

Theological Method: *An Introduction*

GRAHAM A. COLE



SHORT STUDIES *in*
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Edited by Graham A. Cole & Oren R. Martin

“Theological Method seeks to help new theologians get started on a sound basis. Graham Cole sets forth a theological method that is meant to be good theology—a method that, first and foremost, is itself true to the Bible and, second, shows how theologians throughout history have best used the Bible to edify the church. I am impressed with the conciseness of *Theological Method*. Cole has done an excellent job summarizing the basics in this short volume.”

John M. Frame, Professor of Systematic Theology and
Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary

“Graham Cole has enviable gifts of clarity and wisdom, combined with an ability to identify significant themes in theology. *Theological Method* is as fresh, bright, and crisp as a sun-drenched spring morning. It is as helpful for connecting the dots in Christian discipleship in the church as it is for pastoral formation in the seminary context. It is profound in its simplicity.”

C. Ben Mitchell, author, *Ethics and Moral Reasoning:
A Student's Guide*

“We are all theologians, and we all practice theology, good or bad. Ministers and lay people need to learn how to do theology, to think theologically, to increase our theological awareness and theological ability, and to think God's thoughts after him. We need to do this not only to understand our past but also to work through new issues of today and tomorrow. Graham Cole writes with his usual clarity and has provided a resource that is short, deep, vivid, and thoughtful! He shows us a method of doing faithful theology. This method requires honoring and using the Bible and the insights of the past, as well as clarity of thought, an understanding of sin and frustration, humility, patience, faith, prayer, and worship. We see these features reflected in this book.”

Peter Adam, Vicar Emeritus, St. Jude's Carlton; Former Principal,
Ridley College, Melbourne

“This helpful primer provides the common sense, plain speech, biblical perspective, and evangelical commitment we've come to expect from Graham Cole.”

Daniel J. Treier, Gunther H. Knoedler Professor of Theology,
Wheaton College; author, *Introducing Evangelical Theology*

“Drawing from his years of teaching, Graham A. Cole guides the reader like a pastoral sage. *Theological Method* offers much insightful discussion about how to wed the demand for contextual affirmation and a commitment to scriptural authority. Cole is to be thanked for illustrating how we need to do theology as pilgrims heading home.”

Andrew J. Schmutzer, Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies,
Moody Bible Institute; coauthor, *Between Pain and Grace*

Theological Method

SHORT STUDIES IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Edited by Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin

The Atonement: An Introduction, Jeremy Treat (2023)

The Attributes of God: An Introduction, Gerald Bray (2021)

The Church: An Introduction, Gregg R. Allison (2021)

The Doctrine of Scripture: An Introduction, Mark D. Thompson
(2022)

Glorification: An Introduction, Graham A. Cole (2022)

The Holy Spirit: An Introduction, Fred Sanders (2023)

Justification: An Introduction, Thomas R. Schreiner (2023)

The Person of Christ: An Introduction, Stephen J. Wellum (2021)

Predestination: An Introduction, Andrew David Naselli (2024)

Theological Method: An Introduction, Graham A. Cole (2020)

The Trinity: An Introduction, Scott R. Swain (2020)

Theological Method

An Introduction

Graham A. Cole

Theological Method: An Introduction
Formerly published as *Faithful Theology: An Introduction*
© 2020, 2025 by Graham A. Cole
Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2020

Reprinted with new title 2025

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated in whole or in part into any other language.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-8081-9
ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-8084-0
PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-8082-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cole, Graham A. (Graham Arthur), 1949- author.
Title: Theological method : an introduction / Graham A. Cole.
Other titles: Faithful theology
Description: Wheato, Illinois : Crossway, 2025. | Series: Short studies in systematic theology | Previously published: Faithful theology, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024035609 (print) | LCCN 2024035610 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433580819 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433580826 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433580840 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Bible—Hermeneutics. | Theology.
Classification: LCC BS476 .C57 2025 (print) | LCC BS476 (ebook) | DDC 230.01—dc23/eng/20240912
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024035609>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024035610>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP		35	34	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25
13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

To the many, many students
I have taught this method to
on three continents

Contents

Series Preface	11
Introduction	13
1 The Word of Revelation	19
2 The Witness of Christian Thought and Practice: Past and Present	39
3 The World of Human Brokenness	53
4 The Work of Wisdom	69
5 The Way of Worship: Putting It All Together in Thought and Life	87
Conclusion	103
Further Reading	107
General Index	109
Scripture Index	115

Series Preface

The ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus reputedly said that the thinker has to listen to the essence of things. A series of theological studies dealing with the traditional topics that make up systematic theology needs to do just that. Accordingly, in these studies, theologians address the essence of a doctrine. This series thus aims to present short studies in theology that are attuned to both the Christian tradition and contemporary theology in order to equip the church to faithfully understand, love, teach, and apply what God has revealed in Scripture about a variety of topics. What may be lost in comprehensiveness can be gained through what Calvin, in the dedicatory epistle of his commentary on Romans, called “lucid brevity.”

Of course, a thorough study of any doctrine will be longer rather than shorter, as there are two millennia of confession, discussion, and debate with which to interact. As a result, a short study needs to be more selective, but deftly so. Thankfully, the contributors to this series have the ability to be brief yet accurate. The key aim is that the simpler is not to morph into the simplistic. The test is whether the topic of a short study, when further studied in depth, requires some unlearning to take place. The simple can be amplified. The simplistic needs to be corrected. As editors, we believe that the volumes in this series pass that test.

While the specific focus will vary, each volume will (1) introduce the doctrine, (2) set it in context, (3) develop it from Scripture, (4) draw the various threads together, and (5) bring it to bear on the Christian life. It is our prayer, then, that this series will assist the church to delight in her triune God by thinking his thoughts—which he has graciously revealed in his written word, which testifies to his living Word, Jesus Christ—after him in the powerful working of his Spirit.

Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin

Introduction

The case can be made that every Christian is a theologian because every Christian has a theology, whether well thought out or not.¹ After all, the word “theology” clearly has to do with God (*theos*, Greek for “God”), and since the third century at least, theology has been understood to refer to “talking about God” (*theos*, “God”; *logos*, “word”).² When that talk is organized, we have a body of teaching, or doctrine. Some become highly trained in talking about God and in thinking about him in a systematic way. Others, because of calling or life circumstance, never have much chance to develop that level of expertise. Whether trained or not, Christians talk and think about God. In that light, there is a sense in which every Christian is a theologian. The question is, How are we to get better at talking and thinking about God? That question brings us to the matter of method. But what is a method? Theologian Robert W. Jensen explains it well: “A method, of course, is a self-conscious

1. For an example of an attempt to make that case, see Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996). Their first chapter is titled “Everyone Is a Theologian.” In my view, they paint with too broad a brush. They contend, “Anyone who reflects on life’s ultimate questions—including questions about God and our relationship to God—is a theologian” (13). For them, filmmaker and actor Woody Allen qualifies as one (14). Given their definitions, it is hard to see the difference between a theologian and a philosopher.

2. See Alister E. McGrath, *Theology: The Basics*, 3rd ed. (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), xii.

way of going about doing something.”³ This book is about the method to use in doing faithful theology: faithful to God, faithful to God’s word.

When I was a lad, my uncle Gordon showed me how to catch more fish with a rod and reel. Before he tied the hook on the line, he attached a much smaller hook that was free. The big hook was put through the bait or hidden in it. Next, the little hook was placed through the tail of the shrimp or other bait. He called it the keeper hook. Over the years, I have caught some really big fish on that little hook alone. My uncle gave me a way of being better at fishing. He gave me a technique, a better fishing method. He taught me how to improve my fishing success. What he did reminds me of an old piece of wisdom: It is better to teach someone how to fish than simply to give that person a fish. The difference is satisfying the hunger of the day versus having a way to satisfy hunger over a lifetime. Method matters, and not only for practical things like fishing, but also for finding out the truth of things, especially the things of God.⁴

When it comes to the truth of the things of God, Scripture plays the pivotal role as God’s self-revelation. (I shall argue this at length in chapter 1.) Indeed, faithful theology is a human project that arises from wise reflection on the self-revelation of God.⁵ Because it is our reflection on God’s revelation, it is always open to be reformed and corrected by that revelation.

3. Robert W. Jenson, *A Theology in Outline: Can These Bones Live?* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 111.

4. The philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) knew that method matters and that the mind needs direction. He had twenty-one rules. Here is his fourth: “We need a method if we are to investigate the truth of things.” Descartes, “Rules for the Direction of the Mind,” Wikisource (website), https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Rules_for_the_Direction_of_the_Mind, accessed March 16, 2017.

5. I take a different view than do Grenz and Olson on the question of the object of theologizing. They argue in *Who Needs Theology?*, 49, that “Christian theology is reflecting on and articulating the God-centered life and beliefs that Christians share as followers of Jesus Christ, and it is done in order that God may be glorified in all Christians are to do.” This is far too anthropocentric in my view. The primary object of theological reflection is God, not our beliefs per se.

This is the truth of the Reformers' slogan *semper reformanda* (always reforming). However, it is one thing to have an evangelical's high view of Scripture. It is quite another to know how to derive teaching (doctrine or theology) from Scripture.⁶

We need guidance just as I needed guidance from Uncle Gordon. The need to do so is easily illustrated. I was taught as a new Christian that when Jesus slept in the boat during the storm on the Sea of Galilee, his human side was showing itself. But when he rose up and commanded the storm to cease, his divine side was expressing itself. It was as though Jesus's two natures oscillated, first the human and then the divine, taking turns. Later, when I was taught some theology and how to evaluate theological proposals, I saw that this was very much like the ancient heresy of Nestorianism. On this view, Jesus was both a human person and a divine person. The Father had, in effect, two sons in one physical body.⁷ However, if Scripture is compared with Scripture, and if the witness of the early church fathers is taken into account, then Jesus is clearly one person and not two. As one person, he had both a truly human nature and a truly divine one at all times.

This brief work especially explores how such a move from Scripture to doctrine is made. But why does doctrine matter? The importance of doctrine lies in that it answers three normative questions vital to us all: (1) What ought we to believe (*orthodoxy*, right opinion)? This is the truth question. (2) What ought we to value (*orthokardia*, right-heartedness)? This is the

6. I am using "doctrine," "teaching," and "theology" as synonyms.

7. Nestorianism is a wrong view (heresy) of Jesus named after Nestorius (386–451), bishop of Constantinople. Nestorius allegedly taught that the incarnate Christ was two persons: one human and one divine. Whether he actually held the view associated with his name is still debated. See H. D. McDonald, "Nestorius (fl. 428–c. 451)," in *New Dictionary of Theology Historical and Systematic*, 2nd ed., ed. Martin Davie, Tim Grass, Stephen R. Holmes, John McDowell, and T. A. Noble (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 609–10. Chap. 2 of the book before you aims to show the value of knowing facts like these.

spirituality question. (3) How ought we to live (*orthopraxy*, right practice of life)? This is the existential or practical question. Put another way, the head (orthodoxy), the heart (orthokardia), and the hands (orthopraxy) all count as concerns of theology. For example, what ought we to believe about the identity of Jesus? Does our answer matter? How are we to live in the light of Jesus's identity? If you believed, as many do, that Jesus was merely human, then worshiping him would be idolatry. But if Jesus is a member of the Holy Trinity, then worship is entirely fitting.⁸

To answer thoroughly the above questions, five key elements are involved.⁹ In this work, a chapter is devoted to each. Chapter 1 explores the foundation of theology in the self-witness of God in Scripture. This element is "The Word of Revelation." However, God has been providentially at work in the history of theological debate and discussion. As German theologian Gerhard Ebeling says, Scripture construed as the word of God has been central to that conversation. He argues that the history of the church is the history of the exposition of the Bible in the church.¹⁰ Knowledge of that conversation is another important element in doing theology, as chapter 2, "The Witness of Christian Thought and Practice," seeks to show. The third chapter recognizes that we do theology in a context. We live outside of Eden in the new normal, or abnormal. There is brokenness about us and in us. This element is

8. The doctrine of the Trinity will be the key case in point to which I shall return at numerous places throughout this book. I completed a first draft of this work before I read Grenz and Olson, *Who Needs Theology?* In that work they also make frequent reference to the doctrine of the Trinity to support many of their points.

9. In one sense every believer is a theologian with thoughts about God and God's relation to the world. Some believers have an unreflective theology. Some have a reflective theology. Hopefully, a college course necessitates reflection. Others have a mission-informed theology and want to be able to teach the church as trained pastors and theologians.

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

“The World of Human Brokenness.” Bringing these elements together requires wisdom from God. Chapter 4 investigates the role of wisdom in doing theology. This element is “The Work of Wisdom.”¹¹ Finally, chapter 5 tackles the question of how the various elements are to be put together. It summarizes the discussion and affirms the doxological dimension in doing theology. This element can be summed up as “The Way of Worship.” That is to say, our doing theology ought to be an offering to God.

Is it worth the effort? Does method matter? Gregory Boyd and Paul Eddy rightly state: “A central debate among evangelical theologians concerns the question of theological method. In other words, how should we ‘do’ theology?”¹² To get our idea of God right we need the right method of doing theology. As we have seen, “theology” is a term made up of two others: *theos* (for “God”) and *logos* (for “word” or “discourse”).

Doing theology aright matters. But that does not mean that this work is written to the academic guild. I write as a church scholar. Such a work may be of use to the guild, but in the first instance it is addressed to pastors, theological students, college students, and interested layfolk. I have written simply but, I hope, not simplistically. What’s the difference? A simple work

11. Some of these elements appear in Albert Outler’s famous formulation of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. His formulation gave the impression that, for John Wesley, Scripture stood on an equal footing with tradition, reason, and experience. However, as Outler later made clear, this was an unfortunate way of characterizing Wesley’s theology: “The term ‘quadrilateral’ does not occur in the Wesley corpus—and more than once I have regretted having coined it for contemporary use since it has been so widely misconstrued.” Quoted in Jonathan Andersen, “The Myth of the ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral,’” <http://www.jonathanandersen.com/the-myth-of-the-wesleyan-quadrilateral/>, accessed November 6, 2017. For Wesley, Scripture was the supreme authority, and the other three were subordinate to the Bible. The original formulation is found in Albert Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—in John Wesley,” in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 26.

12. Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 293.

is more accessible for a wider readership than a highly technical one would be. Yet the technically proficient may still be able to flesh out its ideas and run with them. A simplistic work keeps breaking down in logic and usefulness the more one knows about the field and, above all, the text of Scripture.

The Word of Revelation

Last century A. W. Tozer wrote:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. . . . The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God. . . . Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech. She can never escape the self-disclosure of her witness concerning God.¹

Tozer's bold claims beg an important question: Where ought the church get its ideas of God?

In my first semester of theological study I happened to meet someone I knew from my undergraduate days in the campus Christian group. We shared our new experiences of being at different,

1. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1961), 1. Tozer is an example of a self-taught theologian (an autodidact), of which there are very few. The famous nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon was another.

very different, theological colleges. He was in his first year too. I remarked how my doctrine class was all about grounding our theological claims in Scripture. He too had studied doctrine that semester, and the Bible had not been opened once. Instead, the class worked its way through a text by the eminent liberal theologian Paul Tillich, who was all the rage in that college.

I could not help but think that my former schoolmate was being given stones to eat and not bread. How different was my evangelical theology teacher Broughton Knox. He was clear that our ideas of God are to be found in the self-revelation of God and that the self-revelation of God is to be found in Scripture. Any doctrine that had no biblical warrant he described as “a textless doctrine” and not worthy to be called doctrine.² Doing theology is an evidence-based practice, and Scripture provides the crucial evidence.³

The text of Scripture is vital to doing theology in an evangelical way. Why? Because God has spoken and unveiled his mind, his will, and his ways (Heb. 1:1–2). Scripture is the Spirit-inspired, inerrant, and infallible crystallization of the divine discourse. Paul writes to his younger associate Timothy in these terms (2 Tim. 3:14–17):

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how 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

2. My institution is affiliated with the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA). Historically for this denomination, “The test for all doctrine and deportment was the Scriptures. ‘Where stands it written?’ . . . was the battle cry in all controversies.” See Arnold Theodore Olson, *Stumbling Towards Maturity* (Minneapolis: Free Church Press, 1981), 159.

3. Evidence is that which counts toward deciding the truth or falsity of a claim. See Richard Feldman, “Evidence,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 293.

out [*theopneustos*, “God-breathed”] by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Scripture has its origins in God like no other book or collection of books (e.g., the canon of Shakespeare’s works). It is *theopneustos* (God-breathed), as 2 Timothy 3:16 argues. Apparently, Paul had to coin this new word in Greek to capture the divine role in producing Scripture. G. C. Berkouwer is correct in affirming that “Paul’s word . . . points to a unique origin and to a unique relation of Holy Scripture to God.”⁴ *Theopneustos* refers to an objective reality, not a subjective one. In many ways, the term “inspired” is not strong enough and is indeed misleading.⁵ I have a friend who is an expert in all things Shakespearean. She would say that the canon of Shakespeare’s works is inspired in its ability to move the human spirit. That is a subjective understanding of the term. In contrast, *theopneustos* puts Scripture in a category apart.

“Inerrant” means that Scripture teaches no errors. Inerrancy has to do with Scripture’s content.⁶ “Infallible” means that Scripture won’t lead astray. Infallibility has to do with God’s purpose in giving Scripture to his people. Put in positive terms, Scripture is trustworthy and truth-telling. Someone might object that I have anthropomorphized Scripture as though it were a person. If so, I have an apostolic precedent in Paul, who wrote to the Galatians in these terms: “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the

4. G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Holy Scripture*, trans. and ed. Jack B. Rogers (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 140.

5. Both the ESV and NIV translate *theopneustos* as “God-breathed” and are to be preferred to the NRSV on this point.

6. Inerrancy could be explored by a monograph in its own right. For our purposes, suffice it to say that the reference point is the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>, accessed February 22, 2017.

nations be blessed” (3:8). Likewise, these words of Paul to the Roman Christians in Romans 9:17 are particularly noteworthy: “For Scripture says to Pharaoh . . .” Paul then quotes Exodus 9:16, where God is the speaker. A text like Romans 9:17 informs the claim that what Scripture says, God says.⁷

The human dimension of Scripture must also be taken into account, as 2 Peter 1:21 makes plain: “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.” It is obvious upon reading the New Testament that human authors were at work: the idiom of Paul is very different from that of John, for example. A mysterious double agency has produced Scripture. There is a human story to be told of Paul and John, but there is also the divine story of the Holy Spirit’s primary authorship. That primary authorship can especially be seen in Hebrews 10:15–17 and its use of Jeremiah 31:33–34:

And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying,

“This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, declares the Lord:
I will put my laws on their hearts,
and write them on their minds,”

then he adds,

“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds
no more.”⁸

7. B. B. Warfield appeals to both Gal. 3:8 and Rom. 9:17, among other texts, in his chapter titled “‘It Says:’ ‘Scripture Says:’ ‘God Says,’” in his *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 299–348.

8. It is worth noting that “then he adds” is not in the Greek text. The force of the language is instructive. Not only, according to the writer to the Hebrews, did the Holy Spirit speak these words; they have continuing impact and relevance to a first-century readership (and to us).

Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer captures the duality of Scripture in a particularly clear and helpful way when he writes:

The Bible is both like and unlike every other text. It is like every other book because it has human authors who say something about something in some way. It is *unlike* every other book because (1) it has God for its ultimate author; (2) it has God (Jesus Christ) as its ultimate content; (3) it has God (the Holy Spirit) for its ultimate interpreter; and (4) it has the church for its ultimate interpretive community.⁹

This is finely said and notable for the way Vanhoozer articulates the duality within a Trinitarian frame of reference.

Evangelical Theology and Liberal Theology: A Key Difference

One of the issues over which liberal theology and evangelical theology part company is the inerrancy of Scripture. Stephen Sykes states the liberal position with admirable clarity: “Liberalism in theology is that mood or cast of mind which is prepared to accept that some discovery of reason may count *against* the authority of a traditional affirmation in the body of Christian theology.”¹⁰ He goes on to write of “autonomously functioning reason.”¹¹ To illustrate his point, he selects the traditional affirmation of the doctrine of Scripture. He writes: “For most Protestant Christians the most momentous step of theological liberalism is taken when they deny the traditionally accepted belief in the inerrancy of Scripture.”¹² F. H. Cleobury argues similarly:

9. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “From Bible to Theology,” in *Theology, Church, and Ministry: A Handbook for Theological Education*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 239; original emphasis.

10. Stephen Sykes, *Christian Theology Today* (London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1983), 12; original emphasis.

11. Sykes, *Christian Theology Today*, 12.

12. Sykes, *Christian Theology Today*, 12.

Another way of answering the question, “What is liberalism?” is to consider the question, “Why do we believe the Christian religion to be the highest revelation from God to man?” If a person replies, “I believe it because it is taught by an infallible authority,” whether he means the Pope, the Church or the Bible, *he is not a liberal*.¹³

Cleobury is quite explicit about evangelicals: “And some of my conservative evangelical friends seem to think that the necessary and sufficient reason for believing anything in the field of religion is that it can be ‘Proved from Scripture’.”¹⁴ Clearly, Cleobury would take major issue with this particular book.

A robust evangelical doctrine of Scripture construes Scripture in a threefold way: (1) Scripture is the definitive source for our knowledge of God: his character, will, and ways. (2) Scripture is the verbally inspired, definitive witness to the words and acts of God in history. (3) Scripture is not only a source and a witness but also the norm by which theological proposals are to be tested. In terms of authority, Scripture is the *norma normans* (norming norm).

Bibliology and Christology

There is the closest of connections between our Bibliology (doctrine of the Book) and our Christology (doctrine of the person and work of Christ) at this point. Jesus lived by every word that proceeded out of the mouth of God as his encounter with the devil in the wilderness shows in Matthew 4:1–11 (about which I’ll say more later, p. 31). Jesus also encountered human opposition to his mission from Pharisees and Sadducees. His debate on one occasion with some Sadducees is instructive. Jesus was presented

13. F. H. Cleobury, *Liberal Christian Orthodoxy* (London: James Clarke, 1963), 14; my emphasis.

14. Cleobury, *Liberal Christian Orthodoxy*, 15.

with a conundrum: If a woman dies having been married many times, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? The Sadducees didn't actually believe in the resurrection, so their aim was to show up Jesus as foolish. Jesus's response is striking (Matt. 22:29–32):

But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."

For a start, notice that Jesus believed that you can err theologically ("You are wrong"), which is an unpopular idea in a relativistic age like ours. The Sadducees' formal error was not believing the Scriptures. These Jews prized the books of Moses, so Jesus quoted from Exodus 3:6 as his case in point.¹⁵ Their material error was not reckoning with the content and implications of the very part of the Old Testament that they believed. Exodus 3:6 implies that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were in some sense alive in the presence of God. God is, not was, the God of all three. No wonder the crowds were amazed at Jesus's teaching (Matt. 22:33).

Moreover, Jesus did not simply make a statement about their error; he asked a penetrating question: "Have you not read . . . ?" It would be strange indeed if the follower of Christ had a lesser view of Scripture than the Christ he or she claimed to follow.¹⁶ Scripture needs to be read accordingly, that is to say,

15. Logically speaking, Jesus employed a non-fallacious form of the *ad hominem* argument. He used the very Scripture the Sadducees regarded as authoritative to reveal that the text had consequences that undermined their position.

16. This is not a work of apology (defense). Instead, it is a work of clarification. It seeks to clarify theological method. Apologetics is a different discipline with different methods. Apologetics is a work of justification. It seeks to show the justification for Christianity's truth claims, including truth claims about the Bible (its authority,

with high confidence: read for sense, read for sustenance, and read for its doctrine. To use the classic evangelical metaphor, Scripture is the touchstone of faith. Scripture provides quality assurance when it comes to testing whether our theological proposals are real gold or fool's gold. Bishop J. C. Ryle (1816–1900) serves as an example. He wrote:

Let me first of all ask every one who reads this paper, to arm himself with a thorough knowledge of the written Word of God. Unless we do this we are at the mercy of any false teacher. We shall not see through the mistakes of an erring Peter. We shall not be able to imitate the faithfulness of a courageous Paul. An ignorant laity will always be the bane of a Church. A Bible-reading laity may save a Church from ruin. Let us read the Bible regularly, daily, and with fervent prayer, and become familiar with its contents. Let us receive nothing, believe nothing, follow nothing, which is not in the Bible, nor can be proved by the Bible. Let our rule of faith, *our touchstone of all teaching*, be the written Word of God.¹⁷

In this quote, Ryle exemplifies the classical evangelical tradition in its high view of Scripture as he warns churches of the dangers of abandoning belief in the Bible's authority.

The Matter of Interpretation (Hermeneutics)

It is one thing, though, to have a high view of the Bible's verbal inspiration and authority. It is another to interpret Scripture aright. Is the Bible to be read like no other book or like every

inspiration, inerrancy, canonicity, etc.). For a work of apology, see D. A. Carson, ed., *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016).

17. J. C. Ryle, "The Fallibility of Ministers," chap. 6 in *Warnings to the Churches* (London: Banner of Truth, 1967), <http://www.nrcrws.org/warnings-to-churches.htm>, accessed May 4, 2019; my emphasis. A "touchstone" was an assaying tool for testing whether gold or silver is genuine. A fine-grained piece of quartz or jasper will leave a particular color streak when the ore is marked with it.

other book? R. C. Sproul is one theologian who recognized how we need to read Scripture. He wrote:

Over time I have not only learned about God but I learned the proper rules for reading his Word so that I could understand correctly who this God is, what he demands, and what he has done for sinners. Learning how to read the Scripture, I dare say, was as important as reading the Bible itself. My reading of sacred Scripture from cover to cover and growth in understanding of how to read the Bible correctly—is what defined my theology and my entire career of teaching and preaching the Word of God.¹⁸

The question is, How are we to read Scripture in a way that retrieves its true sense? Regarding this, I believe that the hermeneutic of the Reformers of the sixteenth century is still instructive for us: Scripture interprets Scripture, Scripture is not to be interpreted against Scripture, and plain Scripture is to interpret obscure Scripture.¹⁹

Scripture interpreting Scripture is predicated on the idea that the primary author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit working concursively with human authors. There is thus a unity to divine self-revelation. The book of Hebrews affirms this double agency as can be seen where the writer uses Psalm 95 to encourage the Jewish Christian readers to stay true to Christ and not to drift away because of hostile societal pressure. In Hebrews 3:7 we read, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice.’” The writer proceeds to quote Psalm 95 at length. Hebrews 3:7–11, therefore, is clearly asserting that Psalm 95 is the Spirit’s speech. In the next chapter the human

18. R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 11. Sproul’s book is an excellent contemporary introduction to hermeneutics that is scholarly but accessible in that the scholarship is not obtrusive.

19. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 51–53. Sproul also highly values the Reformers’ hermeneutic.

dimension comes to the fore. In Hebrews 4:7, we learn that this word was spoken through David:

Again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”

Dual authorship is also in view in 2 Peter 1:21, which asserts with reference to Scripture that men spoke for God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

That Scripture is not to be interpreted against Scripture also assumes that the Holy Spirit, as the primary author of Scripture, knows what he is doing and that there is a consistency in truth telling in Scripture. After all, Scripture describes the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth. This claim does not mean that everything is straightforward in Scripture and easy to interpret. There are difficulties and tensions. On the relation of faith and works, does James 2 contradict Ephesians 2? I think not, because these texts are addressing different pastoral needs. But analysis and careful exegesis are needed to show this. The all-too-facile move is to pit biblical author against biblical author. Although in my view Barth did not have a biblically robust doctrine of Scripture, he was right in advising students on the occasion of his farewell before his expulsion from Germany in 1935: “And now the end has come. So listen to my piece of advice: exegesis, exegesis, and yet more exegesis! Keep to the Word, to the Scripture that has been given to us.”²⁰

20. Quoted in Gordon Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster, 2002), v. I heard this wise remark years ago: “Have many teachers but only one Master.” The evangelical ought to be open to wisdom from any source, yet under the lordship of Christ.

The last Reformation interpretive, or hermeneutical, principle to note is that of allowing the plain Scripture to interpret the obscure Scripture. There are things difficult to understand in Scripture, as Peter claims with Paul's writings in view (2 Pet. 3:15–16):

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

This is such an interesting statement. Peter puts Paul's letters in the category of Scripture. Moreover, he acknowledges that there is a level of interpretative difficulty in Paul's letters and that they can be misused. Whatever is meant by the perspicuity, or clarity, of Scripture needs to take statements like this one into account.²¹ For example, what does being baptized on behalf of the dead mean in 1 Corinthians 15:29? The Corinthian readers obviously would have known, but do we? It appears to have been a practice at Corinth, and Paul makes an appeal to it to bolster belief in the bodily resurrection of believers. He does not refer to the practice in any of his other letters that we have. It would be methodologically perilous to build a doctrine on one such obscure statement, though some do.²²

21. For a recent examination of the clarity issue, see Mark D. Thompson, "The Generous Gift of a Gracious Father: Toward a Theological Account of the Clarity of Scripture," in Carson, *Enduring Authority*, 615–43. Also, see Graham Cole, "Sola Scriptura: Some Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," 29: "The majority Protestant view understood the analogy of faith as the analogy of the whole Scripture (*analogia totius Scripturae*)." https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/churchman/104-01_020.pdf, accessed March 16, 2017.

22. For the Mormon use of 1 Cor. 15:29 to justify proxy baptism, see "1 Corinthians 15–16," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (website), <https://www.lds.org/manual/new-testament-student-manual/1-corinthians/chapter-40-1-corinthians-15-16?lang=eng>, accessed March 23, 2017.

The classic analogy-of-faith hermeneutic, however, needs nuancing. This nuancing recognizes the role of genre in a wise reading strategy. Scripture is to be interpreted genre by genre by genre. R. C. Sproul offers great wisdom on this matter. One of the illustrations he uses concerns Adam as portrayed in Genesis. He writes: “The opening chapters of Genesis provide real difficulty to the person who wants to pinpoint the precise literary genre used. Part of the text has the earmarks of historical literature, yet part of it exhibits the kind of imagery found in symbolic literature.”²³ He concludes, “Only after we determine what kind of literature it is can we discern what it is communicating to us as history.”²⁴

Bible-believing readers of Scripture may disagree at the level of genre identification without disagreeing as to the authority of Scripture as God’s word written. I remember a debate I had as a younger Christian with an older Christian friend who told me that if in Luke 10 (the story of the Good Samaritan) Jesus was not reporting a real robbery on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and then using it to draw a moral lesson, this friend would cease to believe. I was puzzled and asked why. He said that if Jesus was the divine Son of God, he would not tell truth through a lie. I replied that Luke 10 was a parable, but to no avail.

In addition, biblical truth claims need to be located in their contexts with an appreciation of their place in redemptive history as it unfolds along the biblical plotline. To account for these contexts is to practice what some call “the theological interpretation of Scripture” or, as I understand it, “biblical theology.” Brian Rosner brings both these phrases together in this helpful explanation:

To sum up, biblical theology may be defined as theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds

23. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 58.

24. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 58.

with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyze and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus.²⁵

Jesus was the interpreter of the biblical text par excellence. Importantly, he interpreted Scripture theologically. This can be seen vividly in his dialogue with the devil in the wilderness. In Matthew 4:1–11 we see Jesus as the anointed Messiah, bearer of the Spirit, confronted by the tempter. At the end of the encounter Jesus is triumphant. Unlike that other son of God, Israel, which failed in the wilderness when temptation came, this Son of God stays faithful. The first temptation concerns Jesus's hunger. Surely the Son of God can turn stones into bread. Jesus meets the temptation with the word of God (Matt. 4:4; cf. Deut. 8:3):

It is written,

“Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth
of God.”

The second temptation uses Scripture. The devil quotes from Psalm 91:11–12, but again Jesus replies with Scripture: “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Matt. 4:7; cf. Deut. 6:16). The last temptation too is met with Scripture (Matt. 4:10; cf. Deut. 6:13):

For it is written,

“You shall worship the Lord your God
and him only shall you serve.”

25. Brian S. Rosner, “Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity and Diversity of Scripture*, ed. Brian S. Rosner, T. Alexander, Graeme Goldsworthy, and D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 10.

This is no mere proof-texting on Jesus's part. Each time, he quotes from Moses's farewell address to Israel reported in Deuteronomy. This is no accident. Israel succumbed to each of the temptations in the wilderness. Israel complained about their lack of food (Ex. 16:1–3). Israel put God to the test ten times (Num. 14:20–23) and worshiped the golden calf (Ex. 32). That son of God failed. This Son of God does not. Jesus lives by “It is written.” But “it is written” is deployed theologically. Each quote is predicated on the contrast between God's Old Testament son and Jesus as the one who is all that Israel should have been.

An Important Distinction

There is an important distinction to be made between one's espoused theology and one's operational theology. We may espouse a high view of Scripture, but our practices may suggest otherwise. For example, if we claim that Scripture is our touchstone but never refer to it in making doctrinal claims, then there is a radical disconnect between what is espoused and what is practiced. Surely this is a spiritually dangerous position to be in.

Scripture does need to be read for its sense. Doctrine needs to be grounded on Scripture, but so does the reader. Scripture needs also to be read for spiritual sustenance. Jesus compared Scripture to bread (Matt. 4). Peter described the word of God as milk (1 Pet. 2:2). Theologian J. I. Packer helps us here in explaining how to do biblical meditation: “Turn what you read about God into prayer and praise to God.”²⁶ The book of Psalms illuminates the way from the very first psalm. Psalm 1 contrasts the righteous person and the wicked one. The righteous person meditates on the instruction of God (*torah*). Psalm 77 puts a finer point on it. The psalmist meditates on the mighty deeds of God. The psalm does not elaborate, but those deeds most likely

26. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 18–19.

are those of the great rescue of God's people from Egypt and his bringing them into the land of promise—in other words, the gospel of the Old Testament. The Hebrew word for “meditate” in both Psalm 1 and Psalm 77 is used in Isaiah for the sound of doves cooing or moaning (e.g., Isa. 38:14). So, again, most likely it involves a slow, out-loud reading of the text that requires a focused attention. No speed-reading here.

If Scripture is going to feed us and indeed transform us, then it needs to be engaged with our openness to being transformed by it so that what we espouse as Christians and how we operate as Christians are in the closest of connections.

Wisdom from the Past

Metaphor embodies a comparison. A striking metaphor shows the hidden likeness between things now brought out into the open. Sixteenth-century Reformer John Calvin provides three such striking metaphors when it comes to Scripture: Scripture as *spectacles*, Scripture as the *labyrinthine thread*, and Scripture as a *school*. He also provides another striking metaphor in arguing that Scripture is to be read for its *sacra doctrina* (sacred teaching), which constitutes the *scepter* by which Christ rules his church. All these ideas are found in Calvin's famous work *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* of 1559.

As someone who has worn glasses for most of my life, I appreciate Calvin's spectacles metaphor for Scripture. He wrote:

For as the aged, or those whose sight is defective, when any book however fair, is set before them, though they perceive that there is something written, are scarcely able to make out two consecutive words, but, when aided by glasses, begin to read distinctly, so Scripture, gathering together the impressions of Deity, which, till then, lay

confused in our minds, dissipates the darkness, and shows us the true God clearly.²⁷

Scripture brings the character, will, and ways of God into sharp relief. It does the same for understanding humankind. According to Calvin, wisdom lies in knowing God and knowing ourselves. Scripture names the God to whom I pray. I am not like those Athenians whom Paul preached to in Acts 17, who had built an altar to the unknown God. God has spoken. Scripture reveals that I am not the product of blind evolutionary forces or pitiless nature but am made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–28).

Calvin's next metaphor shows his classical education.

We should consider that the brightness of the Divine countenance, which even an apostle declares to be inaccessible, (1 Tim. 6:16) is a kind of labyrinth,—a labyrinth to us inextricable, if the Word do not serve us as a thread to guide our path; and that it is better to limp in the way, than run with the greatest swiftness out of it.²⁸

The Labyrinth was an underground maze in Crete in which King Minos housed a monster.²⁹ The Minotaur was a hybrid that was both human and bull. Theseus of Athens killed the beast in the Labyrinth and was able to find his way out because Ariadne the daughter of Minos had given him a ball of twine so he could find his way out. (This is a love story too, at least for Ariadne.) The twine became known as the Labyrinthine thread. Calvin's point is that as folk lost in our sin, we need a way back to God. That way is found in Scripture.

27. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 1.6.1, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes>, accessed June 5, 2019.

28. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.3.

29. For the details of the story, see Simon Goldhill, "Greece," in *World Mythology: The Illustrated Guide*, ed. Roy Willis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 150–51.

The apostle Paul construed Scripture as a teacher that instructs (2 Tim. 3:14–17). Calvin's next metaphor is a related one. He saw Scripture as a school in which the believer learns from the Holy Spirit.

There are others who, when they would cure this disease, recommend that the subject of predestination should scarcely if ever be mentioned, and tell us to shun every question concerning it as we would a rock. Although their moderation is justly commendable in thinking that such mysteries should be treated with moderation, yet because they keep too far within the proper measure, they have little influence over the human mind, which does not readily allow itself to be curbed. Therefore, in order to keep the legitimate course in this matter, we must return to the word of God, in which we are furnished with the right rule of understanding. For Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which as nothing useful and necessary to be known has been omitted, so nothing is taught but what it is of importance to know.³⁰

One last metaphor is worth our attention. In his prefatory address to Francis the king of France, Calvin refers to the word of God as God's scepter. He wrote: "He, moreover, deceives himself who anticipates long prosperity to any kingdom which is not ruled by the scepter of God, that is, by his divine word. For the heavenly oracle is infallible which has declared, that 'where there is no vision the people perish' (Proverbs 29:18)."³¹

The Doctrine of the Trinity: A Textless Doctrine?

The word of God then is our source of the knowledge of God, the definitive witness to the words and deeds of God, and the

30. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.3.

31. Calvin, preface to the *Institutes*, 1:15.

norm for both our thinking about God and our living before God. But who is this God we are to believe? And what if the words we use to describe the God of the Bible are not in the Bible? The term “Trinity” is the great example. How do we do faithful theology in this instance? Let’s explore the question.

Classic Christianity claims that the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: one substance in three persons. This is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. But why believe it? In brief, because of the cumulative weight of many and varied biblical testimonies. That there is only one God is affirmed in both the Old Testament and the New. At the heart of Israel’s faith is the claim found in Deuteronomy 6:4–5: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Jesus reaffirmed that very claim in debate with the Pharisees in Mark 12:29–30: When asked which commandment matters most, he answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’”

When the fullness of time came and the Son of God was sent to redeem his people, and when the risen Son poured out the promised Holy Spirit, the idea of oneness soon showed a need for nuancing. Hence, we find that the baptismal formula at the climax of Matthew’s account of Jesus affirms both the oneness of the only God there is and the distinctness and inseparability of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:18–20):

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name [singular] 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.”

These and many other testimonies in the end demanded nothing less than the concept of the Trinity to make sense of them: oneness, threeness, substance, persons, inseparability, and distinctness. My point is a simple one: The doctrine of the Trinity is not a textless doctrine. If it were, and given that Scripture is the *norma normans*, then the doctrine of the Trinity would be fatally wounded.

More Wisdom from the Past

Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) was the first Protestant archbishop of Canterbury. He was also martyred for his Reformation faith. In fact, there is a mosaic cross set in the Broad Street pavement in Oxford. It marks the place where he was burned at the stake. He knew the value of Scripture as the means by which God spiritually feeds his children. He also knew the importance of prayer in relation to profiting from Scripture. One of his famous prayers is about this. The English is antiquated but the thrust is clear:

Blessed Lord, which hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; grant us that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, and inwardly digest them; that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our savior Jesus Christ.³²

Conclusion

Doing theology needs a secure epistemological base. God’s word written is that base. Textless theology is free of such

32. Quoted in C. Frederick Barbee and Paul F. M. Zahl, *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 4.

divine moorings. It is also important to recognize that other authorities operate in a theologian's life. The evangelical theologian holds to *sola Scriptura*, not *nuda Scriptura*. Reformation scholar Scott Manetsch explains the difference well:

Evangelical Christians in North America sometimes misunderstand the Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura* to mean that the Bible is the Christian's only theological resource, that it can and should be denuded of its churchly context (hence *nuda Scriptura*). Such an understanding is altogether incorrect.³³

Theology is not done in a tradition-free or context-free zone. For example, in this chapter, Calvin was drawn upon for helpful extrabiblical metaphors to use of Scripture. In other words, I drew upon the Reformation tradition to illuminate the topic under discussion. More will be said about the appeal to the role of tradition in the next chapter. However, suffice it to say for our present purpose that in any contest between Scripture and tradition, Scripture alone (*sola*) is the final court of appeal. In addition, it is important to recognize that the theologian is an interpreter of Scripture.

Once more, the theologian can find help from the past. The Reformers of the sixteenth century had a high view of biblical authority and a way of interpreting Scripture that recognized its nature as the inspired word of God, rather than as a mere anthology of ideas about God in texts from ancient Israel and the early church. Finally, God uses Scripture not only to inform his people but also to transform them. The practice of biblical meditation as found in the Psalms is a key practice serving that end.

33. See Scott M. Manetsch, "Is the Reformation Over? John Calvin, Roman Catholicism, and Contemporary Ecumenical Conversations," *Themelios* 36, no. 2 (2011): 199–200, <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/is-the-reformation-over-john-calvin-roman-catholicism-and-contemporary-ecum>.