

---

# INTRODUCING THEOLOGICAL METHOD

---

**A Survey of Contemporary  
Theologians and Approaches**

**MARY M. VEENEMAN**

**B**  
**Baker Academic**  
*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Mary M. Veeneman, *Introducing Theological Method*  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2017. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2017 by Mary M. Veeneman

Published by Baker Academic  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Veeneman, Mary M., 1981– author.

Title: Introducing theological method : a survey of contemporary theologians and approaches /  
Mary M. Veeneman.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Academic, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and  
index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017032147 | ISBN 9780801049491 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Theology—Methodology.

Classification: LCC BR118 .V44 2017 | DDC 230.01—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017032147>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

17 18 19 20 21 22 23      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Mary M. Veeneman, Introducing Theological Method  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2017. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

To my North Park mentors:  
Stephen Spencer, Charles Peterson,  
and Liza Ann Acosta

# CONTENTS

Introduction: <i>The Context of Modern Theology</i>	1
1. The Work of Theology	7
2. Ressourcement and Neo-orthodox Theologies	15
3. Theologies of Correlation	35
4. Postliberal Theologies	61
5. Evangelical Theologies	81
6. Political Theologies	111
7. Feminist Theologies	141
8. Theologies of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theology	169
Conclusion: <i>Where Do We Go from Here?</i>	187
Suggested Reading List for Students	191
Bibliography	192
Index	198

# INTRODUCTION

## *The Context of Modern Theology*

In the summer of 1914 Europe ignited in war, ending what had generally been a century of peace on the continent. Many have argued that the war was inevitable because of the role of imperialism on the international scene.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of who started the war and who prevailed, World War I marked a turning point in Protestant theology and serves as an illustration of the importance of theological method.

Karl Barth was schooled in Protestant liberalism, the dominant theological school in Germany in the nineteenth century. Among several notable teachers was Adolf von Harnack, who famously argued that the essence of Christianity is the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all people.<sup>2</sup> Although during the early stages of his work Barth called himself a disciple of Harnack, World War I was the occasion for a major break between Barth and his teachers.

Albrecht Ritschl, Harnack's teacher, had closely tied Christianity to the culture of the time. Ritschl saw Christianity as primarily emphasizing the work of God in redeeming humanity and the work of human beings to bring about the kingdom of God. As a result, Ritschl (and subsequently Harnack's theology) was very optimistic about what the human being could do. Ritschl assumed that language in Jesus's teachings about the kingdom of God meant the gradual improvement of society over time. Additionally, Ernst Troeltsch, another prominent theologian of the period, argued that Christianity had become part and parcel

1. Allen Weinstein and David Rubel, *The Story of America* (London: DK, 2002), 422.

2. Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (New York: Harper, 1957), 51.

of European culture. Ultimately, they saw Christianity as simply the religious manifestation of European culture.<sup>3</sup>

If Christianity is simply the religious manifestation of European culture, then Christianity is not in a position to critique culture. The results of this line of thinking were made clear at the advent of World War I. Karl Barth's theology would experience a significant shift as a result of this.

At the outbreak of the war, Barth's theological teachers were among a number of German intellectuals who signed their support to the Kaiser's war effort.<sup>4</sup> Barth was profoundly dismayed by this move and saw it as evidence of a fundamentally bankrupt theology that was unable to do anything but endorse the actions of the culture. He broke with Protestant liberalism and sought a new theology that did not make a quick link between the idea of the kingdom of God and social action. His new theology would seek to begin with the Word of God and to read it fresh, apart from historical criticism and apart from any captivity to the culture of the day.<sup>5</sup>

Why tell this story? In a book that covers numerous twentieth-century theologians, why is Barth treated in the introduction? Barth's story is important for a discussion of theological method because it clearly shows what is at stake in these kinds of conversations. Theological method is a work of prolegomena.<sup>6</sup> Its work is crucial because it sets the ground rules for how theology is tied to the world around it, what texts are read, and what questions are asked. Protestant liberal thinkers came to the conclusions they did about World War I because of earlier methodological moves and assumptions. When one sees religion as part and parcel of culture, there isn't a clear warrant for religion standing apart from culture. Similarly, the theological moves Barth made came about from his own methodological assumptions. His critique of Protestant liberalism was grounded in a fundamental assumption about the relationships between God, the Word of God, and human beings.

Although the story of Karl Barth and his teachers during World War I is a particularly good illustration of the potential problems with theological method,

3. William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1983), 286.

4. This document, commonly referred to as the "Manifesto of the Ninety-Three German Intellectuals," can be found at Brigham Young University's World War I document archive, [http://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Manifesto\\_of\\_the\\_Ninety-Three\\_German\\_Intellectuals](http://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Manifesto_of_the_Ninety-Three_German_Intellectuals).

5. Daniel W. Hardy, "Karl Barth," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford with Rachel Muers (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 22. Barth's theology, born out of a methodological critique, will be subject to the methodological critiques of other thinkers. This will be discussed further in chap. 2.

6. Prolegomena covers preliminary issues or could be expressed as the things that must be said before arriving at the topic at hand (in our case, that topic is theology itself).

the contemporary setting can also provide examples of where method can lead to poor theology. One example of this is the kind of theology that arises out of a flat biblical hermeneutic. Hermeneutics deals with questions about how texts are to be read and interpreted.<sup>7</sup> The way one reads the biblical text is part of any discussion of theological method, as is the way one chooses to prioritize the biblical text in theological work. A flat hermeneutic is one that reads the text for what the words literally say. Typically, this is an approach that does not pay sufficient attention to genre or to historical setting.

An example of this has been highlighted and critiqued by the recent emphasis on the new perspective on Paul, a school of thought that argues that the apostle Paul, particularly in Protestant circles, has been too readily associated with Martin Luther and thus pulled out of his original context. This earlier view results from a flat reading of Paul that associates his statements about the works of the law with Luther's statements about legalism in late medieval Catholicism. The problem with reading Paul through the thought of Martin Luther, this school of thought argues, is that first-century Judaism is read to be quite similar to late medieval Catholicism. A historical study of first century Judaism shows that the comparison between it and late medieval Catholicism breaks down and is thus not particularly helpful for interpreting Paul.

Like the story of Barth and Protestant liberalism, the new perspective on Paul illustrates that the way theological method is approached is of crucial importance. The way in which one thinks about the roles of various theological sources, including the biblical text and the Christian tradition, as well as the types of questions to bring to the table, will have an impact on one's theology.

Theological method matters because it drives how theological questions are asked and the ways in which texts are read. How those things are carried out will have a direct impact on one's theological conclusions. A theology that starts with the idea of God and the Word of God is going to say quite different things from a theology that starts with human cultural experience.

Readers should be particularly attentive to the following methodological concerns:

1. What are the *primary sources* for theological reflection? Some theologians will argue that the biblical text alone should inform theological work. Others will argue that creation itself or philosophy and the natural and social sciences are important sources for theological work. Some theologians will argue that the Christian tradition should inform theological work, while

7. Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *The Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 59.

others will advocate a theology that explicitly avoids a consideration of the tradition.

2. What *questions* should a theologian answer? Some theologians argue for a standard set of questions, while others argue that the questions should arise from the contemporary context.
3. What is the *starting point* of theological work? For example, some of the theologians studied in this text will be very concerned with the contemporary situation in specific contexts, while others will look to universal human experience. Other theologians will argue that God or the biblical text, apart from human context, must be the starting point for theological reflection.

As readers work through these differing theologies and theological methods, they should regularly ask themselves *how* the theological claims are tied back to the theological method employed and compare the various methods studied. One way students can approach this is to ask themselves what kinds of conversations would arise if all the theologians studied could be gathered into a room and asked these critical questions.

To be clear, a good theological method is not a guarantee of good theological results. One may employ a good method but come to conclusions that are problematic for one reason or another. At the same time, a good theological method is a necessary starting point for good theological work. Theologians who have not thought about methodology do not have solid ground on which to build their theological work.

This book will introduce the reader to some of the most important theologians of the twentieth century, including Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Avery Dulles, and George Lindbeck. It will also give careful attention to liberation and feminist theologies, evangelical theologies, Mennonite theologies, and comparative theology. Each section will consider the thinker's background, underlying assumptions, use and interpretation of sources, and driving questions. This book will not advocate for a particular theological method. Rather, it will advocate having a conversation about method and becoming more aware of one's own background, underlying assumptions, use and interpretation of sources, and driving questions. Of course, an exhaustive treatment of Christian theological method would be many volumes long and require a lifetime's worth of study. This volume chooses twentieth- and twenty-first-century theologians to study because they are close to the present in terms of historical location and thus may introduce ideas that students find to be more immediately applicable. At the same time, it is important to stress that (as Bernard of Chartres put it) we stand



on the shoulders of giants, and that is true for any Christian theologian. Each of the individuals discussed in this book was influenced by many Christian thinkers who came before. A thorough study of theology requires a significant amount of time spent in the tradition of the church. By studying the methodologies of theologians who came before those covered in this book, a fuller understanding of Christian history as a cohesive and coherent narrative will emerge.<sup>8</sup>

Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson open their book *Who Needs Theology?* by stating that everyone is a theologian.<sup>9</sup> The statement that usually follows this kind of assertion is that the only remaining question is whether one is a good theologian. Similarly, everyone has a theological method, even if that method is not explicitly known. The only question is whether one employs a good method. This book is intended to help the reader become a better theologian by developing a good theological method.

8. While a full treatment of other theological methods is beyond the scope of this book, students who want to broaden their understandings of theological method across the history of the church should see Paul L. Allen, *Theological Method: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012). A number of works focus on the method of a particular historical figure or period. These include Timothy Smith, *Thomas Aquinas' Trinitarian Theology: A Study in Theological Method* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003); Paul Avis, *In Search of Authority: Anglican Theological Method from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014); and Mark A. Noll, ed., *The Princeton Theology 1812–1921: Scripture, Science, and Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Warfield* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001). Considerations of theological method in specific confessional contexts include John G. Stackhouse Jr., ed., *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), and Christopher A. Stephenson, *Types of Pentecostal Theology: Method, System, Spirit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Finally, consideration of theological method through a doctrinal lens can be found in Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

9. Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996).



# 1

## The Work of Theology

Looking at the history of Christianity, as well as the variety of modern church practices, makes one important point clear: Christians do not always agree about how the Christian life is to be led. Disagreement about Christian belief and practice is ultimately disagreement about theology. Ongoing questions about Christian faith and practice require that Christians continue to do the work of theology. This book seeks to take a step back from that work and instead consider how one goes about doing the work of theology.

### What Is Theology?

The Greek roots of the term *theology* are *theos*, “God,” and *logos*, “word” or “words.” Alister McGrath refers to theology as “talking about God” and to Christian theology as “talking about God in a Christian way.”<sup>1</sup> “To study theology,” McGrath writes, “is to think systematically about the fundamental ideas of Christianity. It is intellectual reflection on the act, content, and implications of the Christian faith.”<sup>2</sup> Daniel Migliore writes this about theology: “I propose to describe the work of theology as a continuing search for the fullness of the truth of God made known in Jesus Christ. Defining the theological task in this way emphasizes that theology is not mere repetition of traditional doctrines, but a persistent search for the truth to which they point and which they

1. Alister E. McGrath, *Theology: The Basics*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), vii.

2. *Ibid.*

only partially and brokenly express.”<sup>3</sup> Shortly after that statement, Migliore refers to Augustine’s description of “faith seeking understanding.”<sup>4</sup> Thomas Oden describes theology this way: “The study of God is an attempt at orderly, consistent, and reasoned discussion of the Source and End of all things. . . . The term theology is itself a rudimentary definition indicating discourse about God.”<sup>5</sup>

There are a number of reasons for taking up theological work. Some undertake theological work to help explain reality. Others do so to organize Christian teaching. Still others do so to critique the contemporary life and thought of the church. Of course, these reasons for doing theology are not mutually exclusive. Many people will take up the theological task with all three of these aims in mind. Knowing the goals and the purposes for undertaking theological work is important—these things can help give us a focus and direction for our work. At the same time, knowing the reason for doing theological work is only the first step—it is important to also spend some time thinking about *how* theological work should be done, or what *theological method* should be. We must ask some key questions about method: Where should we begin? What sources should we use? What specific questions should we ask?

## The Work of Theology

McGrath suggests a few ways we might go about answering the question of how to “do” theology. One way would be to study some prominent theologians and examine how they carry out this task.<sup>6</sup> Here are some examples of two theologians from earlier in the history of Christianity and two theologians from the twentieth century.

- Thomas Aquinas: He wrote during the medieval period and is well known for taking the philosophy of Aristotle and trying to synthesize it with Christian theology. He also drew heavily on the work of Augustine and on the Bible.
- John Calvin: He was one of the second generation of leaders during the Protestant Reformation. He is well known for emphasizing the providence of God in his theological system, though the role of providence in his

3. Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1.

4. *Ibid.*, 2.

5. Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 5.

6. McGrath, *Theology*, xii.

thought has often been misunderstood. He saw the Bible as the primary source of Christian theology.

- Karl Barth: Probably the best-known Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, he reacted strongly to the Protestant theology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and called for a theology that starts with God and focuses on the Word of God.
- Karl Rahner: The best-known Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, he reacted to the common Catholic theology of the early twentieth century and believed that theology must be made comprehensible to contemporary people. He argued that theology should start with religious experience that all people have.<sup>7</sup>

There are a couple of problems with trying to make determinations about methodology by studying one particular theology. Each of these theologians has written thousands of pages. There are scholars who devote their entire careers to studying one of them and still never get through all of the writings! That makes this approach to studying theological method very difficult. Additionally, each of these theologians has a very different approach.<sup>8</sup> If you were able to put them in a room and talk with them about method, you would probably have a very interesting and lively discussion, but you would quickly see that each of them has a different starting point for undertaking theological work:

- Thomas Aquinas would draw on the philosophy of Aristotle, the theology of Augustine and the Bible, giving significant weight to each of those.
- John Calvin would insist on giving a place of primary importance to the Bible.
- Karl Barth would say that theology must start with God and the Word of God, but he would explain that somewhat differently than Calvin would.
- Karl Rahner would want to start with a particular kind of human experience—this would be a universal religious experience that he claims each person has whether or not he or she is aware of it.

Because of this, how would you know which approach is the best one to take? You might go with the one that is closest to you in historical location, but Barth and Rahner worked in roughly the same time period and clearly have very different approaches. We are going to have that discussion across the pages of this book. We are going to talk about method, and we will do that by looking

7. *Ibid.*, xiii.

8. *Ibid.*

at various theologians. In order to get to the place where we can have that conversation, though, we need to first talk about the various sources of theology and look at method in general before we will be in a position to compare the methodological proposals of various theologians.

There are two important things to keep in mind as we move forward. First, while there is not complete agreement on how we should go about doing theology either historically across the tradition or today, there is some broad agreement on what sources we should generally consider. McGrath reminds us that “throughout its long history, Christian theology has made an appeal to three fundamental resources: the Bible, tradition, and reason.”<sup>9</sup> Christians generally agree on the importance of the Bible for theological work (as well as living the Christian life), even though there are disagreements over how to interpret it and what its relationship to other theological sources might be.

In addition to this, theological work has been shaped by the historical location of those who do theology, whether or not the theologian is aware of it. Certainly, Thomas Aquinas’s work was significantly shaped by the rediscovery of Aristotle’s philosophy during the medieval period. Calvin’s outlook in his major work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, is clearly shaped by his context—his writings reflect many of the debates that were taking place during the Protestant Reformation. Barth’s theological work reacted strongly to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Protestant theology. Rahner’s work reflects both the influence of twentieth-century philosophy and a reaction to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Catholic theology. Further, that theological work is historically influenced also makes sense in that Christianity is fundamentally a faith that is rooted in history. Christian theology is focused on the person of Christ, and the story of Christ tells us about God breaking into history in a particular time and place. Because we also live in a particular time and place, we must take that into consideration. Taking the time and place or *location* of the theologian into account will result in some theological questions being the same, while others will be different; this will be apparent in subsequent chapters as theologians are introduced.

## Sources for Theology

Theology must be done with consideration to such things as revelation, sources, orienting questions, and starting point. We need to address these topics before talking about specific theological methodologies.

9. *Ibid.*, xv.

Above all else, if theology is talk about God, it is crucial to gain knowledge about this God. Christians believe that God has chosen to reveal Godself to humanity. This act is referred to as “divine revelation.” Divine revelation generally comes in two forms: general revelation and special revelation.<sup>10</sup> General revelation comes from an understanding of the entire world as created by God. If God created all that is, then all that is can be seen as a communication from God. As a result, investigations of creation can reveal true things about God. Often, general revelation is explored through the natural sciences (which investigate the created order) and philosophy (which investigates reality via the use of human reason). Special revelation is revelation from God to a particular group of people. This is revelation that goes beyond what is revealed in God’s act of creating. In Christian theology, the chief act of special revelation is in the Christ event. God’s word as revealed in the biblical text is also understood by most theologians to constitute special revelation.

Some have argued that the best way to describe the difference between special revelation and general revelation is to hold that general revelation is revelation for all people, while special revelation is revelation for a select group of people (i.e., Christians). The problem with this view is that, outside of certain circles that heavily emphasize predestination, most Christians have held that Christ died for all people. If this is the case, the group “Christian” is potentially universal, even if it is not universal in actuality. Perhaps it is better to argue that general revelation is that revelation from which all people can know some truths, regardless of religious persuasion. Special revelation is potentially for all people, but in order for one to receive it as revelation, a prior religious decision is required. Avery Dulles’s *Models of Revelation* offers a helpful extended treatment of this particular issue.<sup>11</sup>

Thinking about revelation leads to a consideration of a larger issue in Christian theology. What sources should be used? The answer to this question largely depends on who is asked. All Christian theologians will argue that the Bible is important, but they will differ on exactly what role the Bible should have.

Martin Luther, along with other Reformers, argued for a principle of *sola scriptura*. Although it was not Luther’s intention, some have interpreted the *sola scriptura* principle to insist that the biblical text must be the only source of theology and that no other sources have any bearing on that work.

There are two problems with this view. The first problem is one of history: Luther did not intend the *sola scriptura* principle to suggest that scripture should

10. Not all theologians hold that knowledge of God can be gained via general revelation. Karl Barth is one prominent example of a theologian who holds such a view.

11. See Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

be the only source of theology. His understanding of *sola scriptura* was that scripture is to be the chief source of theology. In other words, scripture holds the trump card or has veto power over any other potential sources. An added problem comes when considering the question of what it might mean to have scripture as the only source of theology. One need only look at the history of Christianity and the breadth of contemporary Christianity to know that not all Christians read the Bible in the same way. Despite claims about the Bible being self-interpreting, it seems that there often isn't an immediately apparent plain reading of the text. Further, the biblical text is not made up of one genre. Two particularly significant types of genres for the purposes of this discussion are poetry and parables. These are genres that are explicitly not intended to be taken literally. As a result, no "plain" or "flat" meaning of the text can be gleaned apart from the work of interpretation.

If interpretation is required (and in actuality it is required for the whole of the biblical text), it is hard to argue that the biblical text can be one's sole source of theology. If the text does not convey clear meaning apart from interpretation, then one's interpretation must also play a role in understanding. If that is the case, something is added to the biblical text in order to gain meaning from it. The question that arises from the necessity of interpretation is what informs one's interpretation.

As noted earlier, theologians have often argued that all Christians are theologians; the important question is whether one is a good theologian. All Christians are theologians in that they all hold particular beliefs about God that they get from scripture and other sources of theology. As a result, they make particular theological judgments. In a similar way, all readers of the biblical text are interpreters. They make particular judgments about what the text means. What must be asked is what informs those judgments.

This gets us into a conversation about the kinds of sources needed for theology. As we have seen, *sola scriptura* did not historically mean that the Bible is the only source of theology. Many people today would ask if it is actually possible to have a theology that is based on the Bible alone. If it isn't, then what other sources can help theologians better understand revelation?

Historically, theologians have discussed tradition, reason, and experience, in addition to scripture, as potential sources for theological work. Tradition can refer to the tradition of one particular branch of Christianity or the history of the church as a whole. The extent of tradition is typically defined by the community claiming that tradition. One thing to be mindful of when thinking about traditions is that most definitions of Christian tradition are focused on one branch or smaller subset of Christianity. This influences how various Christians come to understand the term *tradition*.

The value of tradition is that it seems to offer an aid to reading scripture. If scripture is better interpreted in community rather than alone, the tradition broadens out the reading community of the one who approaches scripture. With the tradition, reading sacred texts in a community does not just involve reading with people in one's own context, or even with people outside one's context but living at the same time, but it involves reading with others who have lived in different places and in different times. This kind of reading community can help a reader begin to identify blinders that are culturally conditioned and start to see other options for interpreting the text. While tradition is defined differently in different Christian communities, all Christian communities have traditions. This means that claiming not to have a tradition is problematic. Further, those that argue that they do theology free from tradition are likely not being honest about the ways in which their own contexts influence how they read and interpret the Bible.

In addition to tradition, many theologians consider human reason to be a source for theology. This ties back to the earlier discussion of general revelation. If God created all that exists, as Christian theology claims, then God created the human intellect and endowed human beings with the ability to investigate the world around them. It follows, then, that the use of reason in theology should be permissible. Different thinkers will make different claims about how reason is employed. Some will argue that reason is part of methodology and has to do with how theological arguments are constructed. Others will argue that reason is a genuine source and so will consult the work of philosophers in constructing theological arguments.

Experience is a final potential source for theology. The "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" includes scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. In this context, experience is seen as one of four sources of authority for theology.<sup>12</sup> In other contexts, experience might be the thing that brings critical questions in need of addressing.

Two final considerations, those of orienting questions and starting point, must be made concerning theological methodology. Orienting questions are the questions that drive a particular thinker's theological approach. These questions might be about the needs of the contemporary context, the philosophical basis for theological assertions, the claims of the tradition, or the claims of the biblical text. Let's return to Karl Rahner for a moment to consider the importance of an orienting question. Rahner was interested in the joining of

12. For more information about the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, see Don Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Lexington: Emeth, 2005).



Thomistic theology with the transcendental method. One key question for the transcendental method involved the necessary conditions for a given thing to happen. This drove Rahner to begin his work by asking whether the necessary conditions for human beings to receive revelation from God were present, should God choose to reveal Godself to humanity.

Orienting questions are connected to starting points in one critical way, as can be seen with the example from Rahner. If Rahner begins by asking the question about the human being receiving revelation from God, his starting point will be in search of the answer to that question. Rahner begins his work in *Hearer of the Word* by considering the human being and showing how human beings might receive revelation from God, should God choose to give it.

Other thinkers have very different starting points. While Rahner essentially begins his work with the human being, Karl Barth protested vigorously against approaches that begin with the human being. Barth was concerned about what he saw as anthropocentrism (human-centeredness) in nineteenth-century Protestant liberalism. Because of this, he wanted to find a theology that was fundamentally not anthropocentric. As a result, he insisted that theology must start with God and the Word of God, and not the human being. In addition to considerations of God and humanity, many thinkers start their theological work with questions that arise from the contemporary context. We will see this clearly in the work of Tillich, Dulles, and others. Thus various thinkers have significant orienting questions for their theological work, and many of these arise from their distinctive starting points.

## Conclusion

This book will introduce you to the approaches of several theologians across a number of Christian theological traditions. It will raise questions of sources, starting points and orienting questions, and theological assumptions. While this book will not offer one definitive conclusion about theological methodology, it will hopefully create space in your own mind and spark conversations about what is at stake in doing the work of theology.