through his decrees, his written Word, and Spirit-given wisdom: (1) By his decrees, he opens doors

28. See such passages as Romans 12:1–2; Ephesians 5:8–10; Philippians 1:9–10; Hebrews 5:12–14, in which knowledge of God's will comes through regeneration, sanctification, and testing. I discuss this in *DKG*, 153–55.

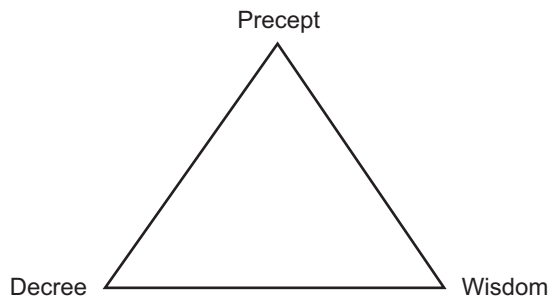
29. For more helpful discussion on the ways in which God leads us to make such choices, see Edmund P. Clowney, *Called to the Ministry* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1964), and James C. Petty, *Step by Step* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999).

30. WCF 1.6. On the inclusion of applications among these consequences, see *DKG*, 84.

and closes them, giving us some opportunities and withholding others; but those circumstances of our lives do not in themselves tell us how to behave. (2) By Scripture, he tells us what he wants us to do, showing us how to respond to these circumstances. (3) By Spirit-given wisdom, God enables us to *apply* Scripture to circumstances.

Scripture uses the idea of *God's will* to describe the outcome of the wisdom in category 3, in the passages mentioned in footnote 28: Rom. 12:2; Eph. 5:10; Phil. 1:9–10; Heb. 5:14. Certainly God knows what kind of life we would live if all our decisions were as wise as possible. We should not hesitate, then, to describe that life as God's will. This is not to say that if we make an unwise decision, we have “missed out” forever on God's will for our lives. After we make an unwise decision, we should turn to God's wisdom again, confident that it will lead us in the path of blessing.

These three categories, *decree*, *precept*, and *wisdom*, are perspectively related. God decrees to act according to his precepts and his wisdom. His precepts include the teaching that we should bow before God's sovereign decrees and seek his wisdom. And his wisdom is displayed both in his decrees and in his Word. In terms of the overall triadic structure of my Theology of Lordship series, the decree is situational, the precept normative, and wisdom existential. See fig. 16.1.



**Fig. 16.1. Perspectives on the Will of God**

### Key Terms

Omnipotence  
 Paradox of the stone  
 Circularity  
 Narrow circle  
 Preventers  
 Antecedent will  
 Consequent will  
 Decretive will  
 Preceptive will  
 Wisdom

## Study Questions

1. Name the two biblical ideas that evoke the concept of God's omnipotence. Cite texts that present these ideas.
2. Is there anything that God cannot do? If so, list some of them. Do these threaten the doctrine of God's omnipotence? Why or why not?
3. What is the "paradox of the stone"? Respond to it.
4. Frame says that the definition of *omnipotence* is circular. In what way? Does that cause a problem? Respond.
5. "In the end, we cannot define precisely what God is able to do." Explain; evaluate.
6. How is God's omnipotence important to our redemption?
7. Is there any sense in which God is weak? Discuss.
8. "It is therefore disingenuous for Arminians to criticize Calvinists for teaching 'two wills' in God." Why? Discuss.
9. Cite some Bible passages speaking of God's will in a decretive sense; a preceptive sense.
10. Does God desire the salvation of all? Cite Scripture texts to this effect. If so, does that affect the Reformed doctrine of limited atonement? How?
11. Which is the "real" will of God? Discuss.
12. A friend asks you, "How can I find God's will for my life?" Respond.

## Memory Verses

**Num. 23:19:** God is not man, that he should lie,  
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.  
Has he said, and will he not do it?  
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

**2 Chron. 20:6:** O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you.

**Ps. 115:3:** Our God is in the heavens;  
he does all that he pleases.

**Matt. 23:37:** O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!

**Rom. 12:2:** Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

**2 Cor. 12:9:** But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

**Eph. 1:11:** In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.

**Eph. 3:20–21:** Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

### Resources for Further Study

Bavinck, Herman. *BRD*, 2:242–49.

Helm, Paul. *The Providence of God*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993. Christian philosopher discusses some of the problems noted in this chapter.

Kenny, Anthony. *The God of the Philosophers*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979. Note his discussion of omnipotence.

Murray, John. “The Free Offer of the Gospel.” In *MCW*, 4:113–32. Standard Reformed discussion of the free offer and of God’s desire that all men might be saved.

Urban, Linwood, and Douglas N. Walton. *The Power of God*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. Philosophical treatments.

## GOD'S ATTRIBUTES: LORD OF TIME

IN THIS CHAPTER, I WILL CONTINUE my discussion of God's attributes of power. Here we will look at his attributes of infinity, eternity, immensity, temporal omnipresence, and unchangeability. These have to do with God's relationships to time.

Theologians do not generally refer to these as attributes of power, but as *metaphysical* attributes (God's relations to the metaphysical structure of creation), *incommunicable* attributes (since none of these can be predicated of creatures), attributes of *transcendence* (since they indicate God's transcendence over time), and so on. The term *metaphysical*, however, might seem to suggest that these attributes relate to "God in himself" in contrast with God in relation to the creation. But in fact all our knowledge of God is in relation to creation, in the sense that it is *our* knowledge, and we are creatures. Like all of God's attributes, these describe God's relation to various aspects of the world he has made, and that relation is always one of lordship. For my critique of the incommunicable-communicable distinction, see chapter 12.

I also object to calling these attributes of transcendence. The concept of transcendence commonly used here uncomfortably reminds me of the non-Christian concept of transcendence described in chapter 3. For example, theologians have often described God's eternity as his absence from the temporal world. While there is some truth in this description, I think it is more biblical to understand God's eternity as his lordship (control, authority, and presence) over time and therefore his presence in time as much as his transcendence over it, his lordship over the whole temporal sequence.

So this chapter will continue the emphasis of the previous one: here I will present God as Lord of time. He is Lord of all creation in terms of all his covenants with creatures, particularly the universal covenant that I expounded in chapter 4.

### God's Infinity

I will say little about God's *infinity*, for the word is almost never used in Scripture, and what can be said about it is best said under other headings. Only the kjv transla-



tion of Psalm 147:5 can be said to regard infinity as a divine attribute, and there it is specifically infinity of his “understanding,” for which see our discussion of omniscience in chapter 15.

In Greek philosophy, infinity is either a negative concept (absence of definite characteristics) or a positive one (existing so far beyond reality that it cannot be named). Both of these concepts reflect what I have called the non-Christian view of transcendence, and as such they are alien to biblical thought.

It is, however, common in theology to use the term adjectivally: infinite power, infinite knowledge, and so on. In these contexts, *infinite* can substitute for the *omni*-prefix in *omnipotence* and *omniscience*, and I have discussed in previous chapters what these terms should be taken to mean. It can also be used to express the “perfection” of God’s attributes. So we will in effect explore God’s infinity as we discuss his other perfections.

We should therefore understand God’s infinity in either or both of these ways: (1) God is free from the limitations implicit in creaturely existence, and (2) God’s attributes are supremely perfect, without any flaw.<sup>1</sup>

## God’s Eternity

The terms *eternity* and *eternal* in Scripture represent several Hebrew (*‘ad*, *‘olam*, *qedem*) and Greek (*aidios*, *aion*, *aionios*) terms. These terms can refer to finite periods of time or to long or endless duration through time. Whether they can also refer to a radical transcendence over time itself is a possibility that we will explore below. *Aion*, when not used to refer to a finite period of time, tends to be found as the genitive *ton aionon* (“of the ages”), the adjective *aionios*, or phrases such as *eis ton aiona* (“to the age,” “forever”), *eis tous aionas*, and *eis tous aionas ton aionon* (“to the ages of the ages,” “forever and ever”).

In the Bible, *eternal* usually refers not to God’s nature, but to the quality of life or punishment that awaits human beings: eternal life or eternal death. But here are some of the rare uses of these terms as divine attributes, or referring to God’s other attributes or decrees:

Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting [*olam*] God. (Gen. 21:33)

The eternal [*qedem*] God is your dwelling place,  
and underneath are the everlasting arms. (Deut. 33:27a)

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal [*aidios*] power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:20)

1. Neither of these has much to do with mathematical infinity. Introducing that concept into discussions of God’s nature is usually, in my view, not helpful.

This was according to the eternal [*ton aionon*] purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph. 3:11)

Cf. also 1 Tim. 1:17 (the “King eternal,” NIV) and Heb. 9:14 (the “eternal Spirit”).

Now, there has been a long debate as to the definition of eternity as a divine attribute. Greek philosophers Parmenides, Plato, and Plotinus understood “eternal” reality to be timeless—beyond or outside time. For Parmenides’ *Being*, Plato’s *Forms*, and the *One* of Plotinus, there is no change, no before or after.

Christian theologians also spoke of God as timeless, as existing before<sup>2</sup> time, and so on. This language became especially common during the Arian controversy of the fourth century A.D., as orthodox theologians opposed the Arian contention that there was a “time when the Son was not.”<sup>3</sup> No, they replied, both the Son and the Father existed before time. Time is their creation. So they are essentially timeless.<sup>4</sup> Augustine says to God in his *Confessions*:

Thy present day does not give way to tomorrow, nor indeed, does it take the place of yesterday. Thy present day is eternity.<sup>5</sup>

The classic statement of God’s atemporal eternity is found in Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6. There he defines God’s eternity as “the simultaneous and perfect possession of infinite life.” This definition held sway in the church for many centuries. We can find its equivalent in Anselm<sup>6</sup> and Aquinas<sup>7</sup> (but not in Duns Scotus and William of Occam), and in the major post-Reformation theologies.<sup>8</sup>

The Socinians opposed this view. They held that God’s eternity meant merely that God has no beginning or end, not that he is above or outside of time. This position may be called *temporalist*, and on this view God experiences temporal succession as we

2. Strictly speaking, it is improper to speak of something occurring before time, because *before* is itself primarily a temporal expression. Without time, there is no before or after. But it is convenient for those who believe time is part of the creation to refer to God’s eternal nature apart from creation by the phrase *before time*. There are spatial uses of *before* as well, as in “stand before the king,” and perhaps we can think of God “standing before time” in that sort of way.

3. More precisely, the Arians asserted a *when* (*pote*) when the Son was not, rather than a *time* (*chronos*). The difference, in my judgment, is rhetorical rather than substantial.

4. Hilary of Poitiers’ *On the Trinity* is a particularly strong example. In 8.40, he says, “Again, let him who holds the Son to have become Son in time and by His Incarnation, learn that through Him are all things and we through Him, and that His timeless Infinity was creating all things before time was.”

5. Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.3.

6. *Proslogium*, chap. 19, and *Monologium*, chap. 22, in *St. Anselm Basic Writings*, ed. S. N. Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974).

7. SCG, 1. He says (section 3) “There is, therefore, no *before* or *after* in Him; He does not have being after non-being, nor non-being after being, nor can any succession be found in his being.”

8. Martin Luther and John Calvin themselves did not concern themselves much with the definition of eternity, or in general with defining divine attributes. But their successors resumed the discussion, following the Boethian-Augustinian approach by and large. See RD, 65. Francis Turretin’s discussion is representative, in *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1:202–4.

do. Such a position was, of course, a necessary implication of their denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge, which I discussed in chapter 15.

More recently, theologians and philosophers, even some of Reformed conviction, have sometimes attempted to qualify the atemporalist tradition. The views of James H. Thornwell and Charles Hodge on this question are not entirely consistent, in my view. James Oliver Buswell taught that God was fully in time. Oscar Cullmann and Nicholas Wolterstorff also challenged the Augustinian-Boethian view, but James Barr said that it was exegetically defensible, and Paul Helm's *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time*<sup>9</sup> presented a vigorous defense of divine timelessness.<sup>10</sup>

As with the denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge (chapter 15), the strongest motive of those who deny divine timelessness, in my opinion, is the desire of these thinkers to make room for libertarian freedom. If God is timelessly eternal, it is difficult to argue that he is ignorant of what to us is future, for he sees all times equally from his eternal vantage point. And if God knows exhaustively what to us is future, then he knows the free acts of human beings before<sup>11</sup> they take place. And if he knows these actions in advance, it is hard to argue that they are free in a libertarian sense.

On the other hand, Scripture often presents God as acting *in* time, so it certainly is not possible to exclude God from time altogether. Evidently the issue is more complicated than a simple decision between whether God is “in” or “out” of time, as an object might be inside or outside of a box.

### Scripture on God and Time

As with all other theological questions, Scripture alone can ultimately resolve the question of the nature of God's eternity.

One cannot derive either a temporalist or an atemporalist view of God from the use of *aion* in its various forms. In this respect I follow Barr rather than Cullmann. The frequent use of *aionios* to refer to the eternal life of God's people should not be taken in an atemporal way. Nothing in Scripture suggests that human beings will ever transcend time.<sup>12</sup> Eternal life is life without end, in fellowship with the eternal God. So one would naturally think that the term has the same meaning when applied to God. A number of passages speak of God as having no beginning or end (Deut. 32:40; Pss. 33:11; 93:2; 102:24, 27; 145:13; 146:10), and in the absence of other evidence it would seem best to say only that God is *everlasting*: persisting through time rather than transcending it.

We should remember, of course, that the biblical writers did not have in mind our modern scientific concept of time, or even (most likely) the Platonic philosophical

9. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

10. See *DG*, 547–48, for specific discussion of these thinkers. I discuss some of their arguments specifically on pages 548–53.

11. The *before* is, of course, from our temporal point of view.

12. Some have taken Revelation 10:6 (“there should be time no longer,” *κῆν*) to indicate a nontemporal existence for the creation in the eschaton. But the context speaks rather of impending judgment, so I think the *NIV* is correct to translate “there will be no more delay.” That is the only verse I know that has been used to suggest that our eternal life is nontemporal.

distinction between time and eternity. Their understanding of time was more immediate and practical. They understood that God gives us a certain number of years of life before we die, but that his years never fail (Ps. 90:9–10; Heb. 1:12). There is no reason to suppose that they thought much about the “nature” or “essence” of time or the relations sustained to time (so defined) by God and man.<sup>13</sup> Certainly they didn’t see time primarily as a kind of “box” that a person can be either inside or outside of.

So perhaps we should back away a bit from the original terms of our question. It may not be possible to derive from Scripture an explicit answer to the question whether God is temporal or supratemporal. But I do think there is biblical reason to conclude that God’s relation to time is very different from our own. For the biblical God transcends a number of limitations associated with our experience of temporality:

*The limitation of beginning and end:* In the passages cited above, Scripture teaches that God has no beginning or end. Temporalists and atemporalists agree on that proposition. But it is also significant that the world has a beginning, and that God exists *before* that beginning. Genesis begins with “the beginning” (*reshit*, *arche*), and many other passages refer to the initial creation as the beginning (Isa. 40:21; 41:4, 26; 46:10; Matt. 19:4; Heb. 1:10; etc.). But the Creator precedes the creation. In John 1:1, the creative Word existed, not only at the beginning. One translation that brings out the durative force of the verb reads: “when all things began, the Word already was” (NEB).

James Barr argues, contrary to Cullmann, that this *beginning* can be taken as the beginning of time itself:

In general there is a considerable likelihood that the early Christians understood the Genesis creation story to imply that the beginning of time was simultaneous with the beginning of the creation of the world, especially since the chronological scheme takes its departure from that date.<sup>14</sup>

The “chronological scheme” includes not only the six days of creation (however literally or figuratively they are to be taken), but also the establishment of day and night (Gen. 1:5) and the creation of the heavenly bodies “to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years” (v. 14).

This argument does not prove absolutely from Scripture that time itself had a beginning. It would be possible, certainly, for time to exist in the absence of days and nights demarcated by heavenly bodies. But certainly the biblical writers saw God as having his

13. Ludwig Wittgenstein discusses in *Philosophical Investigations* a quotation from Augustine on the subject. Platonist that he was, Augustine admitted difficulty in defining time. “If nobody asks me, I know; but if somebody asks me, I don’t know.” Wittgenstein took this as an example of how philosophical problems arise. We use words such as *time* very naturally, without perplexity, until somebody asks us the “definition” or “essence.” Then we are bewildered or “bewitched,” and we find it necessary to consult philosophers. Wittgenstein’s own suggestion is that if we are able to use the word *time* in its everyday settings, then we understand it sufficiently. It may not be possible to define it, to reduce all its uses to one essence. Nouns in language are not always amenable to essence-description. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 89.

14. James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1969), 75.

own existence beyond and prior to the history of the material creation and the human race. And it is problematic to try to imagine what role time would play in a situation before the creation, in which there are no bodies in motion, but only the unchanging God. What we *know* as time, measured by the heavens, affecting our practical lives, certainly began with the creation. If God experienced time before the creation, his experience of it was certainly very different from ours today.

*The limitation of change:* I have chosen to discuss God's unchangeability in a separate section below. But clearly God is unchangeable in some respects (Mal. 3:6), and however one interprets it, his unchangeability gives him an experience of time different from ours.

*The limitation of ignorance:* Through time, our memories of the past grow dim, and our anticipation of the future is always highly fallible. But as I argued in chapter 15, God knows perfectly what to us are past, present, and future, seeing them, in effect, with equal vividness. This does not mean that all times are indistinguishable for him. He knows that one event happened on Monday, another on Tuesday, and he knows the process by which one event flowed into the next. Thus, I consider it misleading to say that there is no "succession of moments" in God's consciousness.<sup>15</sup> But he does see all events laid out before him, as one can see an entire procession from a high vantage point.

The procession analogy<sup>16</sup> is a frequent illustration of an atemporal consciousness. An atemporal being would see all events equally vividly. Since God can do this, his experience of time, in still another sense, is very different from ours. Indeed, his relation to time is unique.

*The limitation of temporal frustration:* To us, time often seems to pass too slowly or too quickly. Too slowly, trying our patience as we wait for something to happen; too quickly, as we try to complete a task by a deadline. For God, however, time never passes too slowly:

For a thousand years in your sight  
are but as yesterday when it is past,  
or as a watch in the night. (Ps. 90:4)

But neither does time pass too quickly for God:

With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.  
(2 Peter 3:8)

I am not here trying to make a point about time traveling at multiple speeds in God's consciousness. I doubt that these passages have in mind anything so abstruse.

15. God does not sense one moment of his own transcendent consciousness flowing into another. But he fully understands the process by which time flows in the creaturely world.

16. Or one could use the analogy of a movie film. When one watches the film projected onto the screen, he watches one frame at a time, each moving into the next. But if one could look at the film itself (only short ones, I gather, are suitable for this illustration), stretched out before one's field of vision, he could see all frames at once, and therefore all "times" in the film.

Rather, the point is that God is so completely in control of the temporal sequence that he is able to accomplish precisely what he wants.

The same point can be made through reflection on the “fullness of time” (NIV: “when the time had fully come”) in Galatians 4:4. God has structured the whole history of the world to accomplish precisely his own purposes. (See chapters 8 and 11 for more biblical evidence of God’s divine control in the accomplishment of his eternal purpose.)

Again, we must conclude that God’s experience of time is very different from ours. He looks at time as its Lord, as his tool in accomplishing his purposes; we look at it as a limit on our choices. He is Lord of time. The dates of history are “times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7; cf 17:26; Mark 13:32).

What conclusion follows from these four ways in which God transcends limitations associated with time? Shall we say that God is merely “in” time, or is he in some way “outside of” time?<sup>17</sup> Well, try to imagine what it would be like to have a consciousness without beginning and end, without change, with perfect knowledge of all times, and with complete sovereignty over temporal relationships. What would that feel like?

When we talk about ourselves being “in time,” part of what we mean, I think, is that to us time is a limit. It is a sort of box that we cannot get out of; it limits our knowledge and our choices. To God, time is clearly not that sort of box. A much better metaphor is the atemporalist one, that he looks down on time from a lofty height. So it seems to me that God’s experience of time, as Scripture presents it, is more like the atemporalist model than like the temporalist one.

I cannot present the above as a watertight argument for divine atemporality. But it seems to me that once we deny the existence of libertarian freedom, all the relevant considerations favor atemporality, and none favor temporality.

More important than the question of temporality, however, is God’s lordship over time. In chapter 3 and since, I have argued that God’s transcendence in Scripture is not his being outside or beyond history, but rather his being Lord and King, in control of all things and speaking with authority over all things. So God’s special relation to time, whether temporal or atemporal, should not be defined first in terms of temporality, but in terms of lordship.

Some temporalists have used the phrase “Lord of time” as an alternative to calling him atemporal.<sup>18</sup> But temporalists who espouse libertarian freedom (that is, most temporalists) need to ask how libertarianism can possibly be consistent with divine lordship as Scripture presents it.

17. Later, I will argue that God is in time as immanent. Here, however, I am concerned with the nature of his transcendence with respect to time, his eternity. The question: does that transcendence imply that he is outside time in some sense, or not?

18. Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 69; Nicholas Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” in *God and the Good*, ed. Clifton Orlebeke and Lewis Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 203; Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 2:456–58.



### *God's Temporal Omnipresence*

We have not, however, exhausted the biblical teaching on the relation of God to temporal reality. So far we have focused on the nature of God's transcendence in relation to time. Now we must look at his temporal immanence.

I disagree with Nicholas Wolterstorff's general position on this matter, but I appreciate one of his arguments, to the effect that God's redemptive actions in Scripture are temporally successive and that the biblical writers regard God as having a time-strand of his own. This is certainly right. I mentioned earlier that God accomplishes his purposes in the fullness of time. That fact is a testimony to his sovereignty, but also to the importance of temporal relationships in the divinely ordained course of history.

The biblical narrative is a historical succession of events—events of creation, fall, and redemption. I mentioned in chapter 5 that, as Cullmann, Geerhardus Vos, and others have pointed out, the NT tells us of two *ages*: the old age and the new. The old is the age of fallen humanity, running from the fall to the final judgment. The new is the age of salvation, beginning with the coming of Christ and running into eternity future. We now live in a time of overlap between the two ages. So history is a linear pattern of events, beginning at creation, reaching a climax in the work of Christ, continuing on to the final judgment and the eternal state.

The work of Christ is *once for all*. Its *pastness* is important to the NT writers. The *presentness* of the time of decision is also important: "Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2b). And the *futurity* of the consummation is important: suffering now, glory later (1 Peter 1:3–7; etc.).

All these events are God's works, so God works in a temporally successive pattern. The sequence is foreordained by God's decree, but he brings it to pass in time. Now, Wolterstorff takes this temporal pattern to imply that God has "a time strand of his own" and therefore that God is temporal.

In one sense, Wolterstorff is correct. We saw in chapter 2 that covenant presence is an important element of God's lordship. And covenant presence means both that God is *here* and that God is *now*. Israel in Egypt needed to learn that God was present not only to the patriarchs four hundred years before, but to them as well, in their current experience. So it is not only the case that God *works* in time; it is also the case that he is *present* in time, at all times.

I believe that too little attention has been paid to God's temporal omnipresence in the discussion over God's temporality. Much of what some writers want to gain by a temporalist view (other than, of course, libertarian freedom) can be as easily secured through sufficient recognition of God's temporal covenant presence. For example, a covenantally present God, like a temporalist God, can know (and assert) temporally indexed expressions such as "the sun is rising *now*." He can feel with human beings the flow of time from one moment to the next. He can react to events in a significant sense (events that, to be sure, he has foreordained). He can mourn one moment and rejoice the next. He can hear and respond to prayer



in time. Since God dwells in time, there is give-and-take between him and human beings.<sup>19</sup>

As I indicated in chapter 9, God's providence operates on the world both from above (government) and from below (concurrence). And in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we see again how the eternal God enters time. In Christ, God enters not a world that is otherwise strange to him, but a world in which he has been dwelling all along.

But this temporal immanence does not contradict his lordship over time or the exhaustiveness of his decree. These temporal categories are merely aspects of God's general transcendence and immanence as the Lord. The "give-and-take" between God and the creation requires not a reduced, but an enhanced view of God's sovereignty. We must recognize God as Lord in time as well as Lord above time.

So God is temporal after all—but not *merely* temporal. He really is "in" time, but he also transcends time in such a way as to have an existence "outside" it. He is both inside and outside of the temporal box, a box that can neither confine him nor keep him out. That is the model that does most justice to the biblical data.

### ***God's Unchangeability***

Another attribute describing God's relation to time is that of *unchangeability* or *immutability*. Whether we think of change as the measure of time or time as the measure of change, the two are closely related.

From the time of the ancient Greek philosophers, intellectuals have tried to understand change. Many have concluded that there must be something unchanging, a reference point from which we can measure and therefore understand the changes around us. In Christian thought, the ultimate vantage point has always been God.<sup>20</sup>

Scripture refers to God as unchanging:

Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands.  
They will perish, but you will remain;  
they will all wear out like a garment.  
You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,  
but you are the same, and your years have no end. (Ps. 102:25–27; cf. Mal. 3:6;  
James 1:17)

One particular emphasis is that God does not break his word or change his mind (KJV: "repent"):

God is not man, that he should lie,  
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.

19. More on this interaction in the next section.

20. Cornelius Van Til and others have argued that only the Christian God, as absolute person, is able to provide the presuppositions of meaningful experience. See my *CVT*, 51–78, 311–22; *AGG*, 57–147.

Has he said, and will he not do it?

Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Num. 23:19; cf. 1 Sam. 15:29)

Compare Psalm 110:4 (Heb. 7:21); Jeremiah 4:28; Ezekiel 24:14, in which God says in specific cases that he will not change his mind. So as we have seen in earlier chapters, God's counsel stands firm; his purpose certainly will come to pass (Deut. 32:39; Ps. 33:11; Isa. 43:13; etc.). The image of the *rock* underscores Yahweh's stability, the sureness of his purposes.

### ***A God Who Relents***

Nevertheless, a number of problems arise in discussions of God's unchangeability. For example, we should note that there are many passages of Scripture in which God does appear to change his mind. In Genesis 2:17, God tells Adam that in the day he eats of the forbidden fruit, he will surely die. Yet, in the first biblical indication of God's grace, Adam and Eve do not die after eating the fruit, but God rather proclaims his intention to defeat Satan (3:16).<sup>21</sup>

In Exodus 32:9–10, God announces judgment against the children of Israel for their false worship:

And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."

But Moses seeks God's favor, calling on him to "relent" (v. 12). "Relent" here is *nacham*, the same word translated "change his mind" in Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29 NIV (KJV: "repent").<sup>22</sup> And God does relent:

And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. (Ex. 32:14)

Six verses from 1 Samuel 15:29, which denies that God relents, we read:

And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel. (v. 35)

"Regretted" is *nacham*. So in these six verses we learn that God does not *nacham*, but that he "*nachamed*" that he had made Saul king. The passage appears contradictory. Similarly, before the flood, God "was sorry [*nacham*] that he had made man on the

21. We may, of course, say that man's *spiritual* death (Eph. 2:1, 5) dates from the fall. But I believe that the threat of Genesis 2:17 was to Adam's physical as well as his eternal state. Human death did, in general terms, begin with the fall, but in my view God did not fully carry out the terms of the threat in 2:17.

22. When used of God, *nacham*, of course, cannot mean to repent of sin, so the KJV translation is misleading here. It can mean "relent," "change one's mind," or "be grieved" (usually of an intense grieving).

earth" (Gen. 6:6). It seems again that God has changed his mind: from joy in creating man to grief.

The prophet Joel calls on Israel to repent:

"And rend your hearts and not your garments."  
Return to the LORD your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;  
and he relents over disaster.  
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,  
and leave a blessing behind him,  
a grain offering and a drink offering  
for the LORD your God? (Joel 2:13–14)

This passage is especially interesting because it quotes one of the definitive expositions of the divine name *Yahweh*, the one in Exodus 34:6–7, but it adds to this exposition that the Lord is One who "relents" (*nacham*). (I assume that this is a conclusion from the emphasis on forgiveness in Exodus 34.) So relenting is part of his very nature as the Lord. He is the Lord who relents.

The prophet Amos records a dialogue between himself and the Lord:

This is what the Lord God showed me: behold, he was forming locusts when the latter growth was just beginning to sprout, and behold, it was the latter growth after the king's mowings. When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said,

"O Lord God, please forgive!  
How can Jacob stand?  
He is so small!"  
The LORD relented concerning this:  
"It shall not be," said the LORD.

This is what the Lord God showed me: behold, the Lord God was calling for a judgment by fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. Then I said,

"O Lord God, please cease!  
How can Jacob stand?  
He is so small!"  
The LORD relented concerning this:  
"This also shall not be," said the Lord God. (Amos 7:1–6)

We are reminded here of Abraham's intercession for Lot in Sodom, in Genesis 18:16–33, and Moses' calling on God to spare Israel, as we have seen it in Exodus 32:9–14. In both passages, the intercessor gets his way. The Lord relents; he retreats from the judgment that he had originally announced.

When he finally arrives at Nineveh after some delay, Jonah announces, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jonah 3:4b). This is God’s word, given through the prophet. But Nineveh is not overturned. God relents from his purpose. Jonah is not surprised, however:

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.” (Jonah 4:1–2)<sup>23</sup>

Like Joel, Jonah quotes Exodus 34:6–7, drawing from that passage the conclusion that God relents. This connection with the name *Yahweh* again suggests that relenting belongs to God’s very nature: he is “a God who relents.” Relenting is a divine attribute.

But how can this be, in the face of passages such as 1 Samuel 15:29 that appear to deny that God relents?

In the light of Joel 2:13–14 and Jonah 4:1–2, it is not a mere game with words to say that relenting is part of God’s unchangeable divine nature. In Jeremiah 18:5–10, God indicates that such relenting is part of his general way of working:

Then the word of the LORD came to me: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.”

Cf. Jer. 26:3, 13, 19 (referring to Isa. 38:1–5); 42:10. Here the Lord states a general policy: many prophecies of judgment and blessing (see below for exceptions) are *conditional*. God reserves the right to cancel them or reverse them, depending on people’s response to the prophet. As Calvin puts it, speaking of Jonah’s prophecy:

Who now does not see that it pleased the Lord by such threats to arouse to repentance those whom he was terrifying, that they might escape the judgment they deserved for their sins? If that is true, the nature of the circumstances leads us to recognize a tacit condition in the simple intimation.<sup>24</sup>

Some prophecies, then, that appear to be straightforward predictions are, according to the principle of Jeremiah 18:5–10, really warnings, with “tacit conditions” attached.

23. Cf. also 1 Chron. 21:15.

24. *Institutes*, 1.17.14.

Sometimes, as in the passages from Jeremiah, Joel, and Jonah, those tacit conditions have to do with obedience or disobedience, repentance or complacency. Sometimes, as in Genesis 18:16–33, Exodus 32:9–14, and Amos 7:1–6, prayer is such a condition. As the prophet intercedes for his people, God relents from the judgment he announced. The prophet stands before the throne of God himself and pleads for God's people, and God answers by relenting.

How is all this compatible with the sovereignty of God? Note the following:

1. Jeremiah 18:5–10 follows a passage (vv. 1–4) in which God compares himself to a potter and Israel to clay, a radical image of God's sovereignty. God's relenting is his sovereign decision. His right to withdraw his announced judgments and blessings is part of his sovereignty.

2. If we interpret these passages (as did Jonah) according to the principle of Jeremiah 18, we are interpreting them as expressions of his preceptive will, rather than his decretive (chapter 16): as warnings, not as predictions of what will certainly happen. So there is no question of his decretive will failing. His preceptive will, of course, unlike the decretive, can be disobeyed, but at great cost.

3. Even God's decretive will, his eternal plan, takes human actions and prayers into account. God's decretive will in the book of Jonah is not to judge Nineveh at that time. But he has eternally determined to accomplish that through Jonah's prophecy and the repentance of the Ninevites.<sup>25</sup> It is God's eternal intention to forgive Israel in the situation of Amos 7:1–6. But he does this through the power of Amos's intercession, and not without it.

Another problem: how is all this compatible with the authority of the prophetic word? For in Jonah 3:4, God through his prophet announces something that does not take place: the destruction of Nineveh. In Deuteronomy 18:21–22, the test of a true prophet is this:

And if you say in your heart, "How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?"—when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

On this criterion, should not Jonah have been denounced as a false prophet? No, because God had revealed that such prophecies have "tacit conditions." What Jonah said to Nineveh was really, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed, *unless* you repent of your sins and turn to the Lord." Jonah himself understood (Jonah 4:2) that God might forgive Nineveh despite the apparently categorical language of the prophecy. The Ninevites understood it, too. The king said:

Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish. (Jonah 3:9)

25. This is an example of what I mentioned earlier in the chapter: the give-and-take between human beings and God in his temporal immanence.

Jonah was a true prophet, announcing God's judgment with tacit conditions. His words were God's, his tacit conditions God's tacit conditions.

But then does Deuteronomy 18:21–22 become a dead letter? Not at all. Not all prophecies are conditional. Sometimes prophets do make straightforward predictions of events to come. Obviously, in 1 Samuel 10:1–7, for example, there is no conditionality. Samuel simply tells Saul a number of events that will take place in the immediate future, and they happen exactly as Samuel said. (For other examples, see the general treatment of providence in chapter 8 and the discussion of divine foreknowledge in chapter 15.) We must determine from the context which principle is operative: straightforward prediction, or conditional proclamation.

Some prophecies, too, are qualified by assurances. In Jeremiah 7:15, God says that the exile is certain, so certain that, according to verse 16, the prophet is not even to pray for the people, “for I will not hear you.” Here, God makes known his decretive will. What he has predicted will certainly come to pass, whatever the conditions. In Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 13; 2:1, 4, 6, God announces judgments to come and says that these will certainly come to pass; he will not turn back his wrath. For other examples, see the following: Isa. 45:23; Jer. 4:28; 23:20; 30:24; Ezek. 24:14; Zech. 8:14. Sometimes, indeed, God takes a solemn oath to indicate the certainty of the predicted events: Ps. 110:4; Isa. 14:24; 54:9; 62:8; Jer. 44:26; 49:13; 51:14; Amos 4:2; 6:8; 8:7. Sometimes the phrase “as I [the Lord] live” pledges the unconditional truth of the prophecy (Ezek. 5:11; 14:16, 18, 20; 20:3, 31, 33; 33:27; 35:6, 11). In these examples God declares his unchangeable decretive will.<sup>26</sup>

In what sort of context are we likely to find “tacit conditions”? In prophecies of blessing and judgment, according to Jeremiah 18:5–10. To be sure, some such prophecies are unconditional, as those mentioned in the previous paragraph. But most of them are conditional, and most conditional prophecies are prophecies of blessing and judgment. Blessing and judgment are the twin sanctions of God's covenants. Often the prophet serves as the prosecuting attorney for God's “covenant lawsuit.” In the covenant, God offers two alternatives: blessing for obedience, cursing for disobedience (see chapter 2). It is the job of the prophet to hold out both alternatives. This is the theological reason why prophecies of blessing and judgment are often conditional: they are proclamations of God's covenant. So it should not surprise us either to find that “relenting” is part of God's covenant name.

So to say that much prophecy is conditional is not to say that “anything can happen” following a prophecy. Even conditional prophecy limits what can happen and what cannot. The covenant itself is sealed by God's oath, so its curses and blessings will certainly come to pass granted the relevant conditions. The result will not be neutral; it will be *either* curse *or* blessing. Most of these prophecies are imprecise, to be sure; they don't describe exactly what kind of blessing or curse, or the timing of them. But they speak the truth.<sup>27</sup>

26. The fact that many passages have these explicit assurances, however, suggests that prophecy does not always have this unconditional character. So these passages, too, reinforce our impression that many prophecies in Scripture are conditional.

27. In this section, I am greatly indebted to Richard Pratt's important article “Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions,” available at [http://reformedperspectives.org/newfiles/ric\\_pratt/TH.Pratt](http://reformedperspectives.org/newfiles/ric_pratt/TH.Pratt)

### *How Is God Unchanging?*

We have seen that *unchanging* needs some definition beyond the obvious, since Scripture attributes to God some kinds of changes, even changes of mind. There are also questions that arise of a philosophical sort. Say that Susan becomes a Christian on May 1, 1999. Before that date, we could not say of God that he was “believed in by Susan,” but after that date we could say that. A change has taken place, one that can be interpreted as a change in God.

Philosophers sometimes call these “Cambridge changes”<sup>28</sup> to distinguish them from “real changes.” On the human level, consider that Mary has the property of being taller than her son Justin on January 1, 1998, then loses that property on January 1, 1999. She has remained the same height, but Justin has grown taller. Normally we would say that Mary has not changed in this respect, but Justin has. If we are in a philosophical state of mind, however, we can formulate the event as a change in Mary, namely, of losing a property and/or gaining one. We might call this a “Cambridge change” as opposed to a “real change.”

It is not perfectly easy in some cases to distinguish the two,<sup>29</sup> but most of us would grant intuitively that there is a distinction to be made. Hence, theologians have often said that God does not change “in himself,” but does change “in his relations to creatures.” When Oviedo experiences a heat wave, it is not because the sun has grown hotter, but because Oviedo stands in a different relation to it (outside cloud banks, etc.). When God “changes” his attitude from wrath to favor, it is because the creature has moved from the sphere of Satan to the sphere of Christ.

Some “changes in God” can be understood in this way, but it would be wrong, I think, to understand all of them according to this model. For one thing, Reformed theology insists that when a person moves from the sphere of wrath to that of grace, it is because God has moved him there. God’s “change” in this context (from wrath to grace) is not the product of creaturely change; rather, the creaturely changes come by God’s initiative. Wolfhart Pannenberg says that in medieval theology,

because of God’s immutability any change in God’s attitude to sinners has to begin with a change on our side. This was the main impulse behind the development of the Scholastic doctrine of a *gratia creata*. Only when the soul in its creaturely reality is adorned with this grace can the unchanging God have a different attitude toward it.<sup>30</sup>

Certainly the biblical doctrine of God’s unchangeability is not intended to lead to such conclusions. But how do we avoid them?

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.Historical\_Contingencies.html. Pratt distinguishes (1) prophecies qualified by conditions, (2) prophecies qualified by assurances, and (3) predictions without qualifications. He analyzes each group most helpfully.

28. It evidently means that there are some kinds of events that only subtle philosophers would regard as changes.

29. See, e.g., Helm, *Eternal God*, 45.

30. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:437. He refers to Johann Auer, *Die Entwicklung der Gnadenlehre in der Hochscholastik*, vol. 1, *Das Wesen der Gnade* (Freiburg: Herder, 1942).



I will not here take up the difficult and probably unedifying task of distinguishing Cambridge changes from real changes. If such a distinction turns out to be impossible, then it won't hurt us to concede that indeed God does change in some of these relational ways, just as we have conceded that God changes his mind in some senses. But Scripture does clearly teach that God is immutable in some important ways. So we do need to spend some time thinking about what changes, specifically, Scripture intends to exclude when it speaks of God's unchangeability. As I see it, they fall into the following categories. God is unchanging:

1. *In his essential attributes.* The WSC's answer to question 4 says that "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." Hebrews 13:8 (speaking specifically of Christ) and James 1:17 speak of God's being in general terms as unchangeable. Notice also in Hebrews 1:10–12 (quoting Ps. 102:25–27):

And,

"You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands;  
they will perish, but you remain;  
they will all wear out like a garment,  
like a robe you will roll them up,  
like a garment they will be changed.  
But you are the same,  
and your years will have no end."

Here the writer underscores the fundamental contrast between Creator and creature, and he characterizes it this way: Creatures change, but God does not. The passage does not merely say that God is without end, though that is true. Rather, unlike nature, which is worn out from one season to the next, God always remains the same. And remarkably, the author applies this teaching not specifically to God the Father, but to Christ. Note also that in Hebrews 5:8 he says of Christ, "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered." Note the "although" (*kaiper*). The writer considers it somewhat anomalous that the Son of God should actually suffer and increase in knowledge. (The church deals with that anomaly, of course, under the category of Christology, distinguishing between Jesus' divine and human natures.) The author's main conception, therefore, is that God (Father or Son) does not change.

God's wisdom and knowledge are unchanging because, as we have seen in chapter 15, they are exhaustive. Since God knows all things in all times, from all eternity, his knowledge neither increases nor decreases. Nor does his power change, for as we saw in chapter 16, God is omnipotent, and there are no degrees of omnipotence. The same must surely be said of God's goodness and truth, for as we have seen, God is supremely perfect in these attributes, indeed the standard for the corresponding attributes in human beings.

2. *In his decreative will.* Psalm 33:11 reads:

The counsel of the LORD stands forever,  
the plans of his heart to all generations.

As we saw in earlier chapters, God governs all things by the story that he has written, his eternal decree that governs the entire course of nature and history. That story has been written already; it cannot and will not be changed.

3. *In his covenant faithfulness.* When God says, “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6),<sup>31</sup> he is telling them that he will surely fulfill his covenant promises despite Israel’s disobedience. He is the Lord of the covenant, and he will not forsake his people. In Micah 7:19–20, the prophet says of God:

He will again have compassion on us;  
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.  
You will cast all our sins  
into the depths of the sea.  
You will show faithfulness to Jacob  
and steadfast love to Abraham,  
as you have sworn to our fathers  
from the days of old.

The covenant continues through time. As we saw in chapter 4, this is an important biblical theme: God’s presence with his covenant people through many generations, despite the people’s temptation to relegate the covenant to a past age. So God says, in Psalm 89:34–37:

I will not violate my covenant  
or alter the word that went forth from my lips.  
Once for all I have sworn by my holiness;  
I will not lie to David.  
His offspring shall endure forever,  
his throne as long as the sun before me.  
Like the moon it shall be established forever,  
a faithful witness in the skies.

And in Isaiah 54:10:

“For the mountains may depart  
and the hills be removed,

31. This verse might also refer to the unchanging nature of God’s being. Divine lordship, as we have seen, is not only a description of God’s relations to creatures, but also a key to his nature as God.

but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,  
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,”  
says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

We can see that in these contexts the unchanging character of God’s covenant is vitally important to the biblical doctrine of salvation. It is this covenantal immutability that comforts us, that reassures us that as God was with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so he will be with us in Christ. So Jesus is the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8).

The writer to the Hebrews does say that God’s covenant with Israel is “obsolete”: “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:13). Does God’s covenant, then, change after all? No; the first covenant is obsolete not because God will violate its terms, but because he will fulfill those terms in a far more glorious manner than the Jews imagined. God’s promises endure; through Jesus, all the nations of the earth are blessed:

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. (Heb. 6:17–20)

4. *In the truth of his revelation.* What God declares to be true was true from the beginning and always will be (Isa. 40:21; 41:4; 43:12; 46:10). So his ancient words remain our infallible guide, despite the passing of time and the changes in human culture (Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16–17).

### ***Unchangeability and Temporal Omnipresence***<sup>32</sup>

Obviously, God is unchangeable in his atemporal or supratemporal existence. But when God enters time, as theophany, incarnate Son, or merely as present in time, he looks at his creation from within and shares the perspectives of his creatures. As God is with me on Monday, he views the events of Sunday as in the past, and the events of Tuesday (which, to be sure, he has foreordained) as future. He continues to be with me as Monday turns into Tuesday. So he views the passing of time as we do, as a process.

Theologians have sometimes described God’s relenting as “anthropomorphic.” There is some truth in that description, for divine relenting is part of the historical interaction

32. Thanks to Vern Poythress for suggesting to me many of the ideas of this section. I take full responsibility for the formulations.

between God and his people, an interaction in which God's activity is closely analogous to human behavior. In the exchange, for example, between God and Amos in Amos 7:1–6, God engages in a temporal conversation with a man, as an actor in history. The Author of history has written himself into the play as the lead character, and interacts with other characters, doing what they do.

That is one perspective on the situation. The other is the atemporal perspective: God has eternally decreed that he will forgive Israel, by means of Amos's intercession. This decree never changes.

But the historical process does change, and as an agent in history, God himself changes. On Monday, he wants something to happen, and on Tuesday, something else. He is grieved one day, pleased the next. In my view, *anthropomorphic* is too weak a description of these narratives. In these accounts, God is not merely *like* an agent in time. He really *is* in time, changing as others change. And we should not say that his atemporal, changeless existence is more real than his changing existence in time, as the term *anthropomorphic* suggests. Both are real.

Neither form of existence contradicts the other. God's transcendence never compromises his immanence, nor do his control and authority compromise his covenant presence. God stirs up "one from the east" to subdue nations and kings (Isa. 41:2). This is God as a historical agent. But the prophecy concludes in verse 4:

Who has performed and done this,  
calling the generations from the beginning?  
I, the LORD, the first,  
and with the last; I am he.

God has planned from the beginning that the eastern scourge would devastate Palestine. That is God as an atemporal agent, controlling all by his decree.

The difference between God's atemporal and historical existences begins not with the creation of man, but with creation itself. In Genesis 1, note that God creates the light and darkness, and then names them "Day" and "Night" (v. 5). Here, God is acting in a sequence. Then on the second day he makes the expanse to divide the waters, and names it "sky" (v. 8 NIV). On the third day he gathers the sea and lets dry land appear, defining "Earth" and "Seas" (v. 10), "and God saw that it was good." That last phrase is especially interesting. God acts, and then he evaluates his own work. He acts, and then he responds to his own act.<sup>33</sup>

God's historical novel, remember, is a logical, temporal sequence, in which one event arises naturally out of the one before. When God himself becomes an actor in the drama, he acts according to that sequence. He sends the rains; then he brings the harvest. At one time, his interest is producing rain; at another, harvest. Thus do his interests *change* over time, according to his unchanging plan.

33. If we take a nonchronological view of the days of Genesis 1, we must still recognize that God's creative work precedes his rest in chronological sequence.

## Some Modern Views

### *Process Theology*

My approach bears a superficial resemblance to process theology, which also recognizes two modes of existence in God, transcendent and immanent, sometimes called the “primordial and consequent natures of God.” John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin explain the process view as follows:

For Charles Hartshorne, the two “poles” or aspects of God are the abstract essence of God, on the one hand, and God’s concrete actuality on the other. The abstract essence [which Whitehead called God’s *primordial nature*—JF] is eternal, absolute, independent, unchangeable. It includes those abstract attributes of deity which characterize the divine essence at every moment. For example, to say that God is omniscient means that in every moment of the divine life God knows everything which is knowable at that time. The concrete actuality [or *consequent nature*—JF] is temporal, relative, dependent, and constantly changing. In each moment of God’s life there are new, unforeseen happenings in the world which only then have become knowable. Hence, God’s concrete knowledge is dependent upon the decisions made by the worldly actualities. God’s knowledge is always relativized by, in the sense of internally related to, the world.<sup>34</sup>

This position is deeply unscriptural, and it should not be confused with that of this book. Note the following differences:

1. For Hartshorne, God’s primordial nature is abstract. In my view, God exists atemporally as a concrete person.
2. For Hartshorne, even God’s primordial nature is temporal. In the definition above, God’s primordial omniscience is defined by what he knows “in every moment of the divine life.” In my view, God transcends time.
3. For process thought, God in his consequent nature is relative to the world and dependent on it. I maintain that God is self-contained and sovereign, both as transcendent and as immanent.
4. Process theologians teach that God does not have exhaustive knowledge of the future. Scripture says that he does (see chapter 15).
5. For process thought, there is no unchanging standpoint from which change can be identified and measured. Since the “eternal objects” (equivalent to God’s primordial nature) are abstract rather than concrete, possible rather than actual, they cannot serve as such a standpoint. But in Scripture, God, as concrete actuality, stands exalted as the unchanging Lord of time.

There are many problems in process theology, besides its manifest unscripturality, that I cannot take time here to discuss. I will say that process theology does not teach a credible doctrine of divine transcendence. For these thinkers, God as primordial is

34. John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 47–48.

a mere abstraction, not a concrete actuality. To say that God is primordial or transcendent, on this view, is simply to say that every possible universe will include some kind of process deity. On the other hand, God-as-consequent, in process thought, is not clearly distinct from the world and is relative to it. Although process thought seeks to distinguish itself from pantheism (it prefers to be called *panentheism*: all is *in* God), it is not clear to me what there is in this God that is not also in the world. So in this view there is no meaningful Creator-creature distinction and no Sovereign Lord.

### *Futurism*

Most thinkers who limit God to the temporal process limit him (as human beings are limited) to existence in the present. Some theologians, however, impressed by the eschatological dimension of Scripture, think of his existence as primarily future. For them, God is transcendent, not as one who lives in a realm above us, nor (as I have maintained) as one who rules the world as Lord, but as future time that inevitably overwhelms the present. This is not to say that the future has a fixed character—for these writers, the future is *open*; this is part of the reason for its transcendence. We cannot predict it or control it; we can only receive it as blessing or judgment.

This position was set forth in some detail by Jürgen Moltmann in *Theology of Hope*.<sup>35</sup> In a later work, he says simply that God is “the power of the future.”<sup>36</sup> He finds some anticipations of his view in Rudolf Bultmann,<sup>37</sup> who also emphasizes the openness of the future and future as the nature of God. Similarly, Wolfhart Pannenberg said that “an existent being acting with omnipotence and omniscience would make freedom impossible,”<sup>38</sup> and so made this suggestion:

The future seems to offer an alternative to an understanding of reality which is concentrated upon what is existing. For what belongs to the future is not yet existent and yet it already determines present existence.<sup>39</sup>

Stanley Grenz, an evangelical with some sympathy for this position, says:

The future orientation suggested by thinkers such as Pannenberg and Moltmann provides a promising starting point for conceiving of the divine reality. God is best conceived not as standing behind us or above us, but in front of us. For systematic theology, this basic outlook means that we no longer seek to answer theological questions from the perspective of the past—from the decisions God made before the creation of the world. Rather we engage in the theological enterprise by viewing reality from the perspective of the future—from God's ultimate goal for creation.<sup>40</sup>

35. New York: Harper and Row, 1967.

36. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Experiment Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 51.

37. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 190, 212, 283.

38. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Idea of God and Human Freedom* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 109.

39. *Ibid.*, 110.

40. Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 104–5.

Scripture does teach that God is the “coming one,” and it puts major emphasis on the future. But that future is not a perfectly open future, as at least Bultmann and Moltmann believe, but a future conceived in God’s eternal plan. Further, it is simply wrong biblically to identify God with the future, as over against the present and past, and as opposed to an atemporal existence. God rules past, present, and future and exists independently of all three. He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. Scripture looks back on God’s mighty works of the past, praises him as the One who is with us today, and looks forward to the certain fulfillment of his promises in the future. Thus, biblical faith honors God as the chief agent in history and as the One who stands above history. Contrary to futurism as expounded by Grenz, we should seek to answer theological questions multiperspectively, from the standpoint of the future, from the standpoints of past and present, and from the standpoint of the “decisions God made before the creation of the world,” such as that mentioned in Ephesians 1:4.

And futurism raises serious questions about the very existence of God in the present time. If God is not an “existent being acting with omnipotence and omniscience” in the present, but one who is coming to be in the future, then it is simply the case that in the world as we know it God does not exist.<sup>41</sup> That perspective is entirely contrary to that of Scripture.

Pannenberg and Moltmann have not, in my opinion, maintained this sort of view consistently, especially in their later works, though they continue to hint at it. They often speak of God as existing in the past and present. The qualifications they have made on their general futurist position are too complicated to go into here. But insofar as they make God a temporal being, insist on an open future, promote libertarian views of freedom, and question the full reality of God’s atemporal, past, and present existence, they have turned far from the biblical doctrine of God.

## Key Terms

- Metaphysical attributes
- Incommunicable attributes
- Attributes of transcendence
- Attributes of power
- Infinity (in Greek philosophy)
- Infinity (Frame’s two definitions)
- Atemporal eternity
- Temporalism
- Temporal omnipresence
- Procession analogy
- Relent

41. Pannenberg is deeply influenced by Hegel, for whom God is the absolute reality, coming to self-consciousness in the world.



Cambridge changes  
 Anthropomorphic  
 Process theology  
 God's primordial nature  
 God's consequent nature  
 Pantheism  
 Panentheism  
 Futurism

## Study Questions

1. Why does Frame describe such divine attributes as *eternity* and *unchangeability* under the category *attributes of power*? Evaluate.
2. Why does Frame prefer to say little about divine infinity?
3. Why does Frame back away from the question whether God is in time or outside time? Comment.
4. "The biblical God transcends a number of limitations associated with our experience of temporality." What are these?
5. "It seems to me that once we deny the existence of libertarian freedom, all the relevant considerations favor atemporality, and none favor temporality." Explain; evaluate.
6. "I believe that too little attention has been paid to God's temporal omnipresence in the discussion over God's temporality." What would we gain from more attention to this concept?
7. Does God change his mind? Make biblical distinctions.
8. In what specific ways is God unchangeable?
9. "But the historical process does change, and as an agent in history, God himself changes." Explain; evaluate.
10. "Thus do [God's] interests *change* over time, according to his unchanging plan." Explain; evaluate.
11. Respond biblically to the claims of process theology.
12. Same for futurism.

## Memory Verses

**Deut. 33:27a:** The eternal God is your dwelling place,  
and underneath are the everlasting arms.

**Ps. 102:25–27:** Of old you laid the foundation of the earth,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands.

They will perish, but you will remain;  
they will all wear out like a garment.

You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away,

but you are the same, and your years have no end.

**Isa. 54:10:** “For the mountains may depart  
and the hills be removed,  
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,  
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,”  
says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

**Gal. 4:4–5:** But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

**2 Peter 3:8:** With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

### Resources for Further Study

Bavinck, Herman. *BRD*, 2:153–70.

Helm, Paul. *Eternal God: A Study of God without Time*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

Pratt, Richard. “Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions.” Available at [http://reformedperspectives.org/newfiles/ric\\_pratt/TH.Pratt.Historical\\_Contingencies.html](http://reformedperspectives.org/newfiles/ric_pratt/TH.Pratt.Historical_Contingencies.html).

## GOD AND OUR KNOWLEDGE

JOHN CALVIN BEGAN his *Institutes* not, as I have, with a discussion of God himself, nor (as has become common) with a doctrine of Scripture, but with a discussion of human *knowledge* of God. In the famous first page of his book, Calvin points out that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are interconnected, so that we cannot know ourselves without knowing God, or vice versa.<sup>1</sup> Since Calvin, Reformed theology has often emphasized the *knowledge of God* as an important subject of theology.<sup>2</sup>

Calvin's emphasis on the knowledge of God correlates with the later Reformed interest in the nature of theology, also with the doctrines of revelation and Scripture. It has also renewed the discussion between theology and philosophical epistemology found already in Augustine, Aquinas, and other pre-Reformation thinkers. Reformed thinkers such as Beza, Turretin, Mastricht, Edwards, Kuyper, Bavinck, Van Til, and Gordon Clark carried on this discussion, often comparing and contrasting biblical/Reformed epistemology with non-Christian philosophical schools.

In this volume, I have placed the doctrine of the knowledge of God in this location,<sup>3</sup> so that I may draw on our previous discussions of God (the foundation of our knowledge, its *principium essendi*) and the word of God (God's communication with us, the fundamental basis of our knowledge, its *principium cognoscendi*). In part 3, I set forth God as the foundation of everything. So in part 4 I emphasized that to know anything rightly, we must submit our thinking to God's word, particularly the Word in Scripture as the covenant constitution of God's people. In part 5, I will examine the knowledge that results either from submission to the word of God or from rebellion against it.<sup>4</sup>

1. *Institutes*, 1.1.1.

2. One important more recent example is Abraham Kuyper's *Encyclopedia*, partly translated into English as *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965).

3. But compare the opening chapter in this volume.

4. Even in part 4, especially toward the end, these epistemological subjects inevitably came up. For as I indicated there, the word of God exists not only in nature and Scripture, but also in writing on our own hearts

I will consider our knowledge of God and also our knowledge of the world and of ourselves as God's creations.<sup>5</sup>

So the content of these chapters is relevant to any human attempt to know, whether in theology, philosophy, the arts, the sciences, or ordinary life. Scripture tells us that everything we do is to be done to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). We Christians often fail to consider how to apply that commandment to our thinking, specifically to our attempts to gain knowledge. It is tempting to think that this passage is limited to our narrowly religious and ethical life. But in fact, it is about every part of life ("whatever you do"), including the intellectual. So there is a distinctly biblical doctrine of knowledge, just as there are distinctly biblical doctrines of God, sin, and redemption.<sup>6</sup> Consider all the passages of Scripture that deal with God's knowledge (chapter 15), his word (chapters 23–28), Christ as containing "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3), human wisdom and foolishness (e.g., in Proverbs), the wisdom of the world, and the wisdom of God (e.g., 1 Cor. 1–3). Surely no Christian can discuss epistemology without taking account of the teachings of the word of God.

### God's Knowledge and Man's

In chapter 15, I discussed God's knowledge, expounding especially the nature of his omniscience. God knows everything, every fact, every person, every event. He not only knows every state of affairs; he knows each one from every possible perspective. He not only knows the number of books in my study, but also knows how those books appear from the perspective of a fly on the wall. And even if there were no fly, he knows how my study would look from the perspective of a *possible* fly. So he knows how anything looks, feels, sounds, tastes, smells, from any point in his vast universe, from any standpoint of any knower. Truly God's knowledge is "too wonderful" for us to imagine (Ps. 139:6).

God has a perfect knowledge of himself. Human beings have hidden depths within them that they themselves can scarcely fathom. So Paul says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom. 7:15). But there are no thoughts, plans, inclinations, or motives in God that he is unaware of. He knows himself perfectly.

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(chapter 28). When God's revelation is written on our hearts through the testimony of the Holy Spirit, we come to *know* it. Review also the section on "Assurance" in that chapter and the subsection "Epistemology and the Spirit's Witness." The goal of revelation is knowledge.

5. I should note that as part 3 was a rewritten and abridged version of *DG* and part 4 of *DWG*, so part 5 will be based on *DKG*. But here the abridgment and rewriting of the original book will be more extensive than with the others. *DKG* was my first published book (1987), and I have had more years to rethink its ideas than in the case of *DG* and *DWG*. So my treatments of the same subjects here, I think, are in general more cogent, or at least more felicitously stated, than in *DKG*. Still, as in the other two cases, there are some parts of *DKG* not present in this rewriting that may be useful supplements to the present discussion.

6. For a contrary view, see Kelly James Clark, "Reformed Epistemology Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 274–75, with my reply, 309–10. Note further discussion of the issue at 350–51, 370–71. I apologize to Clark for using "patronizing" language.

He perfectly knows both his nature and his actions. Among his actions, he knows both his eternal actions (such as the Father's eternal begetting of the Son, chapter 22), his eternal decrees for nature and history (chapter 11), and his actions as the immanent God within the world he has made (chapter 3). His knowledge of the created world includes what to us is past, present, and (contrary to open theism) future.

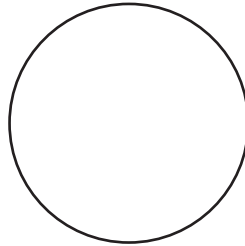
He has exhaustive knowledge of the creation because he first has exhaustive knowledge of himself.

Because of his exhaustive self-knowledge, he also has perfect knowledge of the creation. (1) He knows what is *possible* in the world because *possibility* means "possible for God." He knows what he can do, what he can foreordain, because he knows himself. (2) In a somewhat different sense of *possibility*, God knows what is possible in the world because he knows what he has eternally planned to take place in the world. Nothing can happen in the world that God hasn't planned to take place.

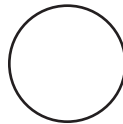
He knows what is *actual* in the world (1) because he knows what he has foreordained to take place at any time, and (2) because as he is present in the world, he is aware of what is happening in a way analogous to our own sense knowledge (Ps. 94:9–11).

God's knowledge is called *archetypal* knowledge in the theological literature. Our knowledge, which is an image of God's, is called *ectypal* knowledge. Here it is important for us to observe the Creator-creature distinction (chapter 3). See fig. 29.1.

God's Knowledge (Archetypal)



Creaturely Knowledge (Ectypal)



**Fig. 29.1. Creator-Creature Distinction in Knowledge**

Just as we should never confuse ourselves with God, so we should never confuse our knowledge with God's knowledge. Note especially the following differences between the two:

- God's knowledge is original, ours derivative from his.
- God's knowledge is exhaustive; ours is limited.
- God's knowledge serves as the ultimate criterion of truth and right; our knowledge must observe those standards.
- God never needs information or illumination from outside himself. We cannot know anything without the help of God and our experience of the world outside ourselves.
- God knows what he knows without process, simply by being what he is. His knowledge has sometimes been described as an *eternal intuition*. But our knowledge often requires hard efforts to accumulate facts and to figure out logical deductions.
- God's knowledge of the facts of creation precedes the existence of these facts. But the facts precede our knowledge of them.
- God's interpretation of the facts precedes the existence of the facts; our interpretation is a reinterpretation of God's prior interpretation. So the facts of our experience are not "brute" or uninterpreted facts, as if the human interpretation were the first. Rather, the facts are already interpreted before we come to know them. And God's interpretation is the normative interpretation that should govern ours.

To summarize: God's knowledge is divine, with all of God's attributes. Our knowledge is creaturely, with all the attributes of creatureliness. As God's image, human beings have a knowledge that reflects God's in many ways, but is by no means identical with it.

In the 1940s, there was a controversy between Gordon H. Clark and Cornelius Van Til. The debate is usually said to be about "the incomprehensibility of God," but is more accurately described as a debate over the relation between divine and human knowledge. Van Til said that there is no point of identity between any divine thought and any human thought; otherwise, we violate the Creator-creature distinction. Clark said that true human knowledge is identical to God's knowledge; otherwise, we are lost in skepticism. Clark assumed that any difference between God's thinking and man's was necessarily a difference in truth value. Van Til, rather, assumed that there were many differences between God's thought and ours that were simply differences between Creator and creature, not differences between truth and falsity.

Actually, Clark and Van Til were not as far apart as they (and their more militant disciples) seemed to think. Clark allowed that there were important differences between divine and human thought as to *mode*: that is, that God obtained and maintained his knowledge in ways very different from the ways in which we obtain and maintain ours. On the other hand, Van Til conceded Clark's main point: that God and man can know the same proposition (e.g., "the sky is blue") and that our belief in that proposition is true only when it agrees with God's.

To say that God and man can know the same proposition is not to violate the Creator-creature distinction. God knows the proposition with his divine knowledge, and man knows it with a human knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

## Our Knowledge of God

We know God as *Lord*, for that is what he is (see chapters 2–3). As we saw in chapter 22, God’s lordship is grounded in his Trinitarian existence. The Father determines the eternal divine plan (authority), the Son accomplishes that plan with his power (control), and the Spirit applies that plan to the hearts of people (presence). So we know him (1) as the One who has full *control* over us and over all things,<sup>8</sup> (2) as the One who speaks with ultimate *authority*,<sup>9</sup> and (3) as the One who is *present* to all his creatures.<sup>10</sup> Our knowledge, then, is the knowledge of servants. In much of our knowledge, we seek to “master” the things we know: to control them, define them, and/or invade their territory. In some cases and in some senses this is appropriate, since God has appointed human beings to be vassal kings over the created world (Gen. 1:28). But our knowledge of God must have a very different character. We cannot know God rightly without acknowledging his lordship over us.

So a necessary step in knowing God is to acknowledge the biblical worldview as I described it in chapters 2 and 3. I said in chapter 2:

If God is in *control* of the world, then the world is under his control. If God is our supreme *authority*, then he has the right to tell us what to believe. And if he is *present* everywhere, our attempts to know the world ought to recognize that presence. The most important fact about anything in the world is its relationship to God’s lordship.

And in chapter 3, I emphasized that there was an antithesis between the biblical worldview and any unbelieving worldview, using the diagram in fig. 29.2.

In the biblical understanding, God’s *transcendence* over the world is his control and authority, his *immanence* in the world his covenantal presence. Non-Christian thought, too, often acknowledges some “transcendent reality.” But on the non-Christian view, *transcendence* refers to a reality that is so far beyond us, so mysterious to us, that we cannot have certain knowledge about it. And for non-Christian thought, *immanence* means that supreme authority and power is vested in the world, not in something beyond the world. So biblical transcendence (1) contradicts nonbiblical immanence (4), and nonbiblical transcendence (3) contradicts biblical immanence (2). To know God rightly, we must view the world as Scripture does, not as non-Christian thought does.

7. For a more elaborate discussion of the Clark controversy, see *DKG*, 21–25, and, even more elaborate, *CVT*, 97–113.

8. Compare the discussion of *event-revelation* in chapter 24.

9. Compare the discussion of *word-revelation* in chapters 24–27.

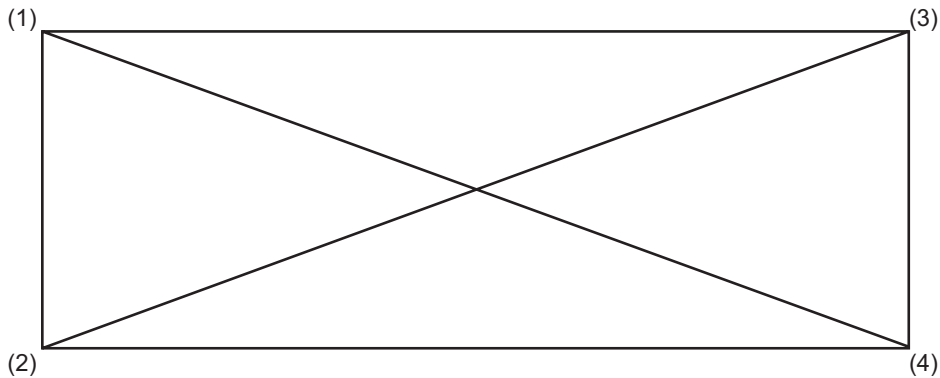
10. Compare the discussion of *person-revelation* in chapter 28.



**Biblical****Nonbiblical**

Transcendence: God's control and authority

Transcendence: God not present



Immanence: God's covenant presence

Immanence: something in the world  
has divine control and authority**Fig. 29.2. Transcendence and Immanence: Rectangle of Opposition**

Significantly, the nonbiblical worldview warrants human autonomous thought as its supreme authority for truth and right, the supreme criterion of knowledge. That is to say, on that basis human reason is the supreme authority. A biblical view of knowledge, however, repudiates the claim of autonomy in no uncertain terms and resolves to live by God's revelation, as I argued in part 4 of this book. As servants, we listen to Scripture to hear what he has to say to us. Then we believe and obey.

**God's Knowability and Incomprehensibility**

The incomprehensibility of God is a much-discussed theological topic. God is so much greater than we that the prospect of coming to know him can often seem daunting. How can we, with all our ignorance, weakness, and sin, come to know the Lord of the universe? And Scripture itself speaks of the discrepancy between God and our power to comprehend:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa. 55:8–9)

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,  
or who has been his counselor?”  
“Or who has given a gift to him  
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.  
Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

Cf. Judg. 13:18; Neh. 9:5; Pss. 139:6; 147:5; Isa. 9:6.

One reason God is incomprehensible is that he has chosen not to reveal to us everything about himself:

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. (Deut. 29:29)

But God is incomprehensible not only in what is unrevealed, but also in his revelation. For his revelation moves us to wonder. It never justifies a “now we know it” smugness. Romans 11:33–36, quoted above, comes after many chapters of careful rational argument, setting forth the gospel in many dimensions and answering many questions. But the conclusion of this argument does not move Paul to boast that he has set forth a final account. Rather, it moves him to wonder and awe. It makes him all the more aware of what we *don’t* know of God’s purposes. Yes, God has saved us from sin, by his grace, through faith. But his reasons for stooping so low to redeem us still lie hidden in the mists of his vast being.<sup>11</sup>

But Scripture never draws the inference that we cannot know God at all. On the contrary:

And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

Knowing God, in one sense, is salvation itself (cf. Matt. 11:25–27). And every page of Scripture describes or presupposes the knowledge of God by human beings. We know God’s character, his acts, his word, his judgments, his mercies.

So our analysis must do justice both to the reality of human knowledge of God and to the limitations of that knowledge. God’s *incomprehensibility* will refer to the limitations, as Scripture presents them, not to some general sense of mystery that we try to articulate on our own.

11. I have found this illustration helpful. Consider your knowledge of God as a circle that begins small, but increases as you get to know God better. But the larger the circle gets, the greater its circumference, its exposure to what is outside. Similarly, the more we know God, the more we understand how little we know. The more we know God, the more areas of mystery we encounter. And the more we know God, the less justification we have for looking down in pride upon those who know a little less. (Thanks to Norman Shepherd for this illustration. I take full responsibility for its formulation here.)

Understanding God's knowability and incomprehensibility proceeds best from the Creator-creature distinction as I have expounded it. God's incomprehensibility follows from his transcendence over us, and his knowability follows from his immanence. Isaiah 55:8–9 and Romans 11:33–36 (quoted above) say essentially that God is incomprehensible because he is God. In Isaiah 55, God's knowledge is above ours as the heavens are above the earth. The epistemological discrepancy has a metaphysical basis. In Romans 11:33–36, God's knowledge is "unsearchable" and "inscrutable" because it is so rich and deep. And he is the owner and Creator of all things (vv. 35–36). Our knowledge is different because we are different. We can't imagine what it would be like to own everything and to be the creators of everything we know. We cannot, in other words, know what it would be like to be Lord of all, and to know as Lord. We are essentially and irreparably servants, consigned to know as servants and only as servants.

So God is incomprehensible because he is Lord and we are his servants. But this does not mean that we cannot know him at all. His control and authority limit our knowledge, rendering it servant-knowledge. But God's covenant presence reveals God to us, so that we genuinely know him, as servants.

So knowing God is always in terms of the biblical worldview: positions 1 and 2 on the rectangular diagram. We do not believe that God is so far removed from us that he cannot be known (position 3) or that we can know him at all by autonomous reasoning (position 4). We believe, rather, that although we cannot know God as he knows himself, as ultimate controller and authority (1), we do know him as he has chosen to reveal himself to us, in a way appropriate to creatures (2).<sup>12</sup>

Some, including Calvin, have found it helpful to say that in revealing himself, God "accommodates" himself to us. That is, he does not speak to us in his own eternal Trinitarian language, but in ways that we can understand (recall chapters 23–24). God is like a loving parent who speaks "baby talk" to us, who "lisp" to us.<sup>13</sup> There is truth in this representation. But we should not infer from this illustration that God lies to us or speaks less than the truth.<sup>14</sup> A mother who speaks baby talk to a child does not intend to deceive him, but to convey truth in a way suited to the child's understanding.

## Knowing God in Faith and in Unbelief

Epistemology (theory of knowledge) as a philosophical discipline has significant relationships to two other parts of philosophy: metaphysics/ontology (theory of being)

12. In *DKG*, 20–40, I discuss at great length some of the more specific limitations on our knowledge of God and a number of the ways in which our knowledge is like God's. Then I discuss several distinctions that I consider problematic, such as the question whether we know God's "essence" or whether we know "God in himself." *Essence* and *in himself* are philosophical terms, not biblical ones, and in my judgment they are not helpful ways to communicate the biblical teachings in these areas. There are ambiguities in these terms, and they are at best ill-suited to the dogmatic precision that many have demanded in theological statements.

13. *Institutes*, 1.13.1.

14. So I repudiate the statement of R. Scott Clark in *Recovering the Reformed Confession* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 130, that there is always "a certain degree of falsehood in human speech about God." This statement implies that there is falsehood in all speech and writing about God, including Scripture.

and ethics (theory of value). So far in this chapter, we have focused on the relationship of epistemology to ontology, its basis in the nature of God and of the creation. In this section, however, we will consider the relation of epistemology to ethics, that is, the relation of human knowledge to human obedience and disobedience to God. We will see that knowledge in obedience and knowledge in disobedience are very different from each other.

### ***Knowledge in Obedience***

As I indicated above, to know God is to know him as Lord. That is to say, it is a covenantal knowledge. As I indicated earlier, it is a knowledge about his control, authority, and presence. But knowing God in the highest sense is more than this. It is also a knowledge *under, subject to, and exposed to* his control, authority, and presence.

First, it is a knowledge *under God's control*. All our knowledge of God is based on revelation. When we come to know God, it is he who takes the initiative. He does not wait passively for us to discover him, but he makes himself known. In the postfall context, furthermore, his revelation is gracious. We do not deserve it, but God gives it as a favor to us, as part of his redemptive mercy (Ex. 33:12–13; 1 Chron. 28:6–9; Prov. 2:6; Isa. 33:5–6; Jer. 9:23–24; 31:33–4; Matt. 11:25–28; John 17:3; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 1:9; Col. 1:9–10; 3:10; 2 Tim. 2:25; 2 Peter 1:2–3; 2:20; 1 John 4:7). God's grace gives us *objective revelation*, revelation of objective truth, but also *subjective or existential revelation*, as we discussed it in chapters 27–28, the illumination or enlightenment of the Holy Spirit that opens our hearts, so that we acknowledge, understand, and rightly use his truth (2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 1:18; Heb. 6:4; 10:32; cf. 1 Thess. 1:5). So the origin of our knowledge of God is God himself. It is Trinitarian: the Father knows all and reveals truth to us by the grace of his Son through the work of the Spirit in our hearts. Note how each person of the Trinity is involved in the knowing process: 1 Sam. 2:3; Ps. 73:11; Isa. 11:2; 28:9; 53:11; Matt. 11:25–27; Eph. 1:1; Col. 2:3. Thus it is all of God, all of grace. We know God because he has first known us as his children (cf. Ex. 22:12; 1 Cor. 8:1–3; Gal. 4:9).

Second, it is a knowledge *subject to God's authority*. In Scripture, knowledge is very closely linked with righteousness and holiness (cf. Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). These go together (1 Cor. 8:1–3; 1 John 4:7f.). So knowledge of God, in the fullest sense, is inevitably an *obedient* knowledge. Let me sketch five important relations between knowledge and obedience.

1. *Knowledge of God produces obedience* (John 17:26; 2 Peter 1:3, 5; 2:18–20). God's friends necessarily seek to obey him (John 14:15, 21; etc.), and the better they know him, the more obedient they become. Such a relation to God is inevitably a sanctifying experience; being near him transforms us, as in the biblical pictures of God's glory being transferred to his people, of his Spirit descending on them, and of their being conformed to his image.

2. *Obedience to God leads to knowledge* (John 7:17; Eph. 3:17–19; 2 Tim. 2:25–26; 1 John 3:16; cf. Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 15:33; Isa. 33:6).<sup>15</sup> This is the converse of the previous point; there is a “circular” relation between knowledge and obedience in Scripture. Neither is unilaterally prior to the other, either in time or in causality. They are inseparable, simultaneous. Each enriches the other (cf. 2 Peter 1:5f.). Some Reformed “intellectualists” (e.g., Gordon Clark applied this label to himself) have failed in my view to do justice to this circularity. Even in the writings of J. Gresham Machen, one often finds the slogan “life is built upon doctrine” used in such a way as to distort the fact that the opposite also holds true in some senses. It certainly is true that if you want to obey God more completely, you must get to know him; but it is also true that if you want to know God better, you must seek to obey him more perfectly.<sup>16</sup>

This emphasis does not contradict our earlier point that knowledge is by grace. Knowledge and obedience are given to us, simultaneously, by God on the basis of Jesus’ sacrifice. Once they are given, God continues to give them in greater and greater fullness. But he uses means, and he uses our obedience as a means of giving us knowledge and vice versa.

The same is true when we seek to “know God’s will for us.” Romans 12:1–2 says that knowing God’s will involves making your body a living sacrifice. Cf. Eph. 5:8; Phil. 1:10; Heb. 5:11–14.<sup>17</sup>

3. *Obedience is knowledge, and knowledge is obedience.* Very often in Scripture, *obedience* and *knowledge* are used as near-synonyms, either by being set in apposition to each other (e.g., Hos. 6:6) or by being used to define each other (e.g., Jer. 22:16). Occasionally, too, *knowledge* appears as one term in a general list of distinctly ethical categories (e.g., Hos. 4:1f.). Thus Scripture presents it as a form of obedience. Cf. also Jer. 31:31f.; John 8:55 (note context, esp. vv. 19, 32, 41); 1 Cor. 2:6 (cf. vv. 13–15; “mature” here is an ethical-religious quality); Eph. 4:13; Phil. 3:8–11; 2 Thess. 1:8f.; 2 Peter 1:5; 2:20f. In these passages, obedience is not merely a consequence of knowledge, but a constitutive aspect of it. Without obedience there is no knowledge, and vice versa.<sup>18</sup>

The point here is not that *obedience* and *knowledge* are synonymous terms, interchangeable in all contexts. They do differ. *Knowledge* designates the friendship between ourselves and God (see below), and *obedience* designates our activity within that relation-

15. The “fear of God” is that basic attitude of reverence and awe that inevitably carries with it a desire to do God’s will.

16. The circle goes even further: knowledge originates in God’s grace and leads to more grace (Ex. 33:13), which leads to more knowledge. In this case, however, there is a “unilateral” beginning. Grace originates knowledge, not vice versa.

17. These are important passages indicating the nature of divine guidance. See DKG, 154–55, for a discussion of them.

18. F. Gerald Downing, in his *Has Christianity a Revelation?* (London: SCM Press, 1964), virtually equates knowledge with obedience in such a way that he actually denies the existence of a revealed knowledge of God in the conceptual sense of *knowledge*. In my view, he presses his case much too far: see, for example, his exegesis of Philippians 3:8ff., which is somewhat bizarre. But he makes many useful suggestions, and the book is very helpful in combating our traditional picture of *knowledge* as something merely intellectual. (*Merely* can be such a helpful word in theology! If Downing had said that knowledge is not *merely* intellectual, he would have said something true and helpful.)

ship. But these two ideas are so inseparable from each other that often they can legitimately be used as synonyms, each describing the other from a particular perspective.

4. Thus, *obedience is the criterion of knowledge*. To determine whether someone knows God, we do not merely give him a written exam; we examine his life. Atheism in Scripture is a practical position, not merely a theoretical one: denying God is seen in the corruption of one's life (Pss. 10:4ff.; 14:1–7; 53). Similarly, the test of Christian faith or knowledge is a holy life (Matt. 7:21ff.; Luke 8:21; John 8:47; 14:15, 21, 23f.; 15:7, 10, 14; 17:6, 17; 1 John 2:3–5; 4:7; 5:2f.; 2 John 6f.; Rev. 12:17; 14:12). The ultimate reason for that is that God is the real, living, and true God, not an abstraction concerning whom we can only theorize, but he is profoundly involved with each of our lives. The very “I AM” of Yahweh indicates his presence. As Francis Schaeffer said, he is “the God who is there.” Thus, our involvement with him is a practical involvement, an involvement with him not only in our theoretical activity, but in all of life. To disobey is to be culpably ignorant of God's involvement in our lives. So disobedience involves ignorance and obedience involves knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

5. Therefore, it is clear that knowledge itself must be *sought in an obedient way*. There are commandments in Scripture that bear very directly on how we are to seek knowledge, that identify the differences between true and false knowledge. In this connection, we should meditate on 1 Corinthians 1–2; 3:18–23; 8:1–3; James 3:13–18. When we seek to know God obediently, we assume the fundamental point that Christian knowledge is a knowledge under authority, that our quest for knowledge is not autonomous, but subject to Scripture. And if this is true, it follows that the truth (and to some extent the content) of Scripture must be regarded as the most sure knowledge that we have. If this knowledge is to be the criterion for all other knowledge, if it is to govern our acceptance or rejection of other propositions, then there is no proposition that can call it into question. Thus, when we know God, we know him more certainly, more surely than we know anything else. When he speaks to us, our understanding of his Word must govern our understanding of everything else. Anything less than this is unacceptable to him.

This is a difficult point because, after all, our understanding of Scripture is fallible, and may sometimes need to be corrected. But those corrections may be made only on the basis of a deeper understanding of Scripture, not on the basis of some other kind of knowledge. In correcting our initial interpretations, we work on the basis of a biblical epistemology. As the Reformers said, Scripture is its own interpreter.<sup>20</sup>

It is at this point that we introduce ourselves to the term for which Van Til's apologetics is best known, the term *presupposition*. A presupposition is a belief that takes precedence over another and therefore serves as a criterion for another. An ultimate presupposition is a belief over which no other takes precedence.<sup>21</sup> For a Christian,

19. A number of ideas in this paragraph come from Norman Shepherd's lectures on the doctrine of God, which I attended in the late 1970s.

20. See the discussion of interpretation in chapter 27.

21. Some may feel that this definition of *presupposition* has too much of an intellectualistic ring. Of course, in this context we are concerned mainly with beliefs, propositions, and the like. But I would certainly want to stress that presuppositions are rooted in basic commitments of the heart. Whether we use the term *presupposition* as



the content of Scripture must serve as his ultimate presupposition. Our beliefs about Scripture may be corrected by other beliefs about Scripture, but, relative to the body of extrascriptural information we possess, those beliefs are presuppositional in character. This doctrine is merely the outworking of the lordship of God in the area of human thought. It merely applies the doctrine of scriptural infallibility to the realm of knowing.

Seen in this way, I really can't understand why any evangelical Christian could have a problem in accepting it. We are merely affirming that human knowledge is servant-knowledge—that in seeking to know anything, our first concern is to discover what our Lord thinks about it and to agree with his judgment, to think his thoughts after him. What alternative could there possibly be? Would anyone dare suggest that while we commit ourselves unreservedly to Christ, there is no place for such commitments in our intellectual work? The doctrine of presuppositions simply asserts the lordship of Christ over human thought.

As we continue to the third of the lordship attributes, we will now consider knowledge *exposed to God's presence*. We commonly distinguish between knowledge of facts ("knowing that . . ."), knowledge of skills ("knowing how . . ."), and knowledge of persons ("knowing whom").<sup>22</sup> These three are related, but they are not identical with one another. Knowing a person involves knowing facts about him (contrary to some "personalistic" theologians), but one can know facts about someone without knowing him, and vice versa. A political scientist may know many facts about the President of the United States without being able to say that he "knows" the President. The White House gardener may know far fewer facts and yet be able to say that he knows the President quite well.

All three kinds of knowledge are mentioned in Scripture, and all are important theologically. A believer must know certain facts about God—who he is, what he has done. Note the importance of the historical prologue within the covenant structure described in chapter 2: the Lord begins the covenant document by telling what he has done. The covenant begins in grace. Those who disparage the importance of factual knowledge in Christianity are in fact disparaging the message of grace (cf. Ps. 100:3; Rom. 3:19; 6:3; 1 John 2:3; 3:2—random examples of factual knowledge that is vital to the believer). Furthermore, a believer is one who learns new skills—how to obey God, how to pray, how to love—as well as skills in which believers differ from one another—preaching, evangelizing, diaconal service, and so forth (cf. Matt. 7:11; Col. 4:6; 1 Tim. 3:5). But (and perhaps most importantly) Christian knowledge is knowledge of a person. It is knowing God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup>

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defined above or whether we define it as "basic commitment" and find another term to employ in the narrowly epistemological context does not seem to me to be a very important problem.

22. Knowledge of things might be a fourth category. Often when we talk about knowing things (bananas, Switzerland, the price structure of the grain market), we are thinking about factual knowledge; other times, or perhaps always to an extent, we are thinking of an acquaintance somewhat analogous to the knowledge of persons. I don't think it would be edifying to try to sort out those questions now.

23. Although the three kinds of knowledge are distinct, each involves the others. You cannot know a person without knowing some facts about him and having some ability to relate meaningfully to him, and so forth. One can therefore describe Christian knowledge under one of three *perspectives*: as learning facts and mastering



Sometimes in the Scriptures, *knowing* a person refers mainly to knowing facts about him, but most often it means being involved with him either as a friend or as an enemy (cf. Gen. 29:5; Matt. 25:24; Acts 19:15; 1 Cor. 16:15; 1 Thess. 5:12). The common use of *know* to refer to sexual intercourse should also be noted at this point (e.g., Gen. 4:1). When Scripture speaks of God's "knowing" men, generally the reference is not to factual knowledge at all (since it goes without saying that God knows the facts). In such contexts, *knowing* generally means "loving," or "befriending" (note Ex. 33:12, 17; Ps. 1:5f.; Jer. 1:5; Nah. 1:7; Matt. 25:12; John 10:14, 27). This is frequently an important exegetical point, especially in Romans 8:29: the statement there that God "foreknew" certain persons cannot mean that he knew that they would believe; thus, it cannot teach that predestination is based on God's foresight of man's autonomous choices. Rather, the verse teaches that salvation originates in God's sovereign knowledge (i.e., love) of his elect. Hence, Scripture almost never speaks of God's "knowing" an unbeliever; the only examples I can find of that (John 2:25; 5:42) clearly refer to factual knowledge.

Man's knowledge of God, then, is very similar to God's knowledge of man. To know him is to be involved with him as a friend or as an enemy. For the believer, to know him is to love him, hence the strong emphasis on obedience (as we have seen) as a constitutive aspect of the knowledge of God. Here, however, we wish to focus on the fact that the God whom we know, whom we love, is of necessity present with us, and therefore our relationship with him is a truly personal one. The intimacy of love assumes the present reality of the beloved. We can love someone at a distance, but only if that person plays a significant continuing role in our thoughts, decisions, and emotions and is in that sense near to us. But if God controls all things and stands as the ultimate authority for all our decisions, then he confronts us at every moment: his power is manifest everywhere, and his Word makes a constant claim on our attention. He is the most unavoidable reality there is, and the most intimate, since his control and authority extend to the deepest recesses of the soul. Because of the very comprehensiveness of his control and authority, we may not think of God as far away. (Earthly controllers and authorities seem far away precisely because their authority and control are so limited.) Thus, God is not a mere controller or authority, but also an intimate acquaintance.

The covenantal language of Scripture brings out this intimacy. God speaks to Israel using the second-person singular, as if the whole nation were one person—God uses the language of "I and thou." He proclaims to his people blessings and curses, the mark of his continuing (priestly) presence. As the history of redemption progresses, the covenant relation is described in terms of marriage (Hosea; Eph. 5; etc.), sonship (John 1:12; Rom. 8:14–17; etc), and friendship (John 15:13–15).<sup>24, 25</sup>

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the implications and uses of these facts, as developing skills in using facts in our relations with one another and with God, or as learning to know God, in which context we learn facts and skills.

24. Some writers find great "progress" being made here, from legal-covenantal categories to intimate-personal ones. I, however, see these latter metaphors as the natural outworking of that intimacy already involved in the covenantal relation. What more intimacy can anyone ask than that assumed in Deuteronomy 6:5? The idea that law is of necessity something cold and impersonal stems from modern humanistic thinking, not from Scripture.

25. Recall our earlier discussion of the family of God, chapter 6.

The sense of the believer's doing all things not only to the glory of God, but in God's presence (*coram deo*), has been a precious truth to Reformed people. Not only does God control and command, but in all our experience he is, ultimately, "the One with whom we have to do." Nothing can be further from the deterministic, impersonalistic, intellectualistic, unemotional brand of religion represented in the popular caricature of Calvinism.

In summary, *knowledge of God* essentially refers to a person's friendship (or enmity) with God. That friendship presupposes knowledge in other senses—knowledge of facts about God, knowledge of skills in righteous living, and so on. It therefore involves a covenantal response of the whole person to God in all areas of life, either in obedience or in disobedience. It involves, most focally, a knowledge of God's lordship—of his control, his authority, his present reality.

### ***Knowledge in Disobedience***

But what about the second alternative, knowledge in enmity? If *knowledge* in Scripture not only involves factual knowledge but also is (1) a gift of God's redemptive grace, (2) an obedient, covenantal response to God, and (3) a loving, personal involvement, then how can there be such a thing as knowledge in *disobedience*? Does not disobedience extinguish knowledge? But Scripture does say that in some sense rebellious people do know God:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (Rom. 1:18–32)

This passage is the beginning of Paul's argument concluding that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23–24). In Romans 1, he focuses on the disobedience of the Gentiles; in Romans 2, of the Jews. In chapter 3, he concludes that *all* are in the same category: sinners in need of grace. So the passage from Romans 1 that I have quoted, together with 2:1–3:22, pertains to *all* people, living at all places and times.<sup>26</sup>

So Romans 1:18–21 teaches clearly that all people know God. They know facts about God (vv. 18–20), indeed quite a lot of facts: they know God's eternal power and divine nature (v. 20), the way he wishes to be worshiped (vv. 21–25), and his standards for sexual and other morality (vv. 26–32). But their knowledge is not only a knowledge of facts. Verse 21 says that they "knew" God. This language indicates a personal relationship, similar to the believer's knowledge of God, but in context vastly different. We can say that if the believer's knowledge is a knowledge in friendship, the unbeliever's knowledge is a knowledge in enmity.

Any such relationship greatly colors the knowledge that one person has of another. The believer's knowledge of his Father and Lord necessitates obedience, as we saw in the previous section. The unbeliever's knowledge of God as an enemy necessitates rebellion and hatred. It also necessitates rejection of the very knowledge that the unbeliever has. According to Romans 1:18, unbelievers "by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." They "exchanged" the glory of God for images (v. 23) and "exchanged the truth . . . for a lie" (v. 25). Throughout the passage, this rejection of the truth and embracing of wickedness is their own responsibility ("without excuse," v. 20). But in the mysterious relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility (see chapter 14), the passage also says that God "gave them up" to disobedience (vv. 24, 26, 28).

In any case, it is clear that according to Paul the pagans sin against their knowledge of God and therefore against their knowledge of the good. They really do know God, but in unbelief and disobedience. Earlier, however, I argued that Scripture often virtually defines the knowledge of God as a knowledge in obedience. How can it now ascribe knowledge of God to people who are identified by their disobedience?

This is a very difficult question to answer. We would be much more inclined to say that these rebels do *not* know God. Paul himself says that they have no understanding in 1 Corinthians 2:8 and 14,<sup>27</sup> and in 1 Corinthians 8:1–3 he denies that anyone who fails to love can

26. The aorists translated "knew," "honor," "give thanks," and "became futile" in verse 21 and beyond have led some readers to think Paul is talking about people living in a past time, not his own contemporaries. But that would imply that Paul is giving his contemporaries a pass from his solemn indictment. Note: (1) This passage, again, is part of an argument convicting *all* people of sin, all past, present, and future. So it presupposes that people in all times and places "know God." The aorists therefore do not designate a particular time of occurrence for the events they mention. (2) More generally, this passage is part of Paul's description to the Roman church of the gospel he proclaims (vv. 16–17). So clearly, the pagans he mentions in verses 18–32 are pagans to whom he preaches this gospel in his present labors. (3) Paul establishes his time reference at the beginning of the passage by a present active participle, *katechonton* in verse 18.

27. Compare the OT use of "understand" and "understanding" in passages such as Psalms 14:2; 32:9; 53:2; 82:5; Proverbs 12:11 kjv.

have knowledge. So the idea of someone who knows God, but does not love him, is very peculiar indeed. Yet we must try to understand it, because it is part of God's Word. Obviously, Scripture uses *knowledge* very differently when it says that unbelievers know God.

Part of the answer is found in God's common grace (chapter 12). God restrains sin, in part, by preventing his enemies from totally extinguishing their knowledge of God. But this is not the whole answer, because often the unbeliever's knowledge of God and God's truth actually equips him for greater sin. If he were able to entirely suppress the truth of God, his consciousness would be a total chaos, and he would not be able to make any meaningful decision, even a sinful one.

I don't think it is possible to describe the unbeliever's knowledge in a fully coherent way.<sup>28</sup> There is something paradoxical about the whole idea. We can better understand the context of the paradox if we consider Satan's knowledge of God. Scripture generally presents Satan as a knowledgeable being, one who knows more facts about God than most of us do. He understood the purpose of Jesus' coming so that he was able to launch a preemptive attack, before Jesus even began his preaching ministry (Matt. 4). Surely Satan understands that God is more powerful than he. Yet he nevertheless seeks nothing less than to overthrow God's lordship and to replace him on the throne. At some level, he must know that his defeat is sure, yet he perseveres in a warfare that he cannot hope to win. So in a being with vast knowledge and understanding of God, there is a streak of irrationality that renders him an utter fool.

Scripture presents unbelieving human beings as disciples of Satan, and as sharing his irrationality. They know God from the creation (Rom. 1), yet they somehow think they can prosper in lives that defy the Almighty.

Philosophically, the best description of this paradox can be found in Van Til's discussion of rationalism and irrationalism. The sinner is first a rationalist, in the sense that he tries to think autonomously. He believes that he can understand the world using his own mind as the ultimate standard of truth and right. But simultaneously he is an irrationalist. When he sees that his mind is, after all, not suited to serve as the ultimate standard of truth, when errors enter his thinking, he excuses himself by saying that the universe is not knowable after all. So his rationalism devolves into irrationalism. He affirms his reason without reason.

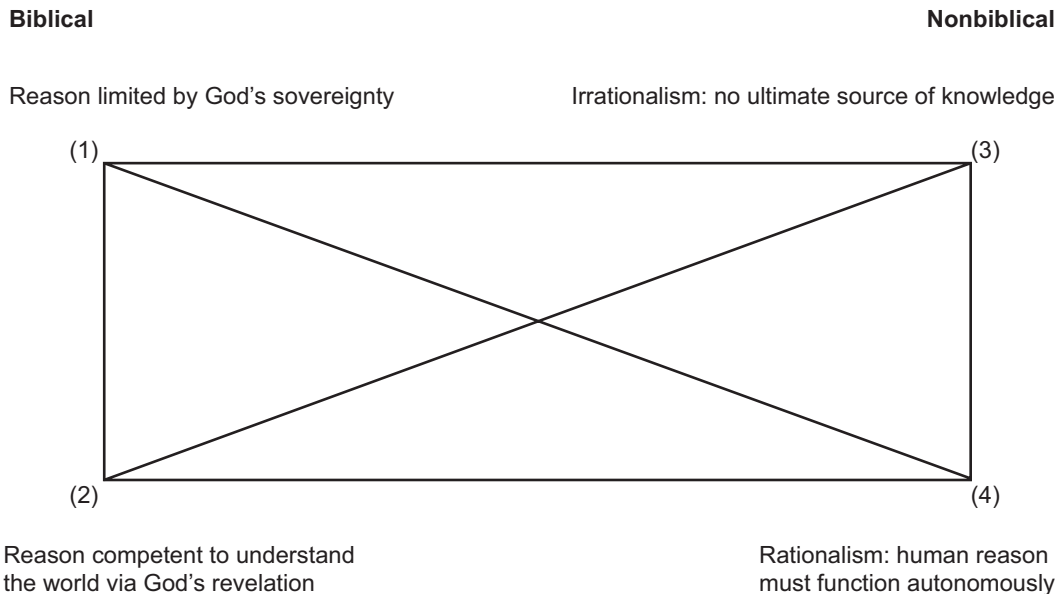
Van Til's illustration was the story in Genesis 3 of the fall of our first parents. God had told them clearly that they were not to take of a particular fruit. But for Eve, then Adam, God's word was not sufficient, despite their intimate knowledge of him in the garden. They

28. Cornelius Van Til, his disciples, and some others such as Gordon H. Clark labored hard to find ways to describe the differences between the believer's and the unbeliever's knowledge of God, in order to illumine what Van Til called the "antithesis" between believing and unbelieving thought. These writers were not always consistent in their formulations, and my general view is that on the whole these contrasts do not pass biblical muster. Van Til argued, for example, that the unbeliever *ought* to know God but doesn't (but how is that reconcilable with Romans 1:21?), that the unbeliever knows God "psychologically" but not "epistemologically" (I don't know what that means), and so on. I analyzed a number of these suggestions in *DKG*, 50–58, and in *CVT*, 187–238. But in the end, I think it's best to do what Van Til did not hesitate to do in other contexts: simply to state the paradox of unbelieving knowledge and to let the matter rest there. The fact is, as I indicate in the present discussion, unbelieving thought does *not* hold a consistent epistemology and cannot.

listened to Satan in the form of a talking snake and took Satan's side. From one standpoint, Eve was a rationalist, because she embraced autonomous thought, concluding that she herself was the ultimate standard of truth. On the other hand, she was an irrationalist, denying that there was any ultimate rationality to the universe to which she needed to conform. So she joined Satan in his irrational quest to replace God on the throne.

The history of non-Christian philosophy shows the same vacillation between rationalism and irrationalism. Some philosophers, such as Parmenides, promoted brilliant and bizarre speculations, following with a mad consistency what they took to be the dictates of their autonomous reason. Others, such as the Sophists, denied that there was any universal reason, arguing that what is true for me might not be true for you. Still others, such as Plato, Aristotle, and Kant, divided the universe in two, postulating one realm in which autonomous reason functioned successfully and another realm of which knowledge is impossible.<sup>29</sup>

The paradoxical relation between rationalism and irrationalism can be illustrated as I earlier illustrated the relations between transcendence and immanence (cf. chapter 3). See fig. 29.3.



**Fig. 29.3. Rationalism and Irrationalism: Rectangle of Opposition**

On this diagram, irrationalism is in corner 3 where I earlier placed nonbiblical transcendence. These are inseparable. When someone says that metaphysically the supreme

29. For more discussion of this paradox in Greek philosophy, see my "Greeks Bearing Gifts," in *Revolutions in Worldview*, ed. W. Andrew Hofferger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 1–36.

being is so far from us that he cannot be known (unbiblical transcendence), there is an epistemological consequence: that we have no ultimate standard of truth. Similarly, when one affirms ontologically that the supreme being is identical with creation or something in it (immanence), that implies epistemologically (4) that human reason must function autonomously.

In one sense, 3 and 4 are inconsistent. One cannot logically say that there is no ultimate standard of truth and at the same time claim that human reason is the ultimate standard. But in another sense, 3 and 4 require each other. For as with Satan, and as with our first parents, autonomous reason (4) can be affirmed only irrationalistically (3). And irrational skepticism (3) can be defended only by appeal to autonomous reason (4).

Now, non-Christians typically reply that in fact the shoe is on the other foot. Christians, they say, are irrational because Christians surrender their reason to someone outside themselves (1). And they argue that Christians are rationalistic because they think absolute truth is available to them by revelation. We may well accept this disparaging language in an ironic way, which allows us to present the four assertions somewhat more clearly:

1. Christian irrationalism
2. Christian rationalism
3. Non-Christian irrationalism
4. Non-Christian rationalism

As with the ontological interpretation of the rectangle, the horizontal lines indicate similarities of terminology: that is, Christian (1) and non-Christian (3) irrationalism can be made to sound very similar, as can Christian (2) and non-Christian (4) rationalism. But the diagonal lines indicate substantive disagreement: for example, Christian irrationalism (1) directly contradicts non-Christian rationalism (4), and non-Christian irrationalism (3) directly contradicts Christian rationalism (2).

This schema does not remove the paradoxical character of non-Christian knowledge, but it helps us to see where the paradox lies, what its nature is, and how intractable it is apart from divine grace. And it helps us to see how non-Christians often utter truths (such as “the sky is blue”) while being in a larger sense confused about *every* truth. It also helps us to see that it is impossible to predict (as Van Til sometimes imagined he could) how a non-Christian would likely respond to a presentation of the gospel or apologetic argument. A non-Christian may respond in faith (because the Spirit has planted faith in his heart), in intellectual agreement without faith (as with the Pharisees in the NT), in intellectual disagreement on irrationalist grounds, or in intellectual disagreement on rationalist grounds. In any case, as Paul says:



The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:14)

## Key Terms

*Principium essendi*

*Principium cognoscendi*

Archetypal knowledge

Ectypal knowledge

Brute facts

Interpretations

Divine incomprehensibility

Divine knowability

Accommodation

Presupposition

Ultimate presupposition

Knowing facts

Knowing skills

Knowing persons

*Coram deo*

Knowledge of God

Christian irrationalism

Christian rationalism

Non-Christian irrationalism

Non-Christian rationalism

## Study Questions

1. "So there is a distinctly biblical doctrine of knowledge, just as there are distinctly biblical doctrines of God, sin, and redemption." Explain; evaluate, citing Scripture.
2. Why are we sometimes tempted to think we can know ourselves without knowing God? The reverse?
3. Frame: God "not only knows every state of affairs; he knows each one from every possible perspective." Explain; evaluate; illustrate.
4. "God's interpretation of the facts precedes the existence of the facts; our interpretation is a reinterpretation of God's prior interpretation." Explain; evaluate.
5. "So the facts of our experience are not 'brute' or uninterpreted facts, as if the human interpretation were the first. Rather, the facts are already interpreted before we come to know them. And God's interpretation is the normative interpretation that should govern ours." Explain; evaluate.
6. State briefly the positions of Cornelius Van Til and Gordon H. Clark as to the relation of divine to human thought. Evaluate Frame's attempt to reconcile their positions.



7. Review from chapter 3 and this one the differences between biblical and unbiblical transcendence, and between biblical and unbiblical immanence.
8. "But God is incomprehensible not only in what is unrevealed, but also in his revelation." How does Romans 11:33–36 bear on this assertion? Show how the Shepherd-Frame illustration of the circle bears on the question.
9. "So God is incomprehensible because he is Lord and we are his servants." Formulate and discuss the implied relation between ontology and epistemology.
10. God "accommodates" his revelation to our finite minds, according to John Calvin. Does this fact imply that revelation is always partly false? Discuss.
11. Godly knowledge is "a knowledge *under, subject to, and exposed to* God's control, authority, and presence." Explain each part of this statement and evaluate.
12. "The Christian life is built upon Christian doctrine." Explain; evaluate. Describe the relationship(s) between knowledge and obedience found in Scripture.
13. Discuss the relationship between knowing facts, skills, and persons in our knowledge of God.
14. Frame: "I don't think it is possible to describe the unbeliever's knowledge in a fully coherent way." Explain; evaluate.
15. Explain the categories of rationalism and irrationalism, using Frame's rectangular diagram. Show the meaning of each line and point.
16. About his rectangular diagram, Frame says, "This schema does not remove the paradoxical character of non-Christian knowledge, but it helps us to see where the paradox lies, what its nature is, and how intractable it is apart from divine grace." Explain each statement and evaluate.
17. About the rectangular diagram, Frame says, "It also helps us to see that it is impossible to predict (as Van Til sometimes imagined he could) how a non-Christian would likely respond to a presentation of the gospel or apologetic argument." Explain; evaluate.

## Memory Verses

**Deut. 29:29:** The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

**John 17:3:** And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

**Rom. 1:20:** For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

**1 Cor. 2:14:** The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

**1 Cor. 3:19:** For the wisdom of this world is folly with God.

**Col. 2:3:** In [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

### Resources for Further Study

Frame, John M. *AGG*.

———. *DKG*, 11–61.

———. “Greeks Bearing Gifts.” In *Revolutions in Worldview*, edited by W. Andrew Hofecker, 1–36. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007.

Van Til, Cornelius. *The Defense of the Faith*, edited by K. Scott Oliphint. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008.

## PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

AS WE HAVE SEEN, when we know God, we come to understand everything in his creation in a new way. For the rest of part 5, I intend to explore the nature of our knowledge of the created world under the lordship of God.

### Objects of Human Knowledge

An *object of knowledge* is anything that we know, or can know, or seek to know. This is a common enough phrase, but some are offended by the application of *object* to persons, or even God. They think that to speak this way involves “objectifying” people, treating people as things, and such like. In my use of the phrase, no such thing is implied. To say that someone or something is an object of knowledge is simply to say that he, she, or it is knowable. In this sense, persons are certainly objects of knowledge, because they are knowable. God, too, is knowable, as I indicated in the previous chapter. So persons and God, along with many impersonal realities, are objects of human knowledge. See fig. 30.1.



**Fig. 30.1. Objects of Human Knowledge**

For our purposes, it will be convenient to divide the created world into three objects of knowledge that are perspectively related to one another and that correspond to our three lordship attributes. These are *self*, *world*, and *divine revelation*. I will argue that we cannot know one of these without knowing the other two, so that a complete knowledge of one is equivalent to a knowledge of all three. *Divine revelation* represents God's authority as the norm that determines the truth or falsity of what we claim to know. *World* is the situation into which God has placed us, the whole course of nature and history under his control. *Self* is the knowing subject, existing in personal intimacy with God as present to his covenant people. Let us consider these individually.

### ***Divine Revelation***

I discussed divine revelation in some detail in chapters 23–28. *Revelation* is a communication of knowledge. In theology, it is communication from God to man by means of the word of God, God's speech. So although *revelation* and *word of God* are not quite synonymous, they are often interchangeable. Here I will present revelation as the normative factor in human knowledge. Revelation represents God himself as he exerts his authority in the creation.

To know revelation is to know God, for it is to know what God has made known of himself. As we have seen (as, e.g., in chapters 2–3), God is both transcendent over the universe and immanent within it. Here we will understand revelation as God's representation of himself within the world he has made. The triad *revelation*, *world*, and *self* is in that respect equivalent to *God*, *world*, and *self*. That triad exhausts the possible objects of human knowledge. These objects are distinct from one another: God is not the world; the world is not the self; and so on. But *knowledge* of God is not separable from knowledge of the world or self. The *revelation* of God is not separable from his revelation in the world and in the self. So knowledge of the world is not separate from knowledge of God or the self, and so forth. Although these three objects are distinct from one another, one cannot know one of them without knowing the other two. I will explore some of those relationships in what follows.

As I indicated, revelation is the normative factor in human knowledge. It is important that we recognize the significance of norms in knowledge. Historically, students of epistemology have recognized the important distinction in knowledge between the *subject* (the one who knows or seeks knowledge) and the *object* (what the subject knows or seeks to know).<sup>1</sup> But the distinction between subject and object has sometimes been problematic. We often think that there is a clear distinction between the subject (our mind) and the object (something outside of us, beyond us, that we seek to know). But the philosopher Bishop George Berkeley (1685–1753) saw it differently. Berkeley was

1. In the previous paragraph, I distinguished God, world, and self as the three objects of human knowledge. In this paragraph, I distinguish the self as knower from the world as object. But of course, the self is an object of his own knowledge as well as subject of it. So the self functions both as a subject of all its knowledge and as an object of its knowledge (specifically its self-knowledge). I hope to clarify these statements in the remainder of this section.

an empiricist in the tradition of John Locke, who thought that knowledge was built up out of sense experience. Sense experience is preserved in memory and current mental data (what David Hume called “impressions and ideas”). But when we examine these mental data, Berkeley said, we find that we know only the content of our own mind, not data outside the mind. We may say, then, that for Berkeley the “external world” is indistinguishable from the mind, or, to put it epistemologically, the object is indistinguishable from the subject. For Berkeley, the only object of thought is thought itself; or, perhaps, there is no object of thought, only subject.

But Hume (1711–76) saw the situation in the opposite way. He, too, was an empiricist. But when he examined his sense experience, he saw trees, clouds, rocks, people—but not a “thinking subject.” So Hume became skeptical over concepts such as *soul*, *spirit*, *mind*, *intellectual substance*, and the like. If we say that Berkeley dissolved the object of knowledge into the subject, Hume did the reverse: dissolved the subject into the object.

Later philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger, thought the whole subject-object distinction was a barrier to human understanding. In his view, it was necessary for us to somehow rise above that distinction. But he, like the mystics before him, was not able to clearly set forth what kind of knowledge he was talking about. What is knowledge, if it is not knowledge of something (an object) by someone (a subject)?

In my view, the way to solve this problem is not to try to transcend the subject-object distinction altogether but to recognize the existence of a third factor—a *norm*. The norm is the rule, standard, or criterion by which we determine truth. By the norm, we determine the truth apart from mere appearance. Put differently, by the norm we are able to distinguish the object of knowledge (what really is) from the subject (our thoughts and ideas). By the norm, we can test when our thoughts and ideas agree with the object of our study and when they differ. So it is the norm that enables us, contrary to Berkeley and Hume, to distinguish subject from object.

The supreme norm (rule, standard, criterion) of our knowledge is God’s revelation. Where is that revelation to be found? Well, we saw in chapters 23–28 that in one sense everything is revelation. God himself is revelation, for God is his own word (chapter 23). God’s word also comes to us through every event in the natural world, every prophetic or apostolic word, and all the books of Scripture (chapters 24–27), as well as in all persons, God’s image (chapter 28). At the end of this discussion, I distinguished between general, special, and existential revelation, a distinction that covers everything there is, triperspectively.

But what help is this? If everything is revelation, then everything is norm. When someone asks, “How may we distinguish the knowing subject from the object of its thought?” we must answer, “By everything.” When someone asks, “Is our view of the universe illusion or reality?” we direct the person to answer the question by consulting everything. But how does one make use of *everything* to answer one specific question?

The answer isn’t quite as unhelpful as it appears. For our errors are always at least in part the result of insufficient knowledge. So when we are confused about one

question, it means that we need to ask another question. Theoretically, that can lead to another question, and still another, until we reach “everything.” But in fact, the trail does not usually go forever. Sometimes it ends with an answer. But when we are beginning our quest, it is often hard to determine where the answer lies, so we often say, “It could be anywhere.”

A more helpful limitation on our quest for normativity is to focus on the *Bible*. The Bible is not the whole of God’s revelation, but it is a vitally important part of it.<sup>2</sup> As we saw in part 4, the Bible is God’s covenant document, given to his people as their highest norm. God directs believers to hold to his written Word (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21) against any human idea that would contradict it.

I said that we should *focus* on the Bible, however, not that we should look to the Bible exclusively. For our understanding of the Bible is dependent on our understanding of other forms of revelation. We often need to look at revelation outside of Scripture to understand Scripture. For example, we need to know the languages in which Scripture was written if we are to fully understand what Scripture says. But the Bible does not contain lessons in Hebrew or Greek grammar. We also need to learn facts about the history and culture of biblical times, beyond the references that Scripture itself supplies. And we need to understand our own culture, our own times, if we are rightly to *apply* the Bible to ourselves and to people today.<sup>3</sup> Further, we need to know ourselves if we are to rightly understand the Bible. We need to know our own level of intelligence and maturity (both physical and spiritual), lest we claim too much (or too little) for our interpretations of Scripture.

To *focus* on the Bible, then, is not to ignore revelation in the world and in the self. On the other hand, our interest in the world and the self should not rob Scripture of its unique function in our lives. Scripture is what we trust, even when other sources of knowledge say otherwise. How, then, should we understand the unique authority of Scripture over against all the other kinds of revelation that we rightly consult? I find the following formula helpful:

*When we have a settled view that Scripture teaches p, then we must believe p, over against any claim that p is false.*

In this formula, a *settled view* is not a first impression or a slapdash interpretation; it is an interpretation of Scripture that we have thought through prayerfully, using what help may be available from other Bible texts and from scholars and pastors. P represents any proposition, such as “God is one being in three persons.”

2. And as we will see, the Bible is not only part of revelation, but also an item in the world and an experience of our consciousness. It belongs to all three perspectives.

3. Scripture is clear that you cannot fully understand God’s Word if you cannot apply it. See the discussion of interpretation in chapter 27. Scripture is given not merely to inform us about past events, but to guide our lives in the present (Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:15–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21). Jesus considers people to be ignorant of Scripture when they cannot see the applications of Scripture to the events of their own experience (Matt. 16:3; 22:29; Luke 24:25; John 5:39–40).

In that way, an understanding of revelation, focused in Scripture, enables us to distinguish truth from falsity and thus to distinguish object from subject. This does not mean that we can easily answer any question at all. But it gives us a framework wherein some certainties (“God created the world,” “Jesus is the Son of God,” “Christ died for our sins”) form a foundation for other knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

### *The World*

I use *world* to include everything that exists and every event that happens in nature or history. That includes God, for he exists in the world, immanently, as well as outside the world, transcendentally. So just as revelation includes everything, the world includes everything. *Revelation* and *world*, therefore, are not separate from each other, but are the same reality viewed from two perspectives.<sup>5</sup> The world includes God’s revelation, and it also includes ourselves.

To distinguish the perspectives, we may say that as revelation serves as the *norm* of human knowledge, so the world serves as its *object*. The world is what we seek to know, by means of the norm of revelation. So revelation and world serve distinct epistemological functions. But the world—that is, the facts—is normative, too, indicating the union between the two perspectives.

It is also worth pointing out that just as the Bible is an aspect of revelation, so it is an object in the world. As we look at the world around us, our situation, one of the things we find is a Book called the Bible. And just as we must deal with rocks, trees, planets, cities, other people, and other books, we must deal with the Bible. It would be wrong for us to think that the Bible is part of revelation but not part of the world—a norm of knowledge but not an object of knowledge. As I indicated earlier, the Bible itself is an object of our study, and as such we seek to relate it to other objects in the world. But when we do that rightly, we discover its uniqueness. It isn’t *merely* an object; it is the object that illumines all other objects. Just as investigating our world leads us to human authority figures, such as a governor or president, so it leads us to recognize the chief authority of all authorities, the document of God’s covenant with his people. Just as the Bible is the norm of norms, the norm that governs all other norms, so it is the object in the world that illumines all other objects.

### *Ourselves*

We have seen that revelation and world each contain everything and therefore serve as perspectives on all reality. Can we say the same of ourselves? Do we in some sense contain everything? Is each of us a perspective on all reality?

4. On the nature of certainty, see the discussion of assurance in chapter 28 and my article “Certainty,” at <http://www.frame-poythress.org>. On the term *foundation*, see the discussion of this subject later in this chapter.

5. Recall my earlier statement in this regard: God, world, and self are distinct from one another, but knowledge of each is not distinct from knowledge of the others. So God’s *revelation* is identical with our means of knowing the world and ourselves.



Well, yes. Because, as Berkeley noted, we know everything by knowing ourselves. We know everything by knowing our sense perceptions, but also by knowing our reasoning, our memory, and our imagination. We even know God by knowing ourselves, for we are his image, and in him we live and move and have our being. So as I noted earlier, Calvin said that we cannot know God without knowing ourselves, and we cannot know ourselves without knowing God.

Our self-knowledge also includes knowledge of the world, for we cannot understand ourselves without understanding our environment, our situation. We learn much about ourselves when we learn about our heredity, our history, our education, our motives. Everything we know, we know by our own experience, broadly understood.<sup>6</sup>

In one sense, then, all knowledge is self-knowledge. It is knowledge of our own senses, our own memories, our own thought processes, our own emotional and spiritual inclinations, and our relationships with others.

And I should also mention that just as the Bible is part of God's revelation and an object in the world, so it is also an item of our experience. It is a subject of our memories, thoughts, meditations, reflections.

In a Berkeleyan mood, we might be tempted to think that we are trapped in our own subjectivity, unsure of the existence of anything beyond ourselves. But our very self-knowledge tells us otherwise. In our memories, experience, meditations, a host of clues indicate that we are not alone, not shut up in our heads. And the most vivid clue is the Bible within us, our Bible experience. For the Bible within *tells* us that we are not alone, that beyond the subject there is the object, and there is God. It tells us that there are others beyond ourselves, and that those make claims on us. And beyond ourselves there is the world, which God has called us to fill and subdue. So we cannot understand ourselves rightly without distinguishing ourselves (the subject) from the world (the object) and from God (the revelation). Solipsism, the view that only self exists, is not an alternative for us.

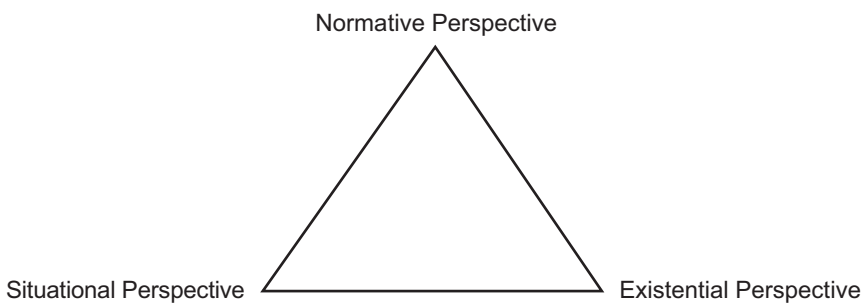
## Epistemological Perspectives

As we have seen, the three objects of our knowledge are quite inseparable. To know one of them, we must know the others as well. We need God's revelation to understand the world, but we also need the world to understand God's revelation. We need God's revelation to understand ourselves, but the reverse is also true, as we have seen. We need the world to understand the self, for the world is our environment. And we need the self to understand the world. Something of ourselves enters into everything we know. One implication of this fact is that there is no such thing as a purely objective, unbiased knowledge. Everyone approaches knowledge with what I called *presuppositions* in the previous chapter. The goal in seeking knowledge is not to try to rid ourselves

6. That is, not just sense experience, as in philosophical empiricism, but also the experience of thinking, meditating, loving, hating, and so forth.

of all presuppositions, but to apply the right presuppositions, those of God's Word, to the data at hand.

Since revelation, world, and self are not separable, but incorporate one another, none functions as an isolated item of knowledge, but as a perspective on knowledge as a whole. At some times, we will focus on revelation (especially the Bible), but without neglecting the world and the self. Other times, we will focus on the world, in the context of revelation and the self, or on ourselves, without forgetting our environment of revelation and the world. The difference in these three views can be described as a difference of *focus*, *emphasis*, or *perspective*. In regard to these, I have found the following terminology helpful; see fig. 30.2.



**Fig. 30.2. Perspectives on Knowledge**

- *The normative perspective* focuses on God's revelation (especially Scripture) in relation to the world and the self.
- *The situational perspective* focuses on the world in relation to God's revelation and to the self.
- *The existential perspective* focuses on oneself and one's own experience in the light of God's revelation and the world.

## Foundations and Foundationalism

The following section is not essential to my argument, and readers without philosophical training and interests may skip over it without much loss. But some readers may at this point in the discussion wonder where I stand in the current discussion of *foundationalism*.

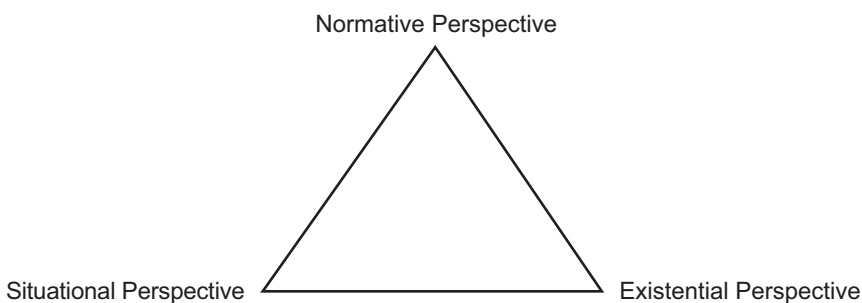
Historically, many philosophers have tried to build the edifice of human knowledge from the bottom up—starting with its most fundamental elements and proceeding from these to determine what we may legitimately claim to know. These elements were considered to be the foundation of knowledge. So thinkers in the rationalist tradition, such as Descartes and Spinoza, started with what they considered to be unassailable axioms and tried in logical or mathematical fashion to derive the whole of human knowledge from these. For empiricists, such as Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, the foundation was not to be found in logical axioms but in

the primary data of sense experience. For Thomas Reid, the foundation was a set of commonsense observations. For Immanuel Kant, it was a set of synthetic, a priori judgments. For Georg Hegel, a dialectical method could guide us from the abstract idea of “Being” to an exhaustive knowledge of God and the world. In logical atomism (Russell and Wittgenstein), the foundation was (as in empiricism) sense-data, but sense-data referred to in elementary propositions, from which one could build up a picture of the world in a perfect language. In phenomenology, the foundation is the elementary data of consciousness, conceived as the primary reality, not as the representation of something else.

There have always been some thinkers who have been skeptical of these foundationalisms, but such skepticism has usually led them to despair of any possibility of objective knowledge. This was true of the Sophists and skeptics of ancient Greece. David Hume began as an empiricist foundationalist, but his analyses moved him again and again toward skepticism. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* began as a precise attempt to develop a perfect language based on Russell’s logic, but at the end of the book Wittgenstein confesses that in such a perfect language his own claims would be cognitively meaningless and it would be better to remain silent.

Without a means of gaining objective knowledge, these skeptical thinkers become, essentially, subjectivists. They have no way to gather knowledge except for the movements of ideas and feelings within their heads. Recent thought, such as that of the postmodern tradition, is skeptical about foundations, *nonfoundational* or *anti-foundational*. They reject all claims to authority over our knowledge, all worldviews or *metanarratives*.

It may be illuminating to see these positions in terms of one of our triangular diagrams, shown in fig. 30.3.



**Fig. 30.3. Non-Christian Views of Knowledge**

Rationalism seeks a *rule*, a *norm*, an axiom or set of axioms—such that by following it consistently, we may arrive at the truth. Empiricism seeks to explore the *world*, the *facts*, the *situation*. The subjectivist despairs of finding truth beyond himself and sees no alternative to searching his own head. Some philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle,

Kant, and Hegel, have adopted various combinations of these motifs, but each motif brings its own weaknesses into the mix.<sup>7</sup>

What I have represented as a biblical epistemology is not rationalist, empiricist, or subjectivist, though it has some affinities with each. With the rationalists, Scripture recognizes our need for norms and rules governing knowledge. With the empiricists, Scripture recognizes the facts of God's creation as our object of knowledge. And with the subjectivists, Scripture recognizes that knowing is a mental process, something inward. But it refuses to isolate any of these three aspects of knowledge.

To isolate the norm, as in rationalism, gives you a rule for nothing. Isolating empirical facts gives you unordered, unstructured data. And isolating inward subjectivity keeps us from acknowledging any truth outside ourselves. Of course, individual rationalists, empiricists, and subjectivists are better than this at times, for God's common grace keeps them from utter chaos in their thinking (chapter 29). But the nature of their epistemology drives them toward skepticism.

The reason for this problem is that these philosophers try to operate without God. For God is the Author of the norms of knowledge, the Creator of the facts of the world, and the Creator of man's mind so that it is made to function in the world under the norm of God's revelation.<sup>8</sup> Under him, these three elements are consistent with one another, reinforce one another, and even, as we have seen, are in one sense one with one another.

Without God, there is no reason to think that what we consider norms of thought actually fit the facts and the workings of the human mind. So nontheistic epistemologists are often constrained to choose one of the three elements that will prevail when inconsistencies appear. Those who choose rational axioms are rationalists; those who choose empirical facts are empiricists; and those who choose human subjectivity are subjectivists. Those who try to combine these motifs in effect have no strategy for resolving conflicts except muddling through.

But a triperspectival biblical epistemology enables us to form a basically coherent understanding of the world by our own minds under God's revelation.

This epistemology is in the most obvious sense nonfoundationalist. That is, on this triperspectival approach one does not need to isolate a set of self-evident axioms or fundamental sense-data before one goes about knowing things. It is not necessary to try to derive all our knowledge from such foundational items. Rather, we can start anywhere; indeed, we start where we are, confident that all truth is God's truth. True facts, for example, will lead to true norms, and vice versa. Indeed, true facts *are* true norms, from a particular perspective, for God wants us to live according to all the truth he grants us. And of course, true norms are also factual. And our inner responses are factual and, rightly evaluated, normative.

7. In regard to the Greek philosophers, see my essay "Greeks Bearing Gifts," in *Revolutions in Worldview*, ed. W. Andrew Hofferger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 1–36.

8. Many have remarked on how striking it is that man's mind and the universe are suited to each other, so that the mind is able to discover truth. Divine creation explains this amazing fit.

But of course, there is a sense in which revelation, our norm, particularly in the Bible, is the foundation of our knowledge. It is not that Scripture contains quasi-mathematical axioms from which all knowledge can be deduced, or that it records the most elementary facts of sense experience. Rather, Scripture is foundational in the sense I indicated earlier:

*When we have a settled view that Scripture teaches  $p$ , then we must believe  $p$ , over against any claim that  $p$  is false.*

Applying this maxim throughout our quest for knowledge gives us a firm basis for finding truth, firm enough to describe it as a “foundation” of knowledge. But this is not the kind of foundationalism so regularly discussed and dismissed today.

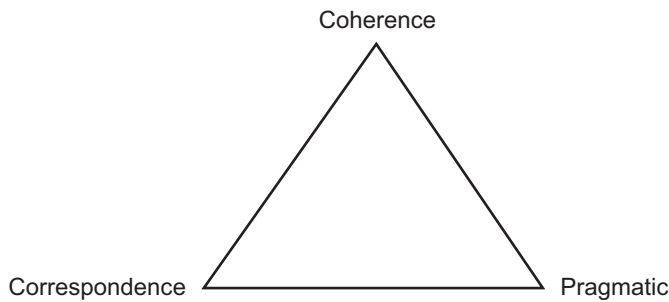
## Theories of Truth

In the philosophical tradition, there have been three main theories of truth—with, of course, many variations and combinations. The first has been called the *correspondence* theory. This is a fairly commonsense analysis: typically we think that we obtain knowledge by seeking a correspondence between our ideas and the real world. Our idea of snakes, for example, should somehow match the snakes that exist in the world. But there are several objections to this theory: (1) What is this “match,” this “correspondence”? The early Wittgenstein thought that the idea (expressed in language) should be a kind of picture that resembled the idea. But he came to see at a later point that “anything can be a picture of anything given the right method of projection.” (2) There will always be an important dissimilarity between any idea we have and any thing or fact in the world, namely, that our ideas are mental and the things are physical. Our ideas, that is, are never *identical* to the things we know. So correspondence must be something short of identity. But it is difficult to specify what such correspondence might be. (3) Idealists such as Berkeley and Hegel have argued that in one sense we can never get outside our own minds, in order to compare the content of the mind with something beyond itself. Rather, they said, we learn about the world only by observing our own perceptions of it, and perceptions are mental entities.

The idealists who questioned correspondence, especially on the third ground, proposed an alternative theory of truth: *coherence*. The coherence theory allows us to look at the mind exclusively, without trying to venture outside it. On this basis, truth is simply the most coherent set of ideas. Here coherence is mainly logical consistency, but it may include other criteria, such as aesthetic balance. The chief objection to the coherence theory is that it is possible for more than one system of ideas to be logically consistent, and for two logically consistent systems to be inconsistent with each other. In this case, we cannot choose between the two systems on the basis of logical consistency. But if some other kind of coherence is in view, such as aesthetic symmetry, it is hard to imagine how an objective conclusion can be reached.

A third alternative is the *pragmatic* theory of truth: roughly, the truth is what works. On this basis, the truth is what we can live by, what does not mislead us in the decisions of life. But often, in order to determine what ideas or concepts will work for us, we must look to see whether they correspond with facts and whether they fit together in a consistent system. So it seems as though the inadequacy of each theory sends us to consider the others.

On a Christian epistemology, the three theories can be understood triperspectivally; see fig. 30.4.



**Fig. 30.4. Tests of Truth**

Truth is ontologically the reality of God (including God the Son, John 14:6) and all he has made. Epistemologically, it is the content of his mind communicated in his word in all forms of his revelation. The three traditional theories do not tell us what truth is, but they specify ways in which we can test our own apprehension of the truth. Correspondence is the situational test, as we compare our ideas with God's creation. But of course, we cannot do that apart from God's revelation and the workings of our own minds. Coherence seeks truth by obtaining a consistent view of God's revelation, so I place it in the normative category. But of course, that coherence is a coherence within God's creation, for our benefit, so it embraces the other two perspectives. The pragmatic test is what we embrace in seeking to obey God's truth, to "walk in" it. God's Word is a lamp to our feet; it shows us how to meet the tests of each day. And what helps us to do that, and never misleads us, is God's truth. But to discover pragmatic truth, to discover how to live, we must attend to God's creation and God's norms. We must have pragmatic truth that accepts the world as God made it (correspondence) and that seeks consistency with God's Word.

### Key Terms

- Object of knowledge
- Subject of knowledge
- Norm of knowledge
- Revelation

World  
 Self  
 Settled view  
 Focus  
 Presupposition  
 Normative perspective  
 Situational perspective  
 Existential perspective  
 Foundation  
 Foundationalism  
 Rationalism  
 Empiricism  
 Subjectivism  
 Postmodernism  
 Correspondence  
 Coherence  
 Pragmatic theory

### Study Questions

1. Revelation is “God’s representation of himself within the world he has made.” Explain; evaluate.
2. “But the distinction between subject and object has sometimes been problematic.” How? Address the problem, as you understand it, referring to the views of George Berkeley and David Hume. How does Frame deal with this difficulty?
3. “If everything is revelation, then everything is norm.” Is this an adequate understanding of the norm of knowledge? How can we make the norm more specific, more useful?
4. “To *focus* on the Bible, then, is not to ignore revelation in the world and in the self.” How do revelation in the world and in the self function when we are focusing on Scripture? Discuss.
5. “When we have a settled view that Scripture teaches *p*, then we must believe *p*, over against any claim that *p* is false.” Explain; evaluate.
6. “Just as the Bible is an aspect of revelation, so it is an object in the world.” Explain. Why is this important?
7. “Do we in some sense contain everything? Is each of us a perspective on all reality?” Give Frame’s answer; explain; evaluate.
8. “In one sense, then, all knowledge is self-knowledge.” Explain; evaluate.
9. “In a Berkeleyan mood, we might be tempted to think that we are trapped in our own subjectivity, unsure of the existence of anything beyond ourselves.” How would you address this temptation?



10. Describe a secular school of epistemology, such as rationalism, empiricism, subjectivism, or postmodernism. What moves that school to take the positions it does? What is lacking in its approach?
11. “This epistemology is in the most obvious sense nonfoundationalist.” Explain why. Is there any sense, then, in which Scripture serves as the *foundation* of Christian thought? Discuss.
12. Define the three traditional theories of truth. How should a Christian make use of these? Is it helpful to say that these are perspectival? Explain.

### Memory Verses

**John 14:6:** Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

**Col. 2:3:** In [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

**2 Tim. 3:15–17:** 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 Peter 1:19–21:** 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.

### Resources for Further Study

Frame, John M. “Certainty.” Available at <http://www.frame-poythress.org>.

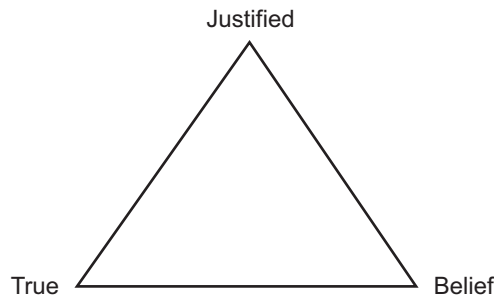
———. *DKG*, esp. 62–75, 109–22.

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Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984.

## JUSTIFYING CLAIMS TO KNOWLEDGE

A COMMON DEFINITION of *knowledge* in secular philosophy is “justified, true belief.”<sup>1</sup> This definition is triperspectival, as shown in fig. 31.1.



**Fig. 31.1. Traditional Definition of Knowledge**

On this definition, knowledge is a type of belief, belief that is true, and true belief that is justified. *Belief* represents the existential perspective, for it is something that exists in the mind, something subjective. But many of our beliefs do not constitute knowledge. To be knowledge, a belief must be *true*. That is, our belief must in some sense conform to fact. Truth, then, represents the situational perspective.

But something else is needed to convert our beliefs, even our true beliefs, into knowledge. If I believe that Jim Bailey lives in Atlanta, my belief may turn out to be true. But perhaps I have no adequate *reason* to think he lives there. I might be making that judgment on the basis of a dream, or palm-reading, or some biblical number game. In

1. It should be noted that this definition pertains to knowledge of propositions, not knowledge of skills, persons, or things, as I distinguished these kinds of knowledge in chapter 29.

such a case, I have a true belief, but I do not have *knowledge*. I cannot say that I *know* he lives in Atlanta. To have knowledge, on this common definition, I must have a good reason for holding this true belief. That is, my belief must be *justified*. Justification for belief<sup>2</sup> represents the normative perspective.

Now, not everybody accepts this traditional philosophical definition of knowledge. Edmund Gettier in 1963 published an article, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”<sup>3</sup> He argued that there are counterexamples to the definition, that there are cases of justified true belief that we would not call knowledge. Since Gettier’s article, the definition of knowledge as justified true belief has lost favor. Part of the problem, I think, has been uncertainty over the meaning of *justification* in such contexts.<sup>4</sup> I suggest that the concept does make sense as a reference to a normative perspective anchored in divine revelation.

Whether or not we regard justification as part of the definition of knowledge, it is an important epistemological concept. For among other things, epistemology teaches us how to reply when someone asks a reason for our belief, a justification. In 1 Peter 3:15, we are told to be ready “to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” That “reason” is what I will be calling *justification* in this chapter.

Reasons play an important role in our knowledge of God, as well as our knowledge of God’s world. Preaching and apologetics both aim to present people with reasons to believe and/or to behave in accord with God’s Word. The Bible itself presents such reasons. Often it uses logical arguments, using language such as “because” and “therefore.” We should present our bodies as living sacrifices to God *because* of the mercies of God (Rom. 12:1–2). We should seek the things that are above *because* we have been raised with Christ (Col. 3:1). In one sense, this is the point of the whole Bible: it gives us reasons to trust in Christ and to do his will.

Of course, people often find themselves believing or doing things without going through any reasoning process. Sometimes that is the result of thoughtlessness, intellectual laziness; sometimes it is a lack of intellectual capacity. But most of the time, it results from a kind of reasoning that is informal rather than formal. I don’t usually utter a syllogism to myself before I enter a room. But if someone asks me, “Why did you go in there?” I can usually conjure up some kind of reason. That is to say, we can think and believe rationally without going through an explicit logical process. Or, as some writers have pointed out, it is possible to “have” a reason without being able to “give” a reason. Indeed, many people believe in God without being able to articulate a rational basis for doing so.

People were thinking and behaving rationally for many centuries before Aristotle taught us how to test our reasoning with syllogisms. Formal logic is merely a system

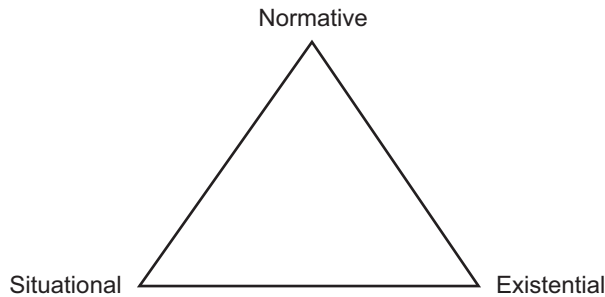
2. Please do not confuse the justification of beliefs with the justification of sinners by God’s grace. The two are quite different.

3. *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121–23.

4. So Alvin Plantinga, in his *Warrant* trilogy—*Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)—replaces *justification* with *warrant*, the latter term describing not our internal reasons for believing, but the external links between thought and reality.

for making our implicit reasoning explicit. But the business of “giving a justification” is more ancient and more primitive than the discipline of formal logic. It is the human activity that formal logic attempts to describe and evaluate.

In what follows I will distinguish three forms of justification, expressing the three perspectives that I have been exploring in this book. I will give to these the same names as I have given to the three perspectives described in the previous chapter. See fig. 31.2.



**Fig. 31.2. Ways of Justifying Claims to Knowledge**

In normative justification, we justify our belief by claiming that it accords with the norms for human thought. In situational justification, we justify our belief by showing that it is in accord with the facts. And in existential justification, we claim that our belief is the most profoundly satisfying of all the alternatives. Since these three forms of justification are perspectives, they are ultimately the same, and they ultimately lead to the same conclusions because God coordinates them with each other. In the discussions below, I will try to show how each incorporates each of the others.

These justifications are somewhat parallel to the non-Christian epistemologies I discussed in the previous chapter. Rationalism appears similar to a Christian normative justification. Empiricism resembles a Christian situational justification. And subjectivism looks somewhat like a Christian existential justification. But in Christian justification, God is central, and we acknowledge him as the One who brings unity to the whole triangle of knowledge. Therefore, the three Christian perspectives are not rivals, as the three similar non-Christian positions are. We can begin anywhere we like on the triangle, as long as we understand that other starting points are equally valid and that to do justice to any one perspective, we must eventually do justice to all three. I will try to clarify these relationships in what follows.

### Normative Justification

In normative justification, I tell someone that I believe  $p^5$  because believing  $p$  accords with the laws of human thought. When philosophers speak of *laws of thought*, they

5.  $P$  is a variable, standing for any proposition.

usually refer to the most fundamental propositions of logic, such as the law of identity,<sup>6</sup> the law of the excluded middle,<sup>7</sup> and the law of noncontradiction.<sup>8</sup> But for the Christian, the most fundamental law of thought is the same as the fundamental law of conduct,<sup>9</sup> namely, the Word of God.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the normative includes all of God's revelation, so in a sense everything is normative. But the Bible plays a special role within the normative perspective as the covenant document given by God to his people, by which all human thought and conduct is to be tested. To be sure, the Bible must be interpreted in the light of other forms of revelation, as they must be interpreted in the light of the Bible. But our settled convictions about what Scripture says take precedence over convictions derived from any other source.

As we have seen, we should therefore regard Scripture as our *presupposition*: our highest standard of truth and certainty.<sup>10</sup> This means admitting that in one sense we are biased. We are inclined to find Scripture reliable and to be suspicious of any view that contradicts Scripture. Some non-Christians will find this a damaging admission and will urge us to put away our bias and to be open-minded toward every alternative position. But on a biblical view, there is no such thing as unbiased human thought. Human thought is either biased against God, by repressing his revelation (Rom. 1), or biased in his favor (by the work of the Spirit, overcoming our sinful bias). Everyone has presuppositions, some false, some true. The first step in epistemological wisdom is to recognize that fact.

But in what way can we justify our own bias, our presupposition? How do we justify belief in the Bible as our presupposition? Strange as it may sound, by the Bible itself, as I sought to do in chapters 23–28. The Bible is our highest standard of truth, the ultimate criterion. But an ultimate criterion must justify itself. It would be contradictory to try to justify an ultimate by appealing to something supposedly higher.

But someone will now object: isn't this a circular argument? We prove Scripture on the basis of the presupposition of Scripture. We appeal to Scripture to prove Scripture.

But if this is a problem for Christian thought, it is equally a problem for non-Christian thought. All systems of thought are circular in a sense when they seek to defend their ultimate criterion of truth. If I challenge a rationalist for accepting human reason as his highest principle, he can defend his view in only one way: by appealing to reason. For him there is nothing higher than reason to which he may appeal in justifying reason. (If there were, he would not be a rationalist, but an advocate of that higher-than-reason standard.) Similarly, an empiricist must ultimately appeal to sense experience,<sup>11</sup> a sub-

6. Every proposition is identical to itself.

7. Every proposition is either true or false.

8. No proposition can be both true and false.

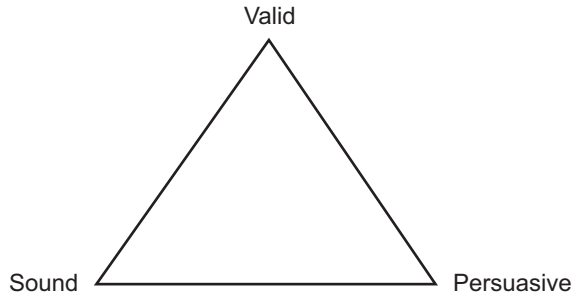
9. Thought is, of course, part of conduct, which is to say that epistemology is part of ethics.

10. Recall our discussion of assurance in chapter 28.

11. Empiricists rarely do this, if ever, because it's rather implausible to think that sense experience in itself could furnish grounds for believing in an epistemological philosophy. But that is one of the problems with empiricism. Our senses enable us to know objects, but our knowledge of standards, criteria, or norms requires some other basis.

jectivist to his subjectivity, a Hegelian to his dialectic, a Muslim to his Qur'an, and a mystic to his mystical experience.

A more difficult question, however, is this: how can such a circular argument *persuade* anyone? A good argument must have three qualities: validity, soundness, and persuasiveness. This is a perspectival triad; see fig. 31.3.



**Fig. 31.3. Qualities of Good Arguments**

*Valid* means that the logic of the argument is correct. *Sound* means that the premises of the argument are true, and that therefore the conclusion is true. But an argument can be both valid and sound and yet utterly unpersuasive. For example:

What Scripture says is true.  
 Scripture says that Scripture is infallible.  
 Therefore, Scripture is infallible.

This argument is valid because the premises imply the conclusion. It is sound because (in my judgment) the premises are true and therefore the conclusion is true. But many would not find the argument persuasive because they would not consent to the premises.

Of course, persuasiveness is a subjective matter. What persuades one person will not necessarily persuade another. In that sense, apologetics is *person-variable*. But to make an argument more persuasive, it is often helpful to bring in additional arguments and evidence. I call that *broadening* an argument. All argument for an ultimate criterion is circular,<sup>12</sup> but there is a difference between a narrow circle and a broad circle. The argument for biblical infallibility that I formulated above is an example of a narrowly circular argument. We can broaden it by bringing in evidence for the premises. For example, I could use the discussion of chapters 23–28 to fortify the second premise. Some of that material would bear on the first premise, too. Or I could add evidence such as the following: (1) The biblical books were written close in time to the events

12. Notice that I did not say that “all argument is circular,” but rather that “all argument for an ultimate criterion is circular.” Most of the time it is fallacious to employ circular argument, but this one case is a necessary exception to that principle.

they describe, closer than any other ancient historical document. (2) First Corinthians 15 shows that the resurrection of Jesus was attested just a few years after it took place, showing that it is not a legend. (3) The story of Abraham in the OT adheres very closely to the customs of the ancient peoples it describes.

There is, however, a circularity even about points (1)–(3), because each depends on something in the Bible. And as I present this evidence as a Christian, I present it according to biblical standards of reasoning and historiography. So in one sense, my broader argument (and it could be still broader) is every bit as circular as the narrowly circular argument with which we began.

But the addition of more evidence and argument nevertheless improves the persuasiveness of the argument. Ultimately one will find the argument persuasive only through the grace of the Holy Spirit. But our responsibility is to present the truth as accurately as possible, as the Bible teaches it. And since the Bible presents the truth persuasively, cogently, and winsomely, we, too, should present the truth as persuasively as we can.

As we expose the inquirer to more data, evidence, and argument, the inquirer will see that our conclusion is part of a whole way of thinking, a worldview that as a whole makes sense.

How should we deal with competing circularities? This problem arises when there is an argument between two parties that are both fully self-conscious about their biases. For example, consider an argument between a Christian who is epistemologically self-conscious and a Muslim who understands that at all times he must presuppose the truth of the Qur'an. It may seem as though such an argument cannot go anywhere. The Christian argues that Jesus is God, appealing to Scripture. The Muslim replies that that cannot be true because it is inconsistent with the Qur'an, which is the highest standard of truth. Then back and forth, yes and no, with no resolution.

This kind of argument is certainly frustrating. How much easier for the Christian to argue with a non-Christian who is *not* so epistemologically self-conscious! But the argument need not degenerate into a shouting match.

Consider this: the Scriptures and the Qur'an are different books. They don't just say, "I am the Word of God." Rather, they present different worldviews, different histories, different ethics, different ways of salvation. In an argument over competing circularities, the Christian should not confine himself to saying that he is right according to the Bible. Rather, he should expound what the Bible says, broadening the circle. He should present the gospel of Jesus Christ. And he should ask the Muslim to present his view of salvation. The argument should be about not just which book is supreme, but how we can be right with God. The Christian should present Christ and him crucified, and trust that this gospel can be as persuasive today as when Paul preached it in Corinth.

The Christian knows that the biblical story is true, and the non-Christian knows that, too, at some level of his thinking (Rom. 1:18–21). The Spirit is able to bless the proclamation of that story today. We must not lose confidence in that fact. Certainly we must not imagine that we can reason on a presupposition acceptable to a non-



Christian, on some kind of neutral ground, for then we would be telling a lie to the inquirer. And God doesn't bless lying even as a means of evangelism.

In this section, we have explored the normative perspective on justification. But it is clear that one cannot do this without taking the other perspectives into account. In presenting a normative (and therefore circular) argument for the truth of Christianity, I have had to broaden the circle to include evidences. But evidences, facts, are elements of the situational perspective. And I have had to consider the matter of persuasion. But persuasion, as I indicated, is subjective, something more obviously associated with the existential perspective. So the normative perspective, important as it is, includes the other two perspectives and therefore cannot be isolated from them.

The situational perspective is part of the normative, because one rule of knowledge is that it must be in accord with the facts. The existential is also part of the normative, because we have a right to certainty only when subjective doubt is substantially removed. Knowing is itself a subjective process, and as I will argue later, all aspects of human subjectivity (will, emotions, imagination, etc.) are involved in knowing.

### Situational Justification

So our discussion of the other two perspectives will inevitably repeat points already made. I can therefore be more brief in expounding them. A situational justification for believing *p* says, "I believe *p* because *p* accords with the facts." When we use facts to persuade someone of the truth of a proposition, we call them *evidence*.

The most important thing about facts and evidence is that they are completely under God's control, by his decree, creation, and providence.<sup>13</sup> So all facts reveal God (chapter 24). They cannot exist as facts apart from God.

So understanding the facts of experience must be done in a way that is pleasing to God, governed by his Word. In that sense, situational justification observes the laws of the normative. It includes the normative within it, just as the normative includes the situational.

But given our submission to the biblical laws of thought, there can be no objection to the use of evidences and arguments to prove the truth of Scripture. Indeed, our fund of evidence is much greater than is often supposed. Christian apologists have often referred to being, causality, and purpose as grounds for believing in God. But beyond this, every fact of God's creation witnesses to him. For the very fact that we can speak intelligibly about being, cause, and purpose, and also about physical laws, mathematics, astronomy, geology, and personal relationships, presupposes the biblical worldview.<sup>14</sup>

The only theological limitation on factual argument is that the apologist must not claim neutrality, but must admit (when the issue comes up) that he cannot argue coherently without presupposing the teachings of Scripture.

13. See chapters 9–11.

14. For an argument that scientists "must" believe in God because scientific laws are the very attributes of God, see Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chap. 1.

Nor is there any reason why we cannot use extrabiblical facts to establish biblical truth, such as historical and archaeological information. I have argued (chapter 27) that even to understand the Bible thoroughly, we need to have an understanding of biblical languages, of logic, of ancient history and culture. But even then, we should reason within the limits of a biblical epistemology.<sup>15</sup>

## Existential Justification

I have indicated that knowledge is a subjective process. God's knowledge is, of course, not a process at all, for he knows everything immediately, by his exhaustive knowledge of his own nature and plan.<sup>16</sup> But for human beings, coming to know things or people is a process that often takes time, with lots of twists and turns along the way. We follow our inclinations, achieve tentative conviction, are attacked by doubts, consider evidence, receive confirmation, and on and on.<sup>17</sup>

We considered earlier in this chapter the importance of *persuasion*, alongside validity and soundness, as a significant criterion of good argument. And we saw that persuasion is a subjective process. In one sense, persuasion is everything. For it is a perspective that embraces validity and soundness. A valid argument is an argument in which the logic is correct; and of course, we must be persuaded that the logic is correct. Same for soundness. And an argument should not persuade us unless it is valid and sound. So persuasion includes the other two qualities, and they each include persuasiveness.<sup>18</sup>

So knowledge does not exist without the subjective element of persuasion. In the traditional philosophical definition, persuasion represents the term *belief*, for we do not fully believe something unless we are persuaded of it. Some writers want to insist that knowledge is purely objective, that it has nothing to do with subjective feelings or inner qualities. But in knowledge there is an unavoidable subjective side.

I have sometimes described knowledge as a search for cognitive satisfaction, a satisfaction that I call *cognitive rest*.<sup>19</sup> Seeking knowledge, inquiry, is very much like other tasks. We perform various operations to achieve it: sense observations, rational inductions and deductions, consulting authority, research of various kinds. We hope that eventually these tasks will lead to something called knowledge. But how do we know when that happens? How do we know when we can end our inquiry and claim to have the knowledge we sought?

15. See *DKG*, 215–318.

16. God's knowledge is subjective, however. As we saw in chapter 15, God knows what he knows by knowing his own nature and eternal plan.

17. The best account of this process I know is Esther Meek's *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003). See also her more recent and more comprehensive *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

18. The only barrier to making this triad fully perspectival is the question whether validity includes soundness. We can say that it does, I think, only if we consider validity broadly: not merely as logical rules, but as laws of thought generally. And of course, one of the laws of thought is that you should draw inferences only from true premises. Soundness is often construed as implying logical validity.

19. See, e.g., *DKG*, 152–53.

Let's say that we are trying to decide whether *p* is true or not. During our inquiry, we may be pressed at times toward believing that *p* is true. But then we encounter contrary evidence that points the other way. We may vacillate through the twists and turns. One authority will incline us in one direction, another in the opposite direction. Perhaps at one point we are ready to commit ourselves to the truth of *p*, but then we become uneasy, and for a time we are unable to make up our minds. But it often happens that we are, at some point, able to make such a commitment. At that point, we say, we know.

How should we describe that moment when we say, "Now I know"? It has to be something like a feeling. It is not the discovery of a new piece of evidence, because we need to evaluate that evidence, that is, to decide how we feel about it. It is not the discovery of a logical argument, for we must always assess the persuasiveness of any argument. Rather, we say "I know" on the basis of a feeling—a feeling *about* the arguments, a feeling *about* the evidence.

A person can go back and forth on a question for years: say, the propriety of infant baptism. One day the paedobaptist argument sounds pretty good; the next day the anti-paedobaptist argument does. But maybe after weeks, months, or years of such indecision, something happens to tilt the mind decisively toward one alternative or the other. It might be a new argument, or a new piece of exegetical evidence. Or maybe not. It might also be that an old argument or an old piece of evidence takes on new life, becomes persuasive as it hadn't been before. We are *satisfied* in a way that we hadn't been before. It is like reaching a point in a task at which we can say, "It is finished; now I can rest." So I call this feeling of completion *cognitive rest*.

Of course, our cognitive rest is not always permanent. Sometimes we lose it, as when we encounter a new argument (or old one) that moves us again to vacillate. But to say "I know" is certainly, in part, to report a feeling of cognitive rest.

I am not saying that knowledge is completely subjective and that there are no objective elements in it. For the question remains as to when we *ought* to rest. Sometimes we leave part of the task undone, as when a child forgets to wash behind his ears. Cognitive rest should not be entered lightly, any more than a person should go to bed without completing his responsibilities for the day. Cognitive rest, that is, must be earned. We have a right to cognitive rest only when we have done the tasks that need to be done to resolve our inquiry. Often that will require researching the evidence, analyzing the logical arguments, and so on. That is to say, subjective cognitive rest ought to be based on an objective view of the truth. But to judge truth to be objective requires a subjective evaluation. So at every point in the process of knowing, objective and subjective factors interact.

### ***Knowledge, Regeneration, and Sanctification***

Theologically, when we talk about the cognitive rest, we are talking about noetic regeneration and sanctification, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit (chapter 28; see also chapters 41, 43). The Spirit accompanies his Word to produce conviction (John

3:3ff.; 1 Cor. 2:4–5, 14; 1 Thess. 1:5; 1 John 2:20f., 27). Also, the “mind of Christ,” his wisdom, is communicated to believers (Matt. 11:25ff.; Luke 24:45; 1 Cor. 1:24, 30; 2:16; Phil. 2:5; Col. 2:3). Completing the trinity, there are also passages that speak of God the Father as Teacher of his people (Matt. 16:17; 23:8ff.; John 6:45). The cognitive rest, then, in which one commits himself to Christianity comes by the grace of God, nothing less.

Cognitive rest is an element of salvation. Sin has kept us from true knowledge (Rom. 1; 8:7–8; 1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 1:19–2:6; 4:17–19). The grace of God in Christ is sufficient to rescue us from this ignorance (Ezek. 36:25ff.; John 1:11ff.; 3:1–8; 6:44f., 65; 7:17; 11:40; Acts 16:14; 1 Cor. 8:1–4; 12:3; 2 Cor. 4:3–6; Eph. 1:17f.; 2:1–10; 3:18f.; Col. 3:10; 1 Thess. 1:9f.; 1 Tim. 1:5–11; 1 John 2:3–6, 9–11, 20–27; 4:2f., 8, 13–17; 5:2f., 20).

Regeneration does not, however, immediately convey to the believer a sense of cognitive rest about all matters pertaining to the faith. Our basic presuppositional commitment to Christ begins at regeneration, but other commitments develop more gradually—or at least it takes a while for us to become conscious of them. Thus, there is not only noetic regeneration; there is also noetic sanctification. There is a radical change at the beginning, gradual change after that.

Scripture teaches that this gradual change is inseparable from the overall process of sanctification: that is, assurance on cognitive matters is inseparable from growth in obedience and holiness. It is sometimes said by theologians that “the Christian life is founded upon Christian doctrine”; but it also works the other way: our ability to discern doctrinal (and other) truth depends on the overall maturity of our Christian lives. In that regard, see John 7:17; also a group of passages that make an interesting use of the term “proof,” *dokimazein*.

1. In Romans 12:1f., Paul urges us, in view of God’s mercies, to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, which entails nonconformity to the world and transformation into holiness. This is the process of ethical renewal, and it is by this process, Paul says, that we will be able to “prove” what the will of God is. This is the opposite from what we usually hear: generally the advice we hear is to learn the will of God, and then we will be able to become more holy. That advice is true enough. But it also works the other way: be transformed, and then your renewed mind will be able to discern God’s will.

2. Ephesians 5:8 starkly describes our fallen condition: you once *were* darkness. But now we *are* light! This light is defined as ethical transformation in verse 9. It is in the process of that ethical transformation that we “prove” what pleases the Lord (v. 10).

3. In Philippians 1:9–10, Paul prays that the Philippians’ love will abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight. Again, ethical renewal is the source of deeper knowledge. Then, in verse 10, it is that deeper knowledge that helps us to “prove” what is most excellent (perhaps = what is most fitting or proper to do on a particular occasion), and that in turn leads to more purity and blamelessness. Again, note the circular relation between ethical sanctification and Christian understanding.

4. Hebrews 5:11–14 is a similar passage to these, but without the word *dokimazein*. The author is impatient to begin his teaching on Melchizedek, but he knows his audience is not ready for such deep instruction. They are “slow to learn,” ready only for

“elementary” teaching. Their trouble is that they are babes, spiritually immature (v. 13), without “experience” of the word of righteousness. Maturity, in contrast, means that one’s “faculties” have been “exercised by constant use to discern good and evil” (v. 14).<sup>20</sup> Notice, again, that theological maturity occurs together with ethical maturity. Ability to understand Melchizedek occurs as we learn to discern good and evil. And this ethical maturity does not occur primarily in the classroom, but in the heat of the Christian warfare. There is “exercise” (*gymnazein*), “use” (*hexis*). It is a training process: the more experience we have in making tough decisions in obedience to God, the better we will be able to do it in the future. The better we are able to make ethical decisions, the more equipped we will be to make theological decisions; the two are of a piece with each other.

So ability to come to cognitive rest concerning Christian teaching comes with sanctification, with growth in holiness. Many doctrinal misunderstandings in the church are doubtless due to this spiritual-ethical immaturity. We need to pay more attention to this fact when we get into theological disputes. Sometimes we throw arguments back and forth over and over again, desperately trying to convince each other. But often there is in one of the disputers—or both!—the kind of spiritual immaturity that prevents clear perception. We all know how it works in practice. Lacking sufficient love for one another, we seek to interpret the other person’s views in the worst possible sense. We forget the tremendous importance of love—even as an epistemological concept (see 1 Cor. 8:1–3; 1 Tim. 1:5ff.; 1 John 2:4f.; 3:18f.; 4:7ff.). Lacking a sufficient humility, too, we overestimate the extent of our own knowledge. In such a case, with one or more immature debaters, it may be best not to seek immediate agreement in our controversy. Sometimes we need to back off a bit, for a while. We need to go off and spend some time—months or years, perhaps—in constructive work for the Lord, fighting the Christian warfare, exercising our moral faculties. Then we can come back later to the doctrinal question and address it again from a more mature vantage point. Do you see how theological problems may sometimes, in effect, have practical solutions?

How many seminarians, I often wonder, have the spiritual maturity to warrant the theological decisions they are asked to make in preparation for licensure and ordination? In this context, Paul’s words take on fresh importance when he tells Timothy not to ordain a recent convert, “or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (1 Tim. 3:6).

### ***Seeing Things in Biblical Patterns***

This cognitive rest, this godly sense of satisfaction—can anything more be said about it? Many questions arise at this point, for these ideas are rather vague and mysterious. In particular, some might be worried about the consistency of these concepts with the sufficiency of Scripture. Is this “satisfaction” a new revelation of the Spirit? Is it an addition to the canon? Is it an additional norm? If not, then what is it?

20. These are my renderings of the Greek terms.

I strongly defend the Reformation doctrine of scriptural sufficiency (see chapter 26). But the Reformers saw no difficulty in affirming both the sufficiency of Scripture and the necessity of the Spirit's testimony. They made it clear (for even in their time there were misunderstandings in this area) that the Spirit's testimony was not a new revelation. Rather, the Spirit's work is to illumine and confirm the revelation already given. In Scripture, the Spirit's testimony is to Christ (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:8–10, 13ff.) and to the Word of God (1 Cor. 2:4; 1 Thess. 1:5). The Spirit witnesses that the Word is true—but the Word has already told us that!

Still, as we saw in chapters 27 and 28, Scripture is not reluctant to describe this work as a work of revelation (Matt. 11:25–27; Eph. 1:17). It is revelation in the sense that through the Spirit's ministry we are learning something of which we would otherwise be ignorant; we are learning the Word of God. Or, put differently, we are being “persuaded,” “noetically regenerated and sanctified,” “brought to cognitive rest.” We are being given a “godly sense of satisfaction.”

In all of this, the Spirit is helping us to *use*, to *apply* the Word. Obviously, he cannot assure us of the truth of Scripture unless he also teaches us the meaning of it; and the meaning, as we have seen, includes the applications. We can see this in 2 Samuel 11–12 where David sins against God by committing adultery with Bathsheba and sending her husband Uriah to his death. Here, David, the “man after God’s own heart,” seems trapped in a peculiar spiritual blindness. What has happened here? In one sense, he knows Scripture perfectly well; he meditates on God’s law day and night. And he is not ignorant about the facts of the case. Yet he is not convicted of sin. But Nathan the prophet comes to him and speaks God’s word. He does not immediately rebuke David directly. He tells a parable—a story that makes David angry at someone else. Then Nathan tells David, “You are the man.” At that point, David repents of his sin.

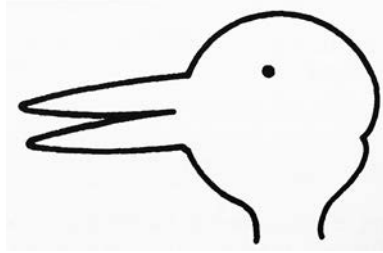
What has David learned at this point? He already knew God’s law, and he already knew the facts, in a sense. What he learned was an application—what the law said about *him*. Previously, he may have rationalized; we can imagine it: “Kings of the earth have a right to take whatever women they want, and the commander-in-chief has the right to decide who fights on the front line. Therefore, my relation with Bathsheba was not *really* adultery, and my order to Uriah was not *really* murder.” We all know how that works; we’ve done it ourselves. But what the Spirit did, through Nathan, was to take that rationalization away.

Thus, David came to call his actions by their right names: sin, adultery, murder. He came to read his own life in terms of the biblical concepts. He came to see his “relationship” as *adultery* and his “executive order” as *murder*. He learned to *see as*.

*Seeing as* is an interesting concept, which a number of recent thinkers, notably Ludwig Wittgenstein, have explored. *Seeing as* is not the same as *seeing*. One person, looking at a certain picture, will see it as a duck, another as a rabbit. In one sense, they see the same lines on the paper. But they see different patterns, shapes, or *gestalts*. So it is with us when we seek to see our lives in the light of Scripture. One person will look at a sexual relationship as a “recreational dalliance”; another will see it as adultery.



Sometimes the matter becomes more complicated, when there seems to be more than one possible biblical interpretation of an event. Say that I feel anger. Is this the righteous anger that Jesus displayed with the money-changers in the temple, or is it the murderous anger that he forbids under all circumstances? Which biblical category does it fit under? See fig. 31.4.



**Fig. 31.4. Seeing As: Duck-Rabbit**

These questions are not obviously questions about facts or norms. One usually doesn't answer them simply by giving information or a command. Rather, what is needed is exhortation that helps us to see things in a different way. Therefore, artistry, nuance, plays a particular role here. Nathan did not simply repeat the law; he told a story. That story had the effect of shaking David out of his rationalization, helping him to see things in different patterns, to call things by their right names. We need to be more sensitive as to when such methods are appropriate in theology.

Much of the Spirit's work in our lives is of this nature—assuring us that Scripture applies to our lives in particular ways. The Spirit does not add to the canon, but his work is really a work of teaching, of revelation. Without that revelation, we could make no use of Scripture at all; it would be a dead letter to us.

Thus, in one sense the Spirit adds nothing; in another sense he adds everything. When we are asked to justify our Christian beliefs, we point not to the Spirit, but to the Word, for it is the Word that *states* the justification. But apart from the Spirit, we would have no knowledge of that justification. And it often becomes important, in justifying beliefs, to give evidence of our own spiritual maturity, so as to indicate our spiritual qualifications for making the statements we make.

### ***A Corporate Existential Perspective***

Most of the discussion above has been focused on the individual's knowledge of God through his private inwardness. I make no apology for that; God does care for each individual and relates to each of us individually. In some ways, all of us are different—with different heredity, life histories, natural and spiritual gifts, natural and spiritual weaknesses. God counts every hair, watches each sparrow fall; all the diversities of the creation are in his hand. He meets each individual's special needs with his saving



grace. Scripture tells with love the stories of how God's love meets individuals. And it tells us that there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.

Yet it may be argued that the *emphasis* of Scripture is different. That emphasis is not on the salvation of individuals, but on the salvation of a *people*. Throughout history, God has been concerned with families, nations, indeed a world. His goal is not merely the perfection of individuals, but the perfection of the church, the body of Christ.

Ephesians is one of the notable portions of Scripture in this regard. It also has much to say concerning the knowledge of God. We have cited Ephesians 1:17ff.; 3:14–19; 5:8–21 in regard to the existential perspective. These texts show that knowledge of God is inseparable from the Spirit's revelatory and sanctifying witness. But the "knowledge" of Ephesians seems not to be primarily the knowledge that each of us has as an individual; rather, it is the knowledge that the church shares as a body. It is ascribed to "you" (plural). It is a knowledge "together with all the saints" (3:18 NIV). The end result of that knowledge is attaining

to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ . . . We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph. 4:13, 15–16)

The "maturity" here is not the maturity of each individual, though that is implied, but the maturity of the corporate body as it grows up into Christ, its Head. It is best, then, to see the knowledge, also, as something shared by the whole body, though of course the knowledge of individuals is not irrelevant to that.

Thus, it appears that there is a kind of knowledge possessed by the church, as well as a knowledge possessed by individuals. Like the individual's knowledge, it may be seen from three perspectives: it is based on scriptural norms, on the realities of creation and redemption, and also on the work of Christ and the Spirit in corporately sanctifying the body (Eph. 4:4f.; 5:22–33).

The *sociology of knowledge* has much to say about the effect of group loyalties on belief-commitments. Much has been written in this area from Marxist or Freudian viewpoints and by such philosophers of science as Kuhn, Hanson, Polanyi. Our pre-suppositions and our views of the objects in the world are profoundly affected by our various interpersonal relationships—family, nationality, religion, political party or ideology, economic status, educational background, occupation, professional association, and so forth. Groups tend to develop "group minds," which, without determining the thinking of individuals within the groups, do influence it deeply.

We tend to be suspicious of "groupthink," and in most cases rightly so. There are important intellectual benefits in cultivating independence of thought. But it is impossible to escape entirely from our associations with others, and such total independence is not really desirable. The ideal thing (a prefall situation) would be for the whole human

race to work as a team, seeking out all the mysteries of the creation together, trusting one another, collaborating peacefully on a great edifice of learning, each contributing his bit to a body of knowledge far larger than any individual could comprehend.

Something like that is what God intends for his church. He wants us to grow together toward a knowledge of him that is broader than any of us, which, marvelously, somehow matches that of its Head, Jesus Christ. Cf. again Eph. 4:15f.

And of course, the growth of corporate knowledge will enrich each individual. When the church reaches maturity, its individuals will “no longer be children” (4:14). Thus, it is wise for us to listen to the church when it speaks through its elder-teachers and its judicial discipline (Matt. 18). The church (and obviously the churches) is not infallible, but each church does have the authority to govern the teaching within its jurisdiction. Individuals in the churches need to cultivate a spirit of submission and humility, a recognition that in most cases the whole body of believers (especially the whole body throughout church history) knows more than any member does. If conscience forces me to go against the body, then I must take my stand—but even then, I should not be hasty. Even the conscience is not infallible; it must be trained to discern properly, in accordance with Scripture.

And of course, the church does more for us than merely to overrule our errors! Even if we never made errors, it would still be through the processes of discussing issues, loving one another (Eph. 4:16), bearing one another’s burdens, fighting the Christian warfare together, that we come to fullness of knowledge. God has given each of us as a gift to the others (4:4–13).

Should this matter be discussed under the existential perspective, or under the situational? One could argue that the body of believers functions as one aspect of our situation that our knowledge must take account of. Well, since all the perspectives are interdependent, it doesn’t much matter. The church also has a normative function—a derived authority from God, as we’ve seen. But Scripture seems to present corporate knowledge primarily as a kind of super-individual subjectivity that grows and develops as the individual does, to which the individual is related not primarily as subject to object, but as member to body. Thus, my subjectivity is part of the church’s, and its subjectivity is the fullness of mine. A pain felt by the finger is fully experienced and understood only by the whole body.

## Key Terms

- Knowledge (philosophical definition)
- Justification (in epistemology)
- Formal logic
- Informal logic
- Laws of thought
- Law of identity
- Law of the excluded middle
- Law of noncontradiction

Normative justification  
 Situational justification  
 Existential justification  
 Presupposition  
 Validity  
 Soundness  
 Persuasiveness  
 Circularity  
 Narrow circularity  
 Broad circularity  
 Person-variable  
 Cognitive rest  
*Dokimazein*  
 Seeing as  
 Corporate existential perspective

### Study Questions

1. Frame says that the traditional definition of knowledge is triperspectival. Show how the three perspectives illumine that definition. Evaluate.
2. Frame says that rational arguments pervade Scripture and preaching. Explain; evaluate.
3. "It is possible to 'have' a reason without being able to 'give' a reason." Explain; evaluate.
4. Frame says that the three perspectives of Christian epistemologies are parallel to non-Christian rationalism, empiricism, and subjectivism. Show how these are parallel and also how they are not parallel.
5. "It is circular to appeal to the Bible to defend the Bible as our presupposition." Reply to this objection.
6. How can a circular argument for Scripture's authority be persuasive? Or can it be?
7. Describe a debate between two people advocating competing circular arguments. How can either party ever be persuaded?
8. Frame says that "now I know" is, among other things, the expression of a feeling. Describe that feeling. Does this reference to feeling invalidate the objectivity of knowledge?
9. Have you had the experience of feeling cognitive rest after searching for an answer? Tell the story of how that happened.
10. What point is Frame seeking to make by invoking the *dokimazein* passages? Evaluate.
11. What point is Frame seeking to make by invoking the story of David and Nathan? Evaluate. Explain how the duck-rabbit illustration fits in.
12. Does Scripture teach the existence of a corporate existential perspective? Discuss.

## Memory Verses

**Rom. 12:1–2:** I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

**Eph. 4:13–15:** Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

**Eph. 5:8–10:** For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

**Phil. 1:9–10:** And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

**Heb. 5:11–14:** About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

## Resources for Further Study

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## RESOURCES FOR KNOWING

THIS CHAPTER SOMEWHAT AMPLIFIES the previous chapter's description of the existential perspective. We have seen that knowing is, existentially speaking, a journey with many twists and turns, as we seek cognitive rest. But of course, God has not left us alone in this journey. He has provided us with many resources, chiefly his Word, the facts of the creation, and the guidance of the Spirit.<sup>1</sup> But he has also provided us with resources in ourselves. We are his image, and so he has made us to know in a way analogous to his own knowledge. He has given us minds, wills, imaginations, and so on. And with redemption, he has remade these gifts in the image of Jesus.

### The Personalism of the Knowledge of God<sup>2</sup>

The believer's knowledge is the expression and application of his deepest convictions, his presuppositions. The presuppositions that govern our thinking arise from many sources—reason, sensation, and emotion, to name a few. The most ultimate presuppositions are religious in nature. All our experience testifies to the truth of these presuppositions.

These presuppositions influence our reading of Scripture, by which, in turn, we seek to validate our presuppositions. That is called the *hermeneutical circle*. Circularity of that sort, as we saw earlier, is inevitable. Under the leading of the Spirit, however, it is not a vicious circle. Contact with God's Word purifies our presuppositions. Then, in turn, when we use our purified presuppositions to interpret Scripture, we come to a clearer understanding of Scripture. Without the Spirit's work, however, the circle can be regressive: bad presuppositions distorting the meaning of Scripture, that distorted

1. The references to the Word and creation show how the existential perspective includes the other two. Our journey is not a journey through chaos, but through a world that God has already made, that he governs, and that he has eternally interpreted.

2. In this chapter, I will often be referring to *theology* as a synonym for *knowledge of God*, for these reasons: (1) This equation has been made in various Reformed writings. (2) The original discussion that I reiterate here (DKG, 319–46) was specifically about theological method, and I want it to continue to have a specific focus on that subject. But the considerations here are certainly not limited to theology as an academic discipline.

meaning leading to even worse presuppositions, and so forth. Hence, we ought not to be surprised when we see apparently sincere and intellectually sophisticated “seekers after truth”—often among the cults (and often among the ranks of professional theological scholars!)—whose conclusions seem *incredibly* far from the truth. This is one way in which obedience and knowledge are closely linked (cf. chapter 28).

The knowledge of God is intensely personal in character. Since God cannot generally be seen, heard, or touched, this knowledge is not reached by the experimental methods of natural science. Ian Ramsey uses the illustration of a courtroom scene in which everything proceeds quite impersonally, persons being referred to by titles (“the Crown,” “the accused,” “the prosecution,” “your honor”). To his amazement, the magistrate looks up and sees as “the accused” his long-lost wife. Suddenly the whole situation takes on a different tone. The new tone is not due to anything that can be seen or heard, but rather to a whole range of memories, past histories, affections, disappointments.<sup>3</sup> Now, this illustration would be misleading if it were taken (as perhaps it is by Ramsey) to illustrate the *whole* nature of Christian truth. Christianity is not just an aura of personal relationships that surrounds purely natural events. The resurrection, for example, was not merely a recollection by the disciples of Jesus’ relationship with them before his death. It was a miracle in space and time; the risen Jesus could be seen and heard and touched. But the illustration does indicate something that is present in all theology, indeed in all our knowledge of God, even as we speak of the resurrection and other great historical events. For all Christian discourse confesses a personal relation to God—a covenant relation. The Jesus who was raised from the dead is “my Lord and my God” (John 20:28). He is the One with whom we, too, are raised (Col. 2:12f.; 3:1).

It is for this reason that we tend to feel uncomfortable with certain attempts at theological talk. It doesn’t seem quite right, for example, to speak of the resurrection of Jesus’ body as the “resuscitation of a corpse.” Some liberal theologians point this out in defense of the view that Jesus was raised only “spiritually” while his corpse remained dead. “Of course,” they say, “the resurrection of Jesus has nothing to do with the resuscitation of a corpse!” But the Christian’s hesitation about the phrase “resuscitation of a corpse” is not because of any doubt in his heart about the literal truth of the resurrection. The reason, I think, is rather that the phrase “resuscitation of a corpse” is not covenant language. It is not the language of personal relationship, the language of love. It does not connote all the rich context of the biblical teaching.

Propositional language is important to theology. Theology conveys information about God. The arguments of Emil Brunner and others that propositional knowledge weakens the personal character of relationships are absurd. Gaining information about someone often deepens our relationship with him. Good language about God, however, is never *merely* propositional. It is simultaneously an expression of love and praise. Preachers as well as theologians need to keep this in mind, to avoid language

3. Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 20.

that encourages their people to speak of God in a kind of clinical jargon. It is not that such jargon is always wrong or sinful. But lack of balance here can lead people (and preachers) into bad habits of thought and life. Personalism is a means of edification. When we neglect it, we are not communicating the whole counsel of God.

I have known professors of theology who are so zealous to defend the scientific character of theology, its academic respectability, that they actually forbid the use of personal references in theological writing. That is, they forbid the author to refer to himself, or to someone else (except, of course, to the *ideas* of another); they conceive theology to be wholly a matter of ideas rather than of personalities. Now, of course there are dangers that such professors are rightly seeking to avoid. There is the danger, for example, of using ad hominem arguments. There is also the danger of writing out of personal vindictiveness rather than concentrating on the theological issues. But *issues* are not sharply separable from *personalities*. People's ideas are closely related to their reputations and to their character (as God's word is one with God himself). Personal references can scarcely be avoided in theology. Even the most academic theology is an expression of a person's heart-relation to God. But if a theology did avoid them, it would be a theology without a soul.

Personalism is also evident in the nature of theology and apologetics as *persuasion*, as we saw in the previous chapter. The purpose of these disciplines is not merely to construct valid and sound arguments, but to persuade people, to edify. And the goal is not merely to bring them to intellectual assent, but to help them to embrace the truth from the heart in love and joy, to motivate them to live out its implications in all areas of life. Thus, theology must be "personalistic" not only in expressing the personhood of the theologian, but also in addressing the full personhood of its hearer.

## The Heart

The knowledge of God is a heart-knowledge (see Ex. 35:5; 1 Sam. 2:1; 2 Sam. 7:3; Pss. 4:4; 7:10; 15:2; Isa. 6:10; Matt. 5:8; 12:34; 22:37; Eph. 1:18; etc.). The heart is the "center" of the personality, the person himself in his most basic character. Scripture represents it as the source of thought, of volition, of attitude, of speech. It is also the seat of moral knowledge. First Samuel 24:5 says that David's conviction of sin was that his "heart" slew him, here using the term as we use the word *conscience*.

The fact that the heart is depraved, then, means that apart from grace we are in radical ignorance of the things of God (chapter 29). Only the grace of God, which restores us from the heart outward, can restore to us that knowledge of God that belongs to God's covenant servants—that knowledge that is correlative to obedience.

One implication of this fact is that the believer's knowledge of God is inseparable from godly character (cf. chapter 28). The same Spirit that gives the first in regeneration also gives the second. And the qualifications for the ministry of teaching (theology) in Scripture are predominantly moral qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1ff.; 1 Peter 5:1ff.). Thus, the quality of theological work is not only dependent on propositional knowledge or on skills in logic, history, linguistics, and so forth (which, of course, believers and



unbelievers share to a large extent); it is also dependent on the theologian's character. We saw in chapter 29 how knowledge and obedience are linked in Scripture.

A second implication is that the knowledge of God is gained not just through one *faculty* or another, such as the intellect or the emotions. It is a knowledge of the heart, the whole person. The theologian knows by means of everything he is and all the abilities and capacities that have been given to him by God. Intellect, emotions, will, imagination, sensation, natural and spiritual gifts of skills—all contribute toward the knowledge of God. All knowledge of God enlists *all* our faculties, because it engages everything that we are.

To say that theological knowledge is a “whole-person” knowledge raises questions about the relations of unity to diversity in the human personality. Traditionally, theologians and philosophers have distinguished various faculties within the human mind: reason, will, emotion, imagination, perception, intuition, and others. These distinctions have given rise to questions about which faculty is “primary.” Some have argued the *primacy of the intellect*, reasoning that emotion, imagination, and the like will lead us astray if they are not disciplined, corrected, evaluated by intellectual processes. Others have said that the will is primary, for even intellectual belief is something that is *chosen*. Others have postulated the primacy of feeling, since everything we believe or choose to do, we choose because in some sense we *feel* like choosing it. And so on, with the other faculties.

Well, the alert reader can doubtless predict what is coming now: I think there is truth in all these contentions—contentions that can be reconciled with one another to an extent if we see these various faculties in perspectival unity with one another. These faculties are a diversity of “angles” from which we can look at the various acts and experiences of the human mind. None of them ever exists or acts apart from the others, each is dependent on the others, and each includes the others. Let us look at them one by one, noting some of these close relationships among them.<sup>4</sup>

## Reason<sup>5</sup>

The term *reason* has a long history in Western philosophy and has been used in a variety of ways. It can refer to logic, to those particular laws of logic called *laws of thought* or more particularly the *law of noncontradiction*. Some philosophers have used *reason* to denote a particular *method* of thinking (defined, of course, by their philosophical system) or even to refer to their philosophy in general. (One is tempted to think that for Hegel, *reason* is synonymous with Hegelianism.)

In this context (and most others), I think it is least misleading to define reason in two ways: first as an ability or capacity—the human capacity for forming judgments and inferences. So understood, reasoning is something that we do all the time, not only

4. In *DCL*, 361–82, I discuss this list of faculties again, from an ethical viewpoint, as “organs of ethical knowledge.”

5. For more discussion of reason, particularly logic, see *DKG*, 242–301. In that discussion, I argue some points that I take for granted here.

when we are pursuing academic or theoretical disciplines. That is how *reason* is used in a *descriptive* sense. I will also use the term in a *normative* sense: that is, not to denote all judgments and inferences, but to denote *correct* judgments and inferences. In the first descriptive sense, an incorrect inference would be rational, for it is an exercise of reason as a human capacity. In the second sense, it would not be rational, for it would not measure up to the criteria of sound reasoning.

Having defined reason in these ways, we can see that talk of God, theology, ought to be rational. Theology is the forming of judgments and inferences based on God's Word (applications being both judgments and inferences), and therefore it is a form of reasoning (descriptive) in the nature of the case. Further, Scripture warrants the making of judgments and inferences (as in Rom. 12:1–2; Col. 3:1). Theology that makes sound judgments and draws sound conclusions from Scripture would be rational in the normative sense.

To say that theology ought to be rational, really, is no different from saying that it ought to be scriptural or that it ought to be true. As we saw in our discussion of logic, logic done properly adds nothing to its premises. Rather, it is a tool that helps us to see what is implicit in these premises, that is, what they really say. That, indeed, is what logic is intended to do. When a deductive process changes the meaning of a set of premises, it is thereby defective. A system of logic that leads to such change is to that extent an inadequate system. The goal of logic is simply to set forth the premises as they really are. Similarly, the goal of theological reasoning is simply to set forth Scripture as it really is (including, of course, its applications that constitute its meaning). So rationality in theology is nothing more or less than scripturality. It is not a separate set of norms to which theology must conform in addition to its conformity to Scripture.<sup>6</sup> Thus, theologians ought not to feel threatened by the demand for rationality. Of course, if rationality is defined not as scripturality, but as conformity to some theories of modern science, history, philosophy, and the like, then conflict is inevitable.

Therefore, when someone tells me that reason must be the judge of theological ideas, I can agree with him in a sense. My rational capacity is the capacity to make judgments; thus, to say that theological judgments must be rational (in the descriptive sense) is a tautology. In the normative sense, too, theology ought to be judged by reason, for that only means that inferences and judgments based on Scripture ought to be *sound* inferences and judgments, that is, really in conformity with Scripture. To speak of reason as a “judge,” however, is rather strange. That may suggest to some (though not necessarily and not to all) that reason operates with some criteria independent of Scripture. Or such language may confuse my norm (Scripture) with one of my psychological capacities.

Must theology, then, conform to reason? Yes. But that means only that theology must conform with rigorous logic to its proper criterion, the inspired Scriptures.

6. And even if it were, for the Christian those norms would be subordinate to the ultimate norm, Scripture itself. Thus, any demonstration of the rationality of Scripture would still be circular.

Does reason have a primacy over our other faculties? Well, all our emotional inclinations, imaginative ideas, intuitions, experiences, and so on must conform to reason or they do not tell us the truth. But what does “conformity to reason” mean in this context? As we have seen, it means nothing more than “conformity to Scripture” or “conformity with truth.” Thus, to say that these must conform to reason in order to tell the truth is really a tautology. It is like saying that you must be unmarried in order to be a bachelor. But we would not want to say that “being a bachelor” is a criterion or test of being unmarried. (The opposite would be equally plausible and equally implausible.) Thus, there is circularity here.

So the *primacy of reason* in the sense described above says very little. It does not even rule out a similar primacy for other faculties, even the emotions. Say that someone claims that he has come to know something through his emotions. If his claim is correct, then his emotions have led him into “conformity with truth.” On the above definition, this is the same as “conformity to reason.” Emotion, in other words, is a form of reason. If his claim is not correct, one may still call his emotions a form of reason, for they are one of the capacities by which he makes judgments and inferences, even though they are not in this case reliable. In this case, we may say that his emotions are reason in a descriptive sense, but not in a normative sense.

Indeed, it is possible that *reason* is only a name that we give to the inference- and judgment-making capacities of the other faculties. Or, perhaps, that it is a perspective on those other faculties, looking at them from the “angle” of their role in discovering truth. (We will see that when we look at them from that angle, we must look at their other roles as well; thus, reason would be a perspective on *everything* done by these faculties.)

In what follows, I will try to clarify the discussion above by showing these relationships from the other side, that is, from the side of the emotions, imagination, and the like. I will try to show the role of these faculties in forming judgments and also mention their other roles and the inseparability of the various roles from one another. If I am right in my perspectival model, these subsequent discussions will also in effect be discussions of reason, enlarging upon what I have said in this section.

## Perception, Experience

*Perception* is associated with the sense organs, but it is not merely a synonym for *sensation*. *Sensation* refers to the operations of the sense organs, whether or not these operations yield knowledge. Perception, on the other hand, is a form of knowledge, the knowledge gained through the process of sensation. We say “I perceive X” when we see, hear, smell, taste, or feel X, that is, when the operations of the sense organs yield knowledge of X.

*Experience* is a broader category than *perception*. It is possible to have an experience of something (say, a prophet’s experience of the divine word) without perceiving it through the sense organs; at least that possibility is arguable. With George Mavrodes, however,

we may understand experience in a way parallel to our account of perception.<sup>7</sup> Mavrodes takes the X in “I experienced X” to refer not merely to a psychological state, but to an object existing independently of the experiencer. Thus, to say “I experienced X” is to claim that through my experience I have gained some knowledge of X.

Mavrodes also argues that experiencing X involves making some judgment about X.<sup>8</sup> The same is true of perceptual language (perceiving X, seeing X, hearing X, etc.). He adds:

But . . . I do not know how to make more precise just how appropriate the judgment must be. It is fairly clear that a man may really see a wolf in the woods, though he takes it to be a dog. It seems, therefore, that the judgment need not be entirely correct. On the other hand, it also seems clear that a man may be in the presence of a wolf, in the sense that light reflected from the wolf stimulates his eye, etc., and yet make no judgment whatever, perhaps because he is preoccupied. In that case we would probably say that he failed to see the animal at all.<sup>9</sup>

Perceiving and experiencing, then, are not activities sharply different from reasoning. They are processes by which we reach judgments, even if those judgments are not always perfectly correct. Are they, like reason, means of *inference*? Of course, experiencing or perceiving something does not usually, if ever, involve going through a syllogism in the head. But if *reasoning* or *informal logic* is something that goes on in all of life, even when no conscious syllogizing takes place, then nothing prevents us from seeing experience or perception as a kind of inference. Data are presented to the senses. From that data, we infer the presence of objects or the existence of states of affairs.

Of course, as I have often said in this book, we have no access to uninterpreted data, the “brute facts.” “I see the tree” presupposes sense experience, but also a lifetime of conceptual learning by which we learn to place certain kinds of sensations in this particular category. “My father was here last night” might have been verified in part by sense experience, yet one cannot tell by sensation alone that a certain man is one’s father. That judgment presupposes some historical knowledge beyond any possible verification by the direct experience of the individual. What we see is greatly influenced by what we expect to see, and that expectation is influenced by a wide variety of factors.<sup>10</sup>

Reasoning, then, the capacity for making judgments and inferences, is present in all *experience* and *perception* as we have defined them. And since a logical syllogism must have premises, and premises are not usually, if ever, supplied by logic alone (chapter 31), its validity relies on knowledge gained from other sources, such as perception. In any

7. George Mavrodes, *Belief in God* (New York, Random House, 1970), 50ff.

8. *Ibid.*, 52.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Compare the anomalous playing-card experiments described by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

case, the use of logic is inconceivable without any experience at all, for we must at least experience the existence of logical principles if we are to perform any logical operations.

Thus, reasoning involves experience and experience involves reasoning. Epistemological attempts to build up the fabric of human knowledge from “pure experience” (corresponding to “brute facts”), untainted by any use of reason (empiricism), or from reason alone apart from experience (rationalism) cannot succeed. Attempts to account for knowledge in either of these ways are generally attempts to find some “bedrock” of truth, an “ultimate starting point” (either experience or reason) apart from God’s Word. But God will not allow this. His creation is perspectival; all creatures are equally ultimate. There is no bedrock except the divine Word.

Thus, when Scripture speaks about “hearing,” “seeing,” and “touching” the Word of life (1 John 1:1), it is not speaking of mere sensation, the mere workings of the sense organs apart from any rational thought. Such a concept of *sensation*, a philosophical abstraction, is not found in Scripture. To see, hear, or touch the risen Christ involves making a judgment about him, an inference; it involves reasoning.

On the other hand, the knowledge of God, according to Scripture, does not come from mere reasoning apart from sensation, either. The verse cited above and many others make this fact evident.<sup>11</sup> Perception, rightly understood, is a legitimate means of knowledge. God has given us our sense organs (Ex. 4:11; Ps. 94:9; Prov. 20:12), and he assures us in his Word that although perception is fallible (so, of course, is reason), it is a means of knowledge (Matt. 5:16; 6:26ff.; 9:36; 15:10; Luke 1:2; 24:36–43; John 20:27; Rom. 1:20; 10:14–17; 2 Peter 1:16–18; 1 John 4:14).

Living between the apostolic age and the parousia, we are no longer in a position to see the risen Christ with the physical eye. But perception still plays a major role in theology. We perceive the biblical text through the senses, similarly other texts that serve as tools of theology. And by the senses we perceive the ancient manuscripts and artifacts of ancient culture that help us to reconstruct the meaning of the text. And of course, experience also reveals the present situation to which our theology will be applying the text.

And there is also that experience by which we grow in Christian maturity—the experience of living the Christian life, meeting challenges, succeeding, failing, praying, finding answers to prayer, persevering when answers aren’t given, struggling against sin, enduring hardship for Christ’s sake. In many situations we live out those experiences described in Scripture; we experience what the Lord Jesus and his great saints experienced. Experience in this sense is important in showing us the meaning of Scripture. Less experienced saints can always look things up in commentaries, but a special kind of insight comes to those who have had long firsthand experience of the Christian warfare. (A young soldier may learn the rules, history, and techniques of warfare in the military academy, but there is much that he can learn only on the actual

11. On this point, see the discussion by Robert Reymond in *The Justification of Knowledge* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976).

field of battle.) There is much, for example, in the Psalms that one cannot understand very well until he has undergone some of the same experiences as the psalmists and has understood the analogies between his experience and theirs.<sup>12</sup>

Christian teachers with this kind of experience have greater credibility, too, than those who have merely theorized about the gospel. A professor of mine once complained about a Sunday school program at his church, at which his five-year-old son sang with other children a happy chorus about being “more than conquerors” in Christ. The professor thought this was somewhat silly: the kids hadn’t conquered anything much! Well, I disagreed somewhat. I thought, and still do, that if the children were “in Christ,” they had through Christ already conquered everything, in one sense. But my professor was not entirely wrong. He rightly sensed that, sung by the children, those words lacked the kind of credibility that they would have on the lips of, say, the apostle Paul himself. Paul endured imprisonment, stoning, abandonment, treachery, loneliness, the “thorn in the flesh” for the sake of Christ. When a man like that is still able to say, “We are more than conquerors,” his words carry a special kind of force. For him, the victory of Christ has been worked out in his life in a great many concrete ways. And that kind of life deserves and evokes a profound respect, giving his words a greater impact.

## Emotion

Scripture doesn’t discuss the emotions in any systematic way any more than it discusses the intellect. Yet Scripture has much to say about our emotions: our joys, sorrows, anxieties, fears, gladness. (Love, too, has a large emotional component, though it is best not to define it as an emotion.) Satan’s temptation in the garden appealed to Eve’s emotions (Gen. 3:6) (but also, importantly, to her intellectual pretensions, her desire to determine the truth autonomously: 3:1, 4–5). Yet disobedience to God led not to happy feelings, but to shame (3:7). Fallen man has a distinctively fallen complex of emotions: hatred of God, his Word, his creation, his people; love of the world, the flesh, the devil. But redemption brings principal restoration: love of God, hatred of evil.

Redemption doesn’t make us more emotional (as some charismatics might suppose) or less so (as many Reformed would prefer), any more than it makes us more or less intellectual. What redemption does to the intellect is to consecrate that intellect to God, whether the IQ is high or low. Similarly, the important thing is not whether you are highly emotional or not; the important thing is that whatever emotional capacities you have should be placed in God’s hands to be used according to his purposes.

Thus, intellect and reason are simply two aspects of human nature that together are fallen and together are regenerated and sanctified. Nothing in Scripture suggests that either is superior to the other. Neither is more fallen than the other; neither is necessarily more sanctified than the other.

12. I remember this point from a lecture by pastor Albert N. Martin of Essex Falls, New Jersey.



Greek philosophy traditionally presented a different picture: the human problem is a sort of derangement of the faculties. Whereas the reason ought to be in control, unfortunately the emotions often rule. Salvation comes (through philosophy, of course!) when we learn to subordinate emotions to reason. That idea is, of course, very plausible. We all know of people who get “carried away” by their feelings and do very stupid things. Such people are often told, rightly, by Christian counselors not to “follow their feelings.”

But the fall is not a derangement of faculties within man. It is rebellion of the whole person—intellect as much as emotions, perception, will. My problem is not something within me; it is me. I must take the responsibility, unless Jesus Christ takes that responsibility in my place.

### ***Emotions and Decisions***

It is true, of course, that people sometimes “follow their feelings” rather than thinking responsibly. But it is also the case that people sometimes follow rationalistic schemes that run contrary to what they know in their guts (feelings) to be true. God gives us multiple faculties to serve as checks and balances on one another. Sometimes reason saves us from emotional craziness, but emotions can also check the extravagant pretenses of reason.

Imagine someone of Reformed background attending a charismatic meeting. He has been told that there is nothing good in the charismatic movement, and he has thought it all through intellectually. He thinks he has some pretty good arguments. Yet while at the meeting, he finds himself clapping, shouting “Amen,” rejoicing in the fellowship. Afterward comes time to give account! What should he do? Should he repent of having allowed his emotions to overrule his carefully wrought theory?

Well, he ought to think some more, obviously! Something is wrong somewhere, but it is not obvious *what* is wrong. Possibly his emotions led him into a false path. Or possibly his emotions were leading him, properly, to reconsider the overly harsh judgments of his theoretical analysis. He must reason, under the authority of Scripture. But that reason will have to take his newfound feelings into account. And he will not achieve complete cognitive rest until his intellect and emotions are somehow reconciled.

Another illustration: Writing book reviews is one of the more “intellectual” tasks that I perform. But it is interesting to see the role that emotions play even in that activity. I read, say, the first chapter of the book and find that I have a certain feeling about the book. I like it, or I don’t like it, or I have some reaction in between these. I then try to think it through. Why do I have this feeling? My rational reflection might lead to a change in feeling, or it might enable me to defend and articulate the feeling. Still, the feeling plays a crucial role. I cannot imagine doing academic work at all without having some feelings of this sort. If I had no feelings about the book I was reviewing, I would simply set it aside. The feeling guides my reflection; my reflection refines my feelings. Those refined feelings provoke additional reflection, and so on. The goal is a satisfying analysis, that is, an analysis I feel good about, one with which I have



cognitive rest, a peaceful relation between intellect and emotion. That relation seems to me to be involved in all knowledge.

Scripture itself sometimes places emotion in the role often given to intellect or will: "Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4); "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret" (2 Cor. 7:10). It is not always wrong to "follow your feelings."

### *Emotions and Knowledge*

The discussion above suggests that emotions contribute to knowledge. When I experience joy, that joy is itself a datum that must be accounted for within the fabric of my knowledge. The joy does not just happen. It has a cause. It is a response of my mind and body to something or other. It might not be a proper response (any more than my reasoning and sensations always lead me to the truth). But it is a means by which truth reaches me. It is a means of knowledge.

We saw in chapter 31 the importance of cognitive rest in human knowledge. That cognitive rest is something mysterious, hard to describe. But it would not be wrong, I think, to describe it as a feeling: not a feeling like that of hot or cold, which can be physically quantified, which is in fact a form of sensation; but a feeling like joy or sadness, the happiness at the completion of a task, the acceptance of the intellectual status quo, the confidence with which we entertain our idea. In other words, cognitive rest is something very much like an emotion.

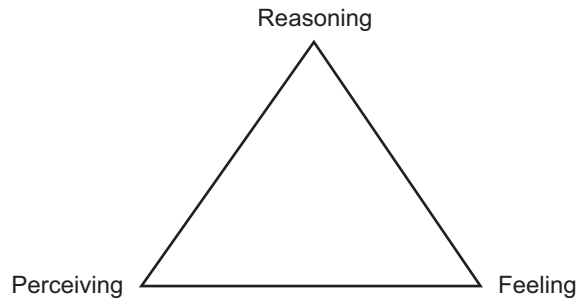
Therefore (though my good friend and colleague Jay Adams balks at the suggestion), it is not entirely wrong to substitute "I feel" for "I believe." Of course, when people say, "I feel that X is the case," they are often seeking to avoid responsibility to objective truth; that is Adams's point, and it is quite right. But one may use that language without so intending to flee responsibility. That language does, moreover, say something true about the nature of knowledge. Having a belief is, indeed, having a certain kind of feeling about a proposition. And when that feeling leads us rightly, that belief, that feeling, constitutes knowledge.

### *Emotion as a Perspective*

Our previous discussions indicate that emotion is an important factor in knowing, one that interacts with reason in important ways. There is a mutual dependence between reason and emotion. But the considerations in the previous section suggest that emotion is more than a mere "factor" in knowledge; it is a perspective on knowledge as a whole. "Feeling that p is true" is "believing that p is true," viewing that belief from a certain perspective. And a right (i.e., justified and true) feeling is a right belief, that is, knowledge.

Reasoning and feeling, then, are coterminous. To reason is to experience certain feelings concerning propositions. To emote is to draw from the data of experience certain logical applications to our subjectivity (which subjectivity is itself a perspective on the whole of reality).

Reasoning, perceiving, feeling can be seen, respectively, as normative, situational, and existential perspectives on the human mind. We speak of reasoning when we want to focus on the mind's use of various principles and laws. We speak of perceiving when we want to focus on its access to the objective world. And we speak of feeling when we want to focus on the integrity of our subjectivity in the cognitive process. See fig. 32.1.



**Fig. 32.1. Perspectives on the Human Mind**

### *Emotion and Theology*

Thus, emotion is unavoidably present in all theological work. It is important that we not stifle our emotional capacities by a model of theology that is too rigidly academic. We must be free in our theological work to make the proper emotional response to God's Word and to its applications. Otherwise, our theological knowledge itself will be in jeopardy.

The content of Scripture is not merely emotive, certainly. (The attempt by the logical positivists to classify all religious language as *emotive* seems rather silly today, even to those fairly sympathetic to the positivist movement.) But every part of it is emotive in the sense that every part is intended by God to generate a particular emotional response. He wants us to hate the evil, to rejoice in the good, to fear the threats, to embrace the promises.<sup>13</sup> That emotive content, as well as the conceptual content, must be applied to God's people. That, too, is the work of theology. If I read Romans 11:33–36 (“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! . . .”) in a monotone, avoiding all trace of emotion, clearly I have not communicated the content of the verses very well, even if I have read every word perfectly. Similarly, if I expound those verses in a commentary or sermon, without somehow taking account of the depth of feeling there, I have obviously missed something enormously important. Systematic theology, too, must not ignore the emotive content of Scripture. This is not to say that theology must always be uttered, as it were, in an excited tone. But the theologian must *take account* of the Bible's emotive tone, as he would take account of any other biblical datum.

13. See WCF 16.2.

Romans 11:33–36, for instance, makes it plain that the incomprehensibility of God is an *exciting* doctrine. It is a significant theological question to ask what generates this excitement and what can be done to restore that excitement in our own time.<sup>14</sup>

### *Cultivating Godly Emotions*

A theologian, therefore, ought to have godly emotions. He ought to be the sort of person who rejoices in what is good, who hates what is evil. He ought to be able to express and communicate that joy or hate infectiously.

To go into detail on how godly emotions are cultivated would take us afield. Some would argue that we cannot change our feelings *per se*; we can change feelings, they say, only by changing our behavior, our habits. I would reply that changing one's habits is important, but that presupposes growth in knowledge, Christian rationality, perception, imagination, will, and so on. Transformation of the emotions is part of the whole "package" of sanctification, transformation of the person as a whole. Growth in any one area can and will strengthen all the others.

In any case, it will not do to say that we "cannot" change how we feel. God demands change, and in one way or another, he will provide the means of change.

### **Imagination**

Imagination has a rather bad reputation in some orthodox Christian circles. "Imagination" in the KJV OT generally refers to the inclinations of the rebellious heart (Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Deut. 29:19; 31:21; Jer. 3:17; 7:24; etc.—often in Jeremiah). That is not the normal meaning of the word in modern English, yet some of the stigma from the older usage still seems to attach to the word today among some Christians. I hope to rehabilitate the term somewhat.

*Imagination* refers to our ability to think about things that are not. We can think about the past, though the past is by definition no longer present. We can think of possible or probable futures, though the future cannot be perceived. Or we can imagine mere alternative states of affairs, whether or not they have existed or could exist in the present or future. Thus, our imaginations allow us to think of fantasy, of conditionals that are contrary to fact, of "what-if" scenarios.

Imagination therefore has much to do with creativity, with art. Many have sought to describe theology as a kind of science, but that model needs at least to be supplemented by others, such as "theology as art." Imagination has much to do with attempting to do things in a new or different way.

In some theological circles, creativity itself has a bad name—perhaps related in the minds of some to those "evil imaginations" of Jeremiah's prophecies, or perhaps merely offending conservative sensibilities. Some intelligent people, however, have also objected to the presence of creativity in theology, giving grounds: Charles Hodge said

14. Readers will have to judge whether the account of God's incomprehensibility in this volume (chapter 29) is suitably excited and/or exciting.

once that at Princeton Seminary (“Old” Princeton, of course) no new ideas had ever been advanced, and he hoped that none ever would be. Well, in a sense he was right. The work of theology is to proclaim the old ideas of Scripture and nothing else. But the work of theology is, indeed, to *proclaim* those old ideas to a new generation. This involves application, and that involves newness, since every new situation is somewhat different from its predecessors. This task involves interaction between Scripture and the subjectivities of human beings. But orchestrating that interaction requires art and creativity. Thus we are back to imagination. Imagination is indispensable to theology.

We have seen that theology requires attention to its technical terms, models, order of topics, style and form, central focus, applications to new audiences. In all these areas, imagination obviously provides important assistance. But imagination is also involved in *every* case of theological concept-formation. Consider my discussion of miracle (chapter 7) as an example. The English word *miracle* does not correspond precisely to any Hebrew or Greek term in the Bible. (That is, to a greater or lesser extent, the case with all English terms.) There are several Hebrew terms and three or four Greek terms that are translated “miracle,” but these are also translated in other ways and can be used to denote events that from our point of view are not miraculous. Further, there are events described in Scripture that are miraculous on nearly everyone’s view, but concerning which no distinctive miracle terms are used (e.g., 1 Kings 17:17–24). How, then, can we formulate a biblical concept of miracle?

If we cannot get our concept by studying the usage of miracle terms, perhaps we should try to study the miraculous events themselves as set forth in Scripture. But how do we know what events are miraculous until we already have a concept of miracle? It seems that we cannot look for an answer unless we already know it!

Well, that problem has philosophical ramifications that I will not try to deal with here. But practically, the only answer seems to be that we must formulate some concept of miracle *before* we systematically investigate the biblical text. Here is another form of the hermeneutical circle. We seek a biblical concept of miracle from the Bible’s own narrations and explanations of actual miracles. But to decide which narratives and explanations are relevant to our study, we must begin by looking at those passages that *seem to us* to be talking about miracles. We must in one sense “begin with” our own idea of what miracle is.

Is such reasoning “autonomous”? Is it autonomous to determine theological concepts out of our own heads and use those to interpret Scripture? Well, not necessarily. Consider: (1) Even that initial concept of miracle that precedes serious Bible study is usually greatly influenced by Scripture. In Western culture, biblical miracles form a certain paradigm for the general concept of miracle. That is not to deny that Western thinkers often make serious errors in the definition of miracle, but they are usually at least in the right ballpark. (2) The initial concept, wherever it comes from, is just that—an initial concept. Our goal is, or should be, to refine it by continual interaction with Scripture. An initial concept should not be an ultimate presupposition. It should be quite tentative, open to the correction of Scripture—which, indeed, is our ultimate

presupposition. (Many modern theologians make the mistake of using as ultimate presuppositions ideas that deserve to be only initial concepts.)

For example, we might use as our initial concept David Hume's view of miracle as a "violation of the laws of nature" and pick out as biblical examples only those narratives that seem to us to be violations of nature. But in the course of our study we would find that *natural law* is not a biblical concept, that events are never said to be miraculous by contrast with natural law, that the notion of a *violation* compromises the freedom of our sovereign God to do what he pleases in the world. Thus, our initial Humeanism must be revised in a more biblical direction. We will then use our "more biblical concept" to gain an even better understanding of the biblical teaching concerning miracle.

We can see, in any case, the importance of imagination. For the theologian must always set before himself, before he formally begins his study, one or more *possible* ways of answering his questions—possibilities that will guide his study of Scripture. In conceiving of possibilities, imagination is crucial.

It is therefore important that imagination be *godly*. That is, the imagination ought to be saturated in biblical teachings and thought patterns so that when an unanswered question is raised, the theologian will consider possibilities that are consistent with Scripture, those that are rendered likely by other biblical teachings.

Is imagination another epistemological perspective? Well, imagination is our faculty for knowing things that "are not": the past, the future, the possible as opposed to the actual, the impossible as opposed to the possible, the fantastic. In one sense, then, it does not embrace all human knowledge. Yet the point has often been made that humans know what is only by contrast with what is not. You cannot know that a book is on the table unless you know what it would mean for the book *not* to be on the table. And the reverse is also true. So positive knowledge involves negative knowledge and vice versa. And a perfect positive knowledge would include a positive negative knowledge.

Further, our concepts of possibility deeply influence our knowledge of actuality. Since Rudolf Bultmann does not believe that miracles are possible, he does not believe that any actually happened. Knowledge that something is the case presupposes a knowledge that it *might* be the case.

And as I said earlier, imagination is important in memory and anticipation—in knowing past and future. But how can we know the present if we cannot relate that present to the past and future? If we have no knowledge of what has been happening, how can we make any sense of what is happening now? And if we have no idea about the goal of events, where they are going, surely our knowledge of present events is at best highly defective. In fact, it is even difficult to conceive of the present merely as present. The moment we try to conceive of precisely what is "happening now," the events we are thinking about become past events. The present, as Augustine pointed out, can begin to look like an indivisible instant that cannot be characterized at all—for when we characterize it, it has become past. Perhaps, then, imagination, as our road to the past and the future, is also our only road to the present. Perhaps sensation, reason, emotion are only different forms of, perspectives on, imagination. Therefore,

if imagination is not a perspective, at least it comes close. It is involved in every act of belief or knowledge.

There is a great need for imagination among theologians today. The crying need is for fresh applications to situations too long neglected, for translating the gospel into new forms. The artistic gift may be well employed in the theological profession.

## Will

Will is our capacity to make choices, commitments, decisions. Philosophers have often debated whether intellect or will is “primary”: do we make choices based on our knowledge, or does our knowledge arise from a choice to believe?

Well, as you might guess, I think there is truth in both assertions. Our choices do presuppose some knowledge—knowledge of the alternatives, knowledge of our own values, knowledge of data. On the other hand, all knowledge also presupposes choices: choices of how to interpret data, choices of values (criteria of truth and falsity, right and wrong), the choice whether to make a judgment or to suspend judgment, the choice to believe a proposition or its contradictory, the choice whether to acknowledge or to suppress our beliefs, the choice of how strongly we will believe, that is, how much that choice will influence our lives. Every belief, then, is an act of will, and every act of will is an expression, an application, of our knowledge (see John 7:17). Knowing and doing are one. (Recall the biblical equations of knowledge with obedience, chapter 28.)

Will is also involved in perception and emotion, which merely serves to underscore the point made above. It is involved in perception: we *choose* to pay attention to sensations or to ignore them. (Remember Mavrodes’s example of the wolf in the woods.) We choose to interpret sensations in one way rather than another. (And remember: there is no sharp line between the interpretation of a sensation and the sensation itself—at least from our point of view.) Will is also involved in emotion. The same event will move different people in different ways. A thief will be joyful over a successful heist; his victims will be mournful. The emotional difference results from different choices made—differences in lifestyle, in values, in beliefs, in religious allegiance.

Will, then, is another perspective on knowledge in general and on reason, perception, and emotion as aspects of knowledge. Which perspective does it fall under? Well, it doesn’t much matter, since each perspective includes the others. But I would be inclined to make it another aspect of the existential perspective alongside emotion. It could be argued that will is a function of an individual’s strongest emotion: my choice is what I most feel like doing. (Advocates of libertarian freedom, such as H. D. Lewis and C. A. Campbell, would disagree, finding in will something radically mysterious, uncaused, distinct from all emotions.)

## Habits, Skills

Habits are those choices that we are accustomed to making, those choices that we make “by force of habit,” as we say, if not specifically moved to do otherwise. When those habits enable us to perform useful tasks, they are called skills.



Habits are important in our knowledge. Presuppositions are habits—values that we customarily bring to bear on questions of truth and right. We develop habits of reasoning in certain ways, of interpreting data in certain ways, of feeling certain ways, of imagining certain kinds of possibilities rather than others, of making certain kinds of choices. Thus, right or wrong choices in the past are reinforced by being repeated over and over. Godly decisions replicate themselves, leading to greater knowledge and sanctification (Rom. 12:1f.; Phil. 1:9f.; Heb. 5:11–14). Ungodly habits, on the contrary, lead to worse and worse error, worse and worse sin (Rom. 1). Habits are hard to break; breaking them usually requires pain. The theologian must be prepared to endure that pain if necessary, even if that may include retracting earlier positions and suffering academic disrespect.

Skills in knowledge are called *wisdom* in Scripture. These are the good epistemic habits by which we are able to understand the truth and to put that truth to work in life. Wisdom comes through Christ by means of his Word and Spirit. Godly wisdom is sharply different from the wisdom of the world (1 Cor. 1–2), for it is based on the Word of God, not man’s autonomous thinking.

Wisdom, however, is the skill of “knowing how” rather than “knowing that.” Both these kinds of knowing are important. A football quarterback must master his playbook (knowing that), but he must also be able to do the things required by the playbook (knowing how). Lacking either form of knowledge, he will not do his job properly.

At one level, it is possible to “know that” without “knowing how.” The quarterback might memorize the playbook, but be unable to evade the oncoming tacklers. So someone might memorize the content of Scripture and the Reformed confessions, but be hopelessly weak in the face of temptation.

On the other hand, even “knowing that” requires skills—in our examples, academic skills, skills of memorizing. And “knowing how” presupposes “knowing that.” A skillful quarterback is one who “knows that”—for example, that he must move in a certain direction to avoid the tackler—and who applies that knowledge to his life. Wisdom and propositional knowledge, therefore, are perspectively related. Each is a help in remedying false concepts of the other.

Skills are important in theology as in all other disciplines: skills with languages, skills in exegesis, logic, communication, dealing with people’s needs. Scripture also speaks much about wisdom as the skill of godly living (James 3:13ff.; cf. Proverbs, *passim*). Without godliness, wisdom is of no value. Here again, God’s Word correlates knowledge with obedience.

## Intuition

When we know something, but don’t know *how* we know it, we are inclined to say that we know it “by intuition.” Thus, intuition is a kind of “asylum of ignorance.” But I prefer to look at it as an index of the mysteriousness of knowledge. Knowledge, like God himself and all his creations, is incomprehensible. We can gain some insight into it through his revelation. But we reach a place where our analysis ends, though all our questions are not answered. Hence another area in which knowledge requires faith.



Some specific mysteries: (1) The chain of justification cannot go on forever. If someone asks me why I believe Sacramento is the capital of California, I can point to a reference work. If he asks how I know that reference work is telling the truth, I can (perhaps!) refer to the credentials of the authors or the good reputation of the publisher. If he asks how I know those credentials or reputations, I might be able to cite further grounds, reasons, or arguments based on perception, reason, emotion, and so forth. But if I am asked how I know that my reason is leading me in the right direction, it is difficult to answer except circularly: by offering another rational argument. At some point we are forced into a corner where we say, “I just know.” That is *intuition*. Ultimate presuppositions, in that sense, are known intuitively, although they are verified by circular arguments of various sorts. This is true not only of Christianity, but of all other systems of thought. The human mind is finite; it cannot present an infinitely long argument and give an exhaustive reason for anything. It must, at some point, begin with a faith commitment, whether in the true God or in an idol.

(2) Not only at the beginning of the chain of justification, but also at every point in the argument, we encounter God’s mystery. Nothing physically forces us to draw logical conclusions. We draw them because, first, we find ourselves agreeing with them, and second, we sense a moral demand upon us to affirm them. At every point we make a choice—either in obedience to or in rebellion against those moral norms. What is our faculty for gaining knowledge of these imperatives? All the faculties are involved; it is the heart itself that makes the choice. But if anyone asks what it is that reveals to us the final decision that we ought to make, having integrated all the data from different sources, I suppose the answer would have to be “intuition.” Our sense of when to stop investigating, our cognitive rest, as I said earlier, is like a feeling. But the term *intuition* may also be properly used for it, if we hesitate to sound emotionalistic!

## Key Terms

Personalism  
 Hermeneutical circle  
 Faculty  
 Heart  
 Primacy of the intellect  
 Reason (two definitions)  
 Sensation  
 Perception  
 Experience  
 Imagination  
 Will  
 Habits  
 Skills  
 Wisdom  
 Intuition

## Study Questions

1. Narrate Ian Ramsey's courtroom illustration. What point is he trying to make about theological language?
2. "The resurrection of Jesus has nothing to do with the resuscitation of a corpse!" Reply, making relevant distinctions.
3. Do you believe in the *primacy of the intellect*? Why or why not?
4. Frame proposes to look at all the faculties of the human mind as perspectives on the knowledge of the whole person. What sorts of views is he opposing in this argument? Explain; evaluate.
5. Should theology be rational? Discuss.
6. "To say that theology ought to be rational, really, is no different from saying that it ought to be scriptural or that it ought to be true." Explain; evaluate.
7. "Therefore, when someone tells me that reason must be the judge of theological ideas, I can agree with him in a sense." Explain; evaluate.
8. "Mavrodes also argues that experiencing X involves making some judgment about X." Explain; evaluate.
9. Describe the "more than conquerors" illustration. What point was the professor trying to make? What do you think about it? How does Frame make use of it?
10. Is it wrong to "follow your feelings"? Discuss, making proper distinctions.
11. Is it wrong to make use of our imagination in theology? Discuss.
12. Discuss the relation between intellect and will.
13. Discuss the role of habits in knowledge.
14. What is intuition, and what use does it have in theology?

## Memory Verses

**Ps. 9:1:** I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart;  
I will recount all of your wonderful deeds.

**Ps. 37:4:** Delight yourself in the LORD,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

**Ps. 94:9:** He who planted the ear, does he not hear?  
He who formed the eye, does he not see?

**John 7:17:** If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.

**Rom. 11:33–36:** Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,  
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him  
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.  
Amen.

**1 John 1:1–3:** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

### Resources for Further Study

Frame, John M. *DKG*, 167–346.

Mavrodes, George. *Belief in God*. New York, Random House, 1970.

Poythress, Vern S. *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013.

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Reymond, Robert. *The Justification of Knowledge*. Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976.

## HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?

PEOPLE HAVE SOMETIMES THOUGHT that ethics and theology are very different disciplines. But many great theology books, such as John Calvin's *Institutes* and Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology*, together with church catechisms such as the HC, the WLC, and the WSC, contain expositions of the Ten Commandments. When you think about it, you can see that ethics is certainly part of theology. For one thing, texts such as 2 Timothy 3:16–17 teach clearly that the purpose of the Bible is to produce good works:

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.

Redemption itself, the main theme of the Bible, is important not for its own sake, but so that the redeemed might glorify God in their actions:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8–10)

We are not saved by works, but we are certainly saved *for* works.

Furthermore, all theology *is* ethics. Throughout this book, we have been studying what we *ought* to believe. That *ought* is an ethical *ought*. Certainly, if it is this important to know what we ought to believe, it is equally important to know what we ought to do. Indeed, doing is a wider category than believing. Belief is one of the things we do. So perhaps we should consider ethics to be a broader discipline of which theology is a part. But I prefer to look at them as equally extensive, for as I argued in chapter 1, theology is the application of the Word of God, by persons, to all areas of life. That definition certainly includes ethics as well as theology. I define ethics, therefore, as “theology, viewed as a means of determining what human persons, acts, and attitudes receive God’s blessing.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Much of the following material is taken from chapter 3 of my *DCL*.

## Lordship and Ethics

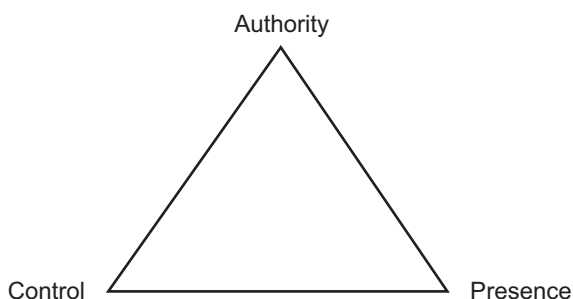
So ethics, like theology, is based on God's lordship, in several ways:

### *How God Governs Our Ethical Life*

God governs our ethical life in three ways. First, by his control, God plans and rules nature and history so that certain human acts are conducive to his glory and others are not.

Second, by his authority, he speaks to us clearly, telling us what norms govern our behavior.

Third, by his covenant presence, he commits himself to be with us in our ethical walk, blessing our obedience, punishing our disobedience. But his presence also provides us with two important means of ethical guidance: (1) Because he is present with us, he is able to serve as a moral example. "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2; cf. Matt. 5:48). (2) He, and he alone, is able to provide, for sinners, the power to do good, to set us free from the power of sin (John 8:34–36). See fig. 52.1.



**Fig. 52.1. God's Lordship Attributes**

### *Necessary and Sufficient Criteria of Good Works*

What is a good work? Reformed theologians have addressed this question in response to the *problem of the virtuous pagan*. Reformed theology teaches that human beings by nature are *totally depraved* (chapter 36). This means not that they are as bad as they can be, but that it is impossible for them to please God in any of their thoughts, words, or deeds (Rom. 8:8). So apart from grace, none of us can do anything good in the sight of God. Yet all around us we see non-Christians who seem, at least, to be doing good works: they love their families, work hard at their jobs, contribute to the needs of the poor, show kindness to their neighbors. It seems that these pagans are virtuous by normal measures.

Reformed theology, however, questions these normal measures. It acknowledges that unbelievers often contribute to the betterment of society. These contributions are called *civic righteousness* and come from God's common grace, which restrains their

sin. Their civic righteousness does not please God, however, because it is altogether devoid of three characteristics:

Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God: and yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God. (WCF 16.7)

Note the three necessary ingredients: (1) a heart purified by faith, (2) obedience to God's Word, and (3) the right end, the glory of God.

The first is a plainly biblical emphasis. The confession cites Hebrews 11:4 and some other texts. Romans 14:23b also comes to mind: "For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." In Jesus' arguments with the Pharisees, too, it is evident that our righteousness must not be merely external (see esp. Matt. 23:25–26). In describing the necessity of an internal motive of good works, Scripture refers not only to faith, but especially to love, as in 1 Corinthians 13:1–3 and many other passages. We learn from these passages that love is not only necessary for good works, but also sufficient: that is, if our act is motivated by a true love of God and neighbor, we have fulfilled the law (Matt. 22:40; Rom. 13:8; Gal. 5:14).

The second element of good works, according to the confession, is obedience to God's Word, to his law. Note the references in the previous section to the importance of obeying God's Word. Certainly, obedience to God's Word is a necessary condition of good works, for disobedience to God's law is the very definition of sin (1 John 3:4). It is also a sufficient condition: for if we have obeyed God perfectly, we have done everything necessary to be good in his sight. Of course, among God's commands are his command to love (see the paragraph above) and to seek his glory (see the next paragraph).

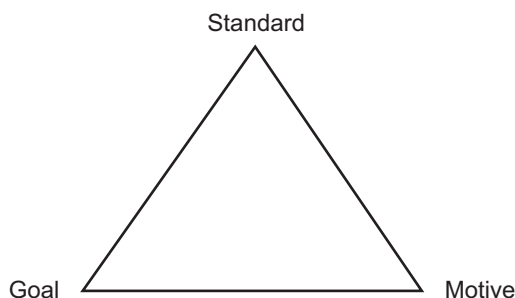
The third element is the right end, the glory of God. Ethical literature has often discussed the *summum bonum*, or "highest good," for human beings. What is it that we are trying to achieve in our ethical actions? Many secular writers have said that this goal is pleasure or human happiness. But Scripture says that in everything we do, we should be seeking the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Certainly, any act must glorify God if it is to be good, so seeking God's glory is a necessary condition of good works. And if the act does glorify God, then it is good; so it is a sufficient condition.<sup>2</sup>

So there are three necessary and sufficient conditions of good works: right motive, right standard, and right goal.<sup>3</sup> Right motive corresponds to the lordship attribute of

2. There is a sense, of course, in which even wicked acts bring glory to God, for God uses the wickedness of people to bring about his good purposes (Rom. 8:28). But the wicked person does not *intend* to glorify God by his actions. So 1 Corinthians 10:31 speaks of intent as well as action. Cf. Matt. 6:33.

3. Cornelius Van Til, in his *Christian-Theistic Ethics* (Philadelphia: Den Dulk Foundation, 1971), was the first to think through the significance of this confessional triad for ethical methodology. I gratefully acknowledge

covenant presence: for it is God's Spirit dwelling in us who places faith and love in our hearts. Right standard corresponds, obviously, to God's lordship attribute of authority. And right goal corresponds to the lordship attribute of control, for it is God's creation and providence that determines what acts will and will not lead to God's glory. God determines the consequences of our actions, and he determines which actions lead to our *summum bonum*. See fig. 52.2.



**Fig. 52.2. Biblical Reasons to Do Good Works**

### ***Biblical Reasons to Do Good Works***

#### *The History of Redemption*

Scripture uses basically three means to encourage believers to do good works. First, it appeals to the history of redemption. This is the chief motivation in the Decalogue itself: God has redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt; therefore, they should obey.

In the NT, the writers often urge us to do good works because of what Christ did to redeem us. Jesus himself urges that the disciples “love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (John 13:34). Jesus’ love, ultimately displayed on the cross, commands our response of love to one another. Another well-known appeal is found in Colossians 3:1–3:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

When Christ died, we died to sin; when he rose, we rose to righteousness. We are one with Christ in his death and resurrection. So those historic facts have moral implications. We should live in accord with the new life, given to us by God’s grace when we rose with Christ. See also Rom. 6:1–23; 13:11–12; 1 Cor. 6:20; 10:11; 15:58; Eph. 4:1–5, 25, 32; 5:25–33; Phil. 2:1–11; Heb. 12:1–28; 1 Peter 2:1–3; 4:1–6.

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his influence on my formulation here. In fact, Van Til’s discussion was the seed thought behind all the triads in this book, and in my four-volume *Theology of Lordship* series.



So the HC emphasizes that our good works come from *gratitude*. They are not attempts to gain God's favor, but rather grateful responses to the favor that he has already shown to us.<sup>4</sup>

But our focus on the history of redemption is not limited to the past. It is also an anticipation of what God will do for us in the future. God's promises of future blessing also motivate us to obey him. Jesus commands us, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33).<sup>5</sup>

This motivation emphasizes God's control, for history is the sphere of God's control, the outworking of his eternal plan.

### *The Authority of God's Commands*

Scripture also motivates our good works by calling attention to God's commands. Jesus said that he did not come to abrogate the law, but to fulfill it, so

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. 5:19)

So in their preaching, Jesus and the apostles often appeal to the commandments of the law, and to their own commandments (as in Josh. 1:8–9; Matt. 7:12; 12:5; 19:18–19; 22:36–40; 23:23; Luke 10:26; John 8:17; 13:34–35; 14:15, 21; Rom. 8:4; 12:19; 13:8–10; 1 Cor. 5:13; 9:8–9; 14:34, 37; 2 Cor. 8:15; 9:9; Gal. 4:21–22; Eph. 4:20–24; 6:1–3; 1 Thess. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; Titus 2:1; James 1:22–25; 2:8–13; 1 Peter 1:16; 1 John 2:3–5; 3:24; 5:2).

God's commandment is sufficient to place an obligation upon us. We should need no other incentive. But God gives us other motivations as well, because we are fallen, and because he loves us as his redeemed children.

This motivation reflects God's lordship attribute of authority. We should obey him simply because he has the right to absolute obedience.

### *The Presence of the Spirit*

Third, Scripture calls us to a godly life, based on the activity of the Spirit within us. This motivation is based on God's lordship attribute of presence. Paul says:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (Gal. 5:16–17)

4. This motivation is not what John Piper calls the "debtors' ethic," in which we do good works in a vain attempt to pay God back for our redemption. We can, of course, never do that, and we should not try to do it. See John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1995), and the summary discussion on pages 33–38 of his *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2002). But gratefulness, nonetheless, is the only legitimate response to the grace that God has given us in Christ.

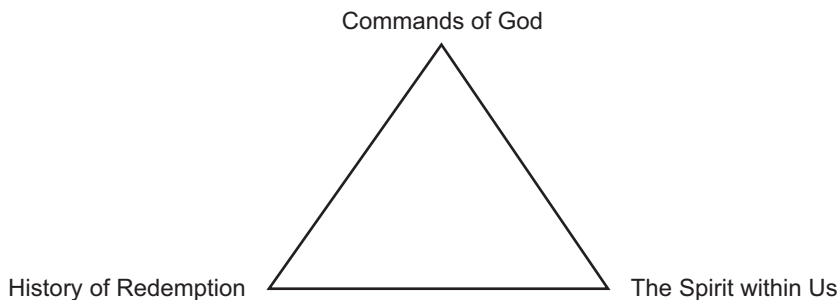
5. This is what Piper calls "future grace" in the works cited in the previous note.

God has placed his Spirit within us, to give us new life, and therefore new ethical inclinations. There is still conflict among our impulses, but we have the resources to follow the desires of the Spirit, rather than those of the flesh. So Paul appeals to the inner change that God has worked in us by regeneration and sanctification. In Ephesians 5:8–11, he puts it this way:

At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

In the following verses, Paul continues to expound on the ethical results of this transformation. Cf. also Rom. 8:1–17; Gal. 5:22–26.

So Scripture motivates us to do good works by the history of redemption, the commandments of God, and the work of the Spirit within us, corresponding to God's lordship attributes of control, authority, and presence, respectively. See fig. 52.3.



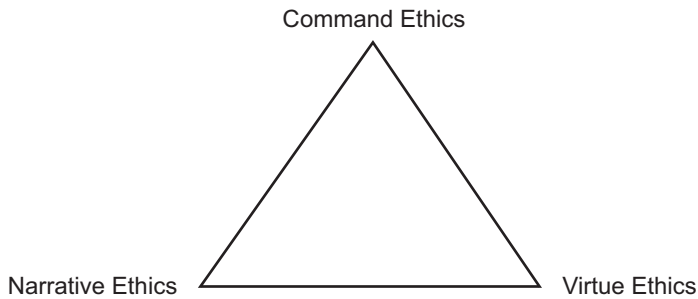
**Fig. 52.3. Biblical Motivations for Good Works**

### *Types of Christian Ethics*

These three motivations have led Christian thinkers to develop three main types of Christian ethics: command ethics, narrative ethics, and virtue ethics. Command ethics emphasizes the authority of God's moral law. Narrative ethics emphasizes the history of redemption. It teaches ethics by telling the story of salvation. Virtue ethics discusses the inner character of the regenerate person, focusing on virtues listed in passages such as Romans 5:1–5; Galatians 5:22–23; Colossians 3:12–17.

Sometimes a writer will pit these types of ethics against one another, designating one as superior to the others. I don't see any biblical justification for that kind of argument. As we saw, Scripture uses all these methods to motivate righteous behavior. And it is hard to see how any of these could function without the others. It is God's commands that define the virtues and enable us to evaluate the

behavior of characters in the narrative. It is the narrative that shows us how God saves us from sin and enables us to keep his law from the heart. And the virtues define what the redeemed person looks like when he obeys God from the heart. See fig. 52.4.



**Fig. 52.4. Three Types of Christian Ethics**

### *What Really Matters*

We can see the same triadic structure in the actual content of biblical ethics. Let us first note sayings of the apostle Paul that intend to show the highest priorities of the Christian life. In these passages, he is opposing Judaizers, who think that one must be circumcised to enter the kingdom of God. He replies that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is important, but rather the following:

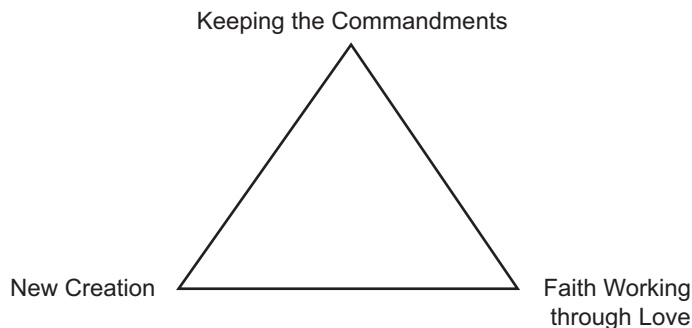
For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. (1 Cor. 7:19)

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. (Gal. 5:6)

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. (Gal. 6:15)

As in our previous discussion, there is a reference in 1 Corinthians 7:19 to keeping the commandments of God. It corresponds to God's lordship attribute of authority. "Faith working through love" in Galatians 5:6 is the work of the Spirit within us, and refers to God's covenant presence. "New creation" in Galatians 6:15 is the great redemptive-historical change brought about by Jesus' death and resurrection, the powerful work of God's sovereign control over history.<sup>6</sup> See fig. 52.5.

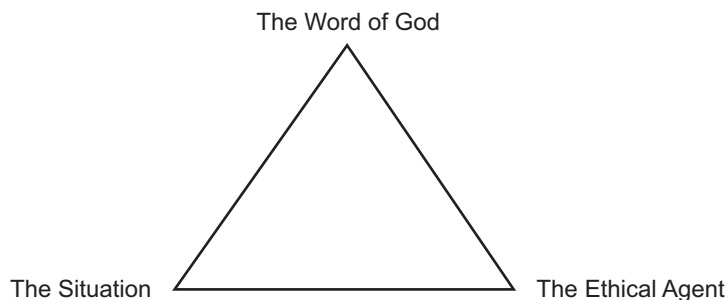
6. Thanks to my colleague Prof. Reggie Kidd for bringing these texts to my attention.



**Fig. 52.5. What Is Most Important**

### *Factors in Ethical Judgment*

Now imagine that you are a pastor or counselor, and someone comes to your office with an ethical problem. Basically, you will need to discuss three things: the situation, the Word of God, and the inquirer himself. See fig. 52.6.



**Fig. 52.6. Factors in Ethical Judgment**

Normally, we ask first about the situation: “What’s your problem? What brings you to see me?” This question is ultimately about God’s lordship attribute of control, for God is the One who brings situations about.

Then we ask, “What does God’s Word say about the problem?” This discussion invokes God’s lordship attribute of authority.

Third, we focus on the inquirer, asking how he needs to change in order to apply God’s solution to the problem. At this point, we are thinking especially about God’s presence within the individual. If the person is a non-Christian, then obviously he needs to be born again by God’s Spirit before he can apply the Word of God to his life. If the person is a believer, he may need to grow in certain ways before he will be able to deal with the issue before him.

We note in such conversations that each of these subjects influences the other two. We may start with a “presentation problem”: “My wife is angry all the time.” But as we move to a focus on God’s Word, gaining a better understanding of Scripture, we may gain a better understanding of the problem as well. For example, Scripture tells us to remove the log from our own eye before trying to get the speck out of another’s eye (Matt. 7:3). So the inquirer may come to see that his wife is angry because he has provoked her. So the problem now is not only in her, but in him as well. Reflection on God’s Word has changed our understanding of the problem.

But this new understanding of the problem pushes us to look at more and different Scripture texts than we considered in the beginning. As we understand the problem better, we understand better how Scripture relates to it. Scripture and the situation illumine one another.

Then when we move to the third question and ask the inquirer to look within, he may see even more things in himself that have provoked his wife’s anger. So the problem, the Word, and the inquirer have all illumined one another. Evidently you cannot understand your problem, or yourself, adequately until you have seen it through what John Calvin called the “spectacles of Scripture.” And you can’t understand the problem until you see yourself as a part of it.

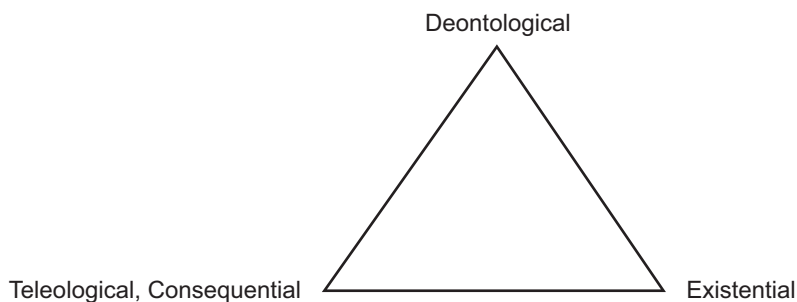
And you can’t understand God’s Word rightly until you can use it, until you see how it applies to this situation and that. This is a more difficult point, but I think it is important. If someone says that he understands “you shall not steal,” but has no idea to what situations that commandment applies (such as embezzling, cheating on taxes, shoplifting), then he hasn’t really understood the biblical command. Understanding Scripture, understanding its meaning, is *applying* it to situations. A person who understands the Bible is a person who is able to use the Bible to answer his questions, to guide his life. As I argued in chapter 6, theology is application.

### ***Perspectives on the Discipline of Ethics***

In general, then, ethical judgment always involves the application of a *norm* to a *situation* by a *person*. These three factors can also be seen as overall perspectives on the study of ethics, just as in chapters 1–6 I argued that theology may be seen from three perspectives; see fig. 52.7.

1. *The Situational Perspective.* In this perspective, we examine situations, problems. This study focuses on God’s actions in creation and providence that have made the situations what they are, hence God’s lordship attribute of control. The situational perspective asks, “What are the best means of accomplishing God’s purposes?” That is, how can we take the present situation and change it so that more of God’s purposes are achieved?

God’s ultimate purpose is his own glory (1 Cor. 10:31). But God has more specific goals as well: the filling and subduing of the earth (Gen. 1:28); the evangelization and nurture of people of all nations (Matt. 28:19–20); the success of his kingdom (6:33).



**Fig. 52.7. Perspectives on the Study of Ethics**

The situational perspective explores the consequences of our actions. Under the situational perspective, we ask, “If we do X, will that enhance the glory of God and his blessing on his people?” So we seek the best means to the ends that please God. So we might describe ethics from this perspective as a Christian *teleological*, or *consequential*, ethic.

2. *The Normative Perspective.* Under the normative perspective, we focus on Scripture more directly. Our purpose is to determine our duty, our ethical norm, our obligation. So we bring our problem to the Bible and ask, “What does Scripture say about this situation?” At this point we invoke God’s lordship attribute of authority. Since we are focusing on duties and obligations, we might call this perspective a Christian *deontological* ethic.

3. *The Existential Perspective.* The existential perspective focuses on the ethical agent, the person or persons who are trying to find out what to do. Under this perspective, the ethical question becomes: “How must I change if I am to do God’s will?” Here the focus is inward, examining our heart-relation to God. It deals with our regeneration, our sanctification, our inner character. These are all the product of God’s lordship-presence within us. We may call this reasoning a Christian *existential* ethic.

### ***Interdependence of the Perspectives***

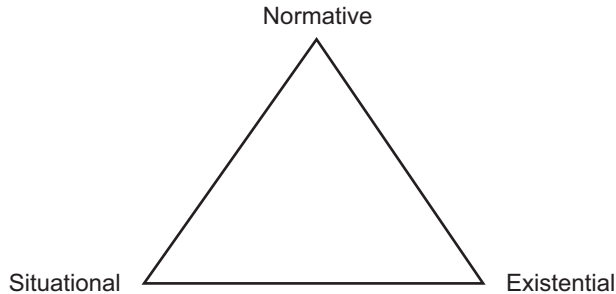
Now, we saw that knowledge of our situation, norm, and self are interdependent. You can’t understand the situation fully until you know what Scripture says about it, and until you understand your own role in the situation. You can’t understand yourself fully apart from Scripture, or apart from the situation that is your environment. And you can’t understand Scripture unless you can apply it to situations and to yourself.

So the situational perspective includes the other two. When we understand the situation rightly, we see that Scripture and the self are elements of that situation, facts to be taken account of. So we can’t rightly assess the situation unless we assess the other two factors.

Similarly the normative perspective: to understand Scripture is to understand its applications to the situation and the self.

And the existential perspective: as we ask questions about our inner life, we find that the situation and God's revelation are both elements of our personal experience, apart from which we cannot make sense of ourselves.

So each perspective necessitates consideration of the others. Each includes the others. You can picture the content of ethics as a triangle; see fig. 52.8.



**Fig. 52.8. Perspectives on the Content of Ethics**

Now, you can study the ethical triangle beginning at any of the three corners. But as you advance through the triangle, you will eventually meet up with the other corners. That is to say, if you start to study the situation, you will eventually find yourself studying the norm and the ethical agent. Same with the other corners.

That's why I describe these approaches as *perspectives*. I don't think of them as "parts" of ethics, as though you could divide the triangle into three distinct parts and then do one part first, another second, and another third. No, you can't really study the situation without the norm, and so on.

So the triangle represents the whole subject matter of ethics, and the corners represent different entrances to that subject matter, different emphases, different initial questions. But the goal is always to cover the whole triangle with regard to any ethical question.

In the end, then, the three perspectives coincide. A true understanding of the situation will not contradict a true understanding of the Word or the self. And a true understanding of each will include true understandings of the others.

But if the three are ultimately identical, why do we need three? Why not just one? The reason has to do with our finitude and sin. God knows all truth simultaneously, from every possible perspective. He knows what the whole universe looks like to the eye of the snail on my window ledge. But you and I are finite, not omniscient. We can see only a portion of reality at a time. That is to say, we can see the world from only one perspective at a time. For that reason, it is good for us to move from one perspective to another. Just as the blind man had to move from the elephant's leg, to its trunk, to its torso, to its head and tail in order to get an adequate picture of the elephant, so we need to move from one perspective to another to get a full understanding of God's world.



And we are sinners in Adam. According to Romans 1, that means that we have a tendency to suppress the truth, to exchange the truth for a lie, to try to push God out of our knowledge. Salvation turns us in a different direction, so that we are able to seek the truth. But the continued presence of sin in our minds and hearts means that we need to keep checking up on ourselves, and multiplying perspectives is one helpful way to do that.

In ethics, the three perspectives I have mentioned are especially helpful. The three perspectives serve as checks and balances on one another. The normative perspective can correct mistakes in my understanding of the situational. But the opposite is also true: my understanding of the norm can be improved when I better understand the situation to which the norm is to be applied. Same, *mutatis mutandis*, for the existential perspective.

Multiperspectivalism is not relativism. I am not saying that any viewpoint is a legitimate perspective. There is in ethics and in other disciplines an absolute right and wrong. The procedure I have outlined above is a means for us to discover that absolute right and wrong.

Scripture itself is absolutely right: inspired, infallible, inerrant. But we are fallible in our study of Scripture. To understand it rightly, we need information outside the Bible, including knowledge of Hebrew and Greek grammar, knowledge of ancient history, and an understanding of those contemporary questions that people pose to Scripture.

## The Ethical Life

So far, we have discussed methodology, the means by which Christians make ethical decisions. But we should also think a bit about the actual content of biblical ethics. That is, what does the Bible teach about God's commands, our ethical situation, and the human being as an ethical agent?

We have already discussed many ethical implications of the Bible's theology. In chapters 23–28, we considered the authority of Scripture, God's ultimate norm for all of human life. In chapter 34, I argued that the image of God is both a fact and a norm, and therefore our fundamental responsibility is to image God, to be like him (Lev. 19:2; Matt. 5:48). This means especially to be like Christ, to love one another as he loved us (John 13:34–35).

In chapters 36–45, I discussed sin and redemption. In ourselves, we cannot obey God. But because he has sent his Son to die for us and rise again, we, too, have died to sin and have been raised with him to newness of life (Rom. 6; Col. 3:1–3). So we are able to say no to sin and to serve God, though imperfectly in this life.

Through Christ, too, the kingdom of God has come, is coming, and will come (chapter 5). It is our job to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33) here on earth.

In chapter 41, I emphasized that the Christian life is especially one of faith and repentance. It is believing God's promises and acting on them, and turning more and more from sin, anticipating the glory to come. In chapters 46–49, I stressed that the Christian life is a life shared with others in the body of Christ. In chapter 47, especially, I emphasized the centrality of God's mandates: the cultural mandate and the Great

Commission. In chapter 51, I stressed that biblical eschatology, the doctrine of the last days, is a purifying doctrine. We seek to be obedient when Christ comes, and we look forward to his rewards. So Christian ethics is oriented toward the past (our creation in God's image and Jesus' work of redemption), the present (seeking the kingdom of God in the present), and the future (looking forward to Jesus' return and the consummation of righteousness in the new heavens and new earth).

## The Lord's Commands

But I should also briefly summarize what God commands us to do. For this purpose, the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17; Deut. 5:1–21) (sometimes called the Decalogue) are especially useful. These commands are part of the document of the covenant that God made with Israel under Moses,<sup>7</sup> and other passages of Scripture refer to them. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) is largely an exposition of the deeper meanings of these commandments. In Matthew 19:17–21, Jesus tells a rich young man the essence of his obligation to God, using commandments from the Decalogue. See also Rom. 13:8–10; James 2:10–11.

As Jesus says (Matt. 22:36–40), the greatest commandments are those to love God with all our heart (Deut. 6:4–5) and our neighbor as ourselves (Lev. 19:18). These sum up the Law and the Prophets, emphasizing the frequent theme of the NT that love fulfills the law (Rom. 13:8, 10; Col. 3:14). So the Decalogue speaks of loving God (commandments 1–4) and loving our neighbors (commandments 5–10).

We love God by worshiping him alone and renouncing all other gods and lords (first commandment), by worshiping him as he desires and not according to our own idolatrous devices (second), by using his name only with a full understanding of its holiness (third), and by acknowledging the Sabbath as a day to rest and worship him, not to carry on our own business (fourth).

We love our neighbors by honoring our parents and all others in authority over us (fifth),<sup>8</sup> by revering human life as sacred in God's sight (sixth), by respecting the marriage bed (seventh), the property of others (eighth), and the truth (ninth), and by guarding our hearts against desires that lead to breaking other commandments (tenth).

## Key Terms

Ethics

Necessary criteria of good works

Sufficient criteria of good works

Problem of the virtuous pagan

7. See chapters 2–4 and 25 for an analysis of the literary structure of this covenant document and its importance as the written Word of the Lord, the fundamental constitution of the people of God.

8. I follow the Westminster catechisms in saying that although the fifth commandment refers specifically only to parents, its principles extend to all other relations of loyalty, love, and authority, such as the church (our extended family, according to Scripture) and the state. The catechisms similarly read the other commandments as containing principles that extend beyond the literal.

Total depravity  
 Civic righteousness  
*Summum bonum*  
 Motive  
 Standard  
 Goal  
 Debtors' ethic  
 Command ethics  
 Narrative ethics  
 Virtue ethics  
 Deontological  
 Teleological  
 Consequential  
 Existential  
 Multiperspectivalism

### Study Questions

1. "All theology is ethics." Explain; evaluate.
2. How does God govern our ethical life? State and evaluate Frame's triperspectival answer.
3. What are the "necessary and sufficient criteria of good works"? Explain the answer of the WCF and discuss.
4. List the most typical biblical reasons for doing good works. Discuss.
5. "Our good works come from *gratitude*." Explain and evaluate this statement of the HC.
6. Paul tells believers to "keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25 NIV). How can we do that, when the Spirit's work is invisible?
7. What are the "things that really matter" in the Christian life? Why does Paul single these out?
8. What are the "factors in ethical judgment"? Explain; evaluate. How are these interrelated?
9. "In general, then, ethical judgment always involves the application of a *norm* to a *situation* by a *person*." Explain; evaluate.
10. Explain and evaluate the three types of ethics distinguished by Frame.
11. How are the three perspectives "interdependent"?
12. Summarize the Ten Commandments.

### Memory Verses

**Matt. 5:19:** 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. 6:33:** But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

**1 Cor. 7:19:** For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.

**Gal. 5:6:** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

**Gal. 5:16–17:** But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

**Gal. 6:15:** For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

**Eph. 2:8–10:** For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

**Eph. 5:8–11:** At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

**Col. 3:1–3:** If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

**2 Tim. 3:16–17:** 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.

## Resources for Further Study

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