

## Revelation, Theology, and Bibliology

We behold God as the Spirit moves in our experience of the world, the Scriptures, and Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Today, God's revelation through these means revolves around the life of the church.<sup>2</sup> As we behold God and respond rightly, we are illuminated and transformed: raised up into greater unity with the uncreated One and, paradoxically, more fully realized in creation as ourselves.<sup>3</sup> To grow in the knowledge of God, then, is to move and be moved into the place, perspective, and power that God has ordained, in wisdom and grace, for his glory and our good.<sup>4</sup>

Though we know God truly and personally, God, in his being, is qualitatively unique, and we can only speak in reference to him analogically.<sup>5</sup> Theology is the conversation in which we attempt to say all that we can about all that we experience in light of the Trinitarian God who is creating and redeeming the world through and for Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> Thus, everyone is a theologian, and the diversity of the theological conversation, both in contents and participants, mirrors the diversity of creation itself.<sup>7</sup> In theology, we are committed to growing in the knowledge of God and saying to one another what is and what is not.<sup>8</sup> We speak through dialogues, papers, and sermons, but perhaps we speak to the greatest effect through poems, paintings, and buildings.<sup>9</sup> Liturgies, rituals of worship, both special and ordinary, corporate and private, are the means by which the theological conversation works its way into our hearts.<sup>10</sup> When speaking well, some of what we say is dogma, some doctrine, and the rest good speculation.<sup>11</sup> At best, all of what we say is approximate.<sup>12</sup> Together as one people after one mind, we continue the theological conversation in hope of entering deeper into the plenitude of the mystery of God and his purposes in creation.<sup>13</sup> Toward that end, we rejoice in the dawn of the postmodern era: We are being set free from the tyranny of the secular, and we have the understanding in Christ to triumph over nihilistic humanism.<sup>14</sup>

The Scriptures are the Word of God.<sup>15</sup> The very words of the autographs were both chosen by God and selected by gifted and intentioned individuals to communicate within their grammatical, literary, and historical contexts.<sup>16</sup> When rightly interpreted, the Scriptures are wholly true: their perspectives are beautiful, their descriptions faithful, their propositions consistent, and their predictions accurate.<sup>17</sup> The Scriptures are a clear and sufficient means for the Spirit to reveal God to humanity for salvation through faith.<sup>18</sup> Though they are not an exhaustive source of truth, all true theology begins with the Scriptures because they uniquely present Jesus Christ and the narrative in which all things have their ultimate meaning.<sup>19</sup> That said, in so addressing humanity, the Scriptures offer insight into every issue of life with unparalleled depth and simplicity.<sup>20</sup> Though the Scriptures are far from the whole of God's revelation to man through prophecy, they exemplify the standard against which all prophecy is measured.<sup>21</sup> In response to the severe disunity of the bishops during the Reformation, the Western church canonized the Scriptures in order to preserve the unity of the church under the authority of Christ.<sup>22</sup> The Scriptures now formally consist of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, though these are by no means the only helpful books for Christian devotion.<sup>23</sup> Over the centuries, the Scriptures have been faithfully preserved through the careful and critical transmission of manuscripts.<sup>24</sup> Today, the majority of people encounter the Scriptures through translations that faithfully convey the original meaning to contemporary cultures on all essential matters of faith.<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> God reveals himself in the world (Ps 19:1; Rom 1:20; Prov 6:6) the Scriptures (Deut 8:3; 2 Tim 3:16-17), and Jesus Christ (John 14:9; Heb 1:1-3). “We know God because of his threefold revelation: the Word to the world, the Word in the world, and the World of the Word. These three means of revelation are in perfect harmony. They complement each other. One is not ‘truer’ than the others; each is Truth. One is not ‘clearer’ than the others; each sufficiently reveals what it is intended to convey. If we neglect one or two of these cords, therefore, we will be neglecting the gracious self-revelation of God.” Glenn R. Kreider and Michael J. Svigel, *A Practical Primer on Theological Method: Table Manners for Discussing God, His Words, and His Ways* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 56.

God even reveals himself in, for example, the being and motions of distant stars, broken human culture, iconography, fresh presentations and derivations of the biblical story, and non-Christians thinking and acting like Jesus. What the church has said about icons can be applied more generally, to varying degrees, to any means through which the goodness, beauty, and truth of God shines. “Whenever these representations are contemplated, they will cause those who look at them to commemorate and love their prototype. . . they are an object of veneration and honor, but not of real worship, which is reserved for Him Who is the subject of our faith and is proper for the divine nature.” *Second Council of Nicaea* 787.

When we neglect God’s self-revelation through creation we quite literally lose touch with reality. Bemoaning this, C.S. Lewis wove an antireductionist theme throughout many of his writings (*e.g.*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*), calling his reader to see the world as it truly is, a world of deep spiritual meaning, significance, and mystery. Lewis says, “The value of the myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by ‘the veil of familiarity.’ . . . By dipping them in myth we see them more clearly.” C.S. Lewis, “The Dethronement of Power,” in *Tolkien and His Critics: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien and the Lord of the Rings* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 12. When we search for God’s self-revelation through creation, we realize that “[t]he world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; / It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil.” Gerald Manly Hopkins, *God’s Grandeur*.

Commenting on Revelation 19:13, Mounce weaves together this threefold chord, emphasizing the power of God’s self-expression. “The name of the warrior is ‘The Word of God.’ Here is a striking link with the prologue of the Fourth Gospel, where the preexistent Son is the Word (John 1:1), who in God’s time became incarnate and lived among us (John 1:14). As the title is used in Revelation, however, it emphasizes not so much the self-revelation of God as it does the authoritative declaration by which the nations of the world are destroyed. In Hebrew thought a word is not a lifeless sound but an active agent that achieves the intention of the one who speaks (Gen 1:3, 7, 9, etc.). The Word of God is God fulfilling his divine purpose. This idea finds expression in Heb 4:12, ‘The word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword.’ The same concept is found in the Wisdom of Solomon in connection with the death of the firstborn in Egypt: ‘Thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of thy authentic command’ (18:15–16). The Messiah as avenging warrior is appropriately named ‘the Word [the powerful and active utterance] of God.’” Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, in *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997). EBSCOhost eBook Collection.

<sup>2</sup> The church is the present locus of God’s redeeming work and is so precisely by the power of the threefold chord of his self-revelation. There is no place to behold God more clearly than in the active life of a church that revolves around the word of God. God is even using the church to display his glory to all creation (Eph 3:10). “They who are placed without the Church, cannot attain to any understanding of the divine word. For the ship exhibits a type of Church, the word of life placed and preached within which, they who are without, and lie near like barren and useless sands, cannot understand.” Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew* 13:1. Note, however, that the life of the church has a diversity of expressions. God has and continues to reveal himself in the desert and the mountain top, in silence and solitude. We are wrong to imagine these places as separate from the church.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 3:18. Salvation is not only ethical and epistemological, but metaphysical. The experience of God affects who we are at the deepest level and thus permeates our being with the presence and significant of God. “For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God. For if the manifestation of God which is made by means of the creation, affords life to all living in the earth, much more does that revelation of the Father which comes through the Word, give life to those who see God.” Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, IV.20.7.

<sup>4</sup> John 17:3; Job 28:28. In the (post)modern age, a distinction needs to be made between knowledge as defined above and ideas, basic linguistic artifacts, that represent knowledge in the context of axiomatic systems. Knowledge is not the accumulation of so-called abstract objects in the mind that can be freely gathered to any desired effect. Rather, it is a gifted participation in God’s life and greater experience of the peculiar creature, in freedom and passion, that we were each made to become. Aquinas discusses this rich notion of being as *habitus*. For an introduction, see John Milbank, Simon Oliver, *et al.*, “Interview and Conversation with John Milbank and Simon Oliver: Radical Orthodoxy and Christian psychology I – theological underpinnings,” *Edification* 6 (2012): 64. ATLA Religion Database.

<sup>5</sup> Matt 19:17. God is not analogous to creation by proportion. Rather, God is analogous to creation by attribution. Aquinas's famous example of this type of analogy is *healthy* food. Food is not healthy in or for itself. Food is judged as healthy in relation to a person and the effect it has on them. Similarly, God is not someone who does good all the time or is infinite in proportion to us with regard to goodness. God is Goodness, and our goodness is that which satisfies his will. We truly do "live and move and have our being" in him (Acts 17:28). Simon Oliver, "Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: from Participation to Late Modernity," in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, eds. John Milbank and Simon Oliver (London: Routledge, 2009), 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> "Every Christian, then, is... a Christian theologian in that he or she reflects on the meaning of God's Word and how it illuminates life, giving meaning and purpose to existence." Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Every experience is pregnant with meaning; every meaning requires a diversity of perspectives to reach maturity; and every perspective says something about God. For a consideration of the contribution of different perspectives to Christian theology (academic, artistic, pastoral, scientific, *etc.*) see Glenn R. Kreider and Michael J. Svigel, *A Practical Primer on Theological Method: Table Manners for Discussing God, His Words, and His Ways* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 17-24.

<sup>8</sup> The conversation of theology is born out of an experience of God and energized by faith. "I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate thy sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand." Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogium* I. It is never an objective analysis of disinterested observers.

<sup>9</sup> Whether we realize it or not, we all know this, but we may not know why it is so. The difference may be in how these art forms excite the imagination through sensation. Synthesizing the philosophies of Tolkien, Lewis, and Coleridge, David Mosley proposes that "the imagination, in its key or primary function, is an organ of perception by which we discover and shape the meaning of the world around us. This perception, further, is a participation in the creative act of God." David Russell Mosley, "Toward a theology of the imagination with S.T. Coleridge, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien," *Religions* 11 (2020), 8, ATLA Religion Database.

<sup>10</sup> Smith argues in an Augustinian flavor that "[h]uman persons are intentional creatures whose fundamental way of 'intending' the world is love or desire. This love or desire—which is unconscious or noncognitive—is always aimed at some vision of the good life, some particular articulation of the kingdom. What primes us to be so oriented—and act accordingly—is a set of habits or dispositions that are formed in us through affective, bodily means, especially bodily practice, routines, or rituals that grab hold of our hearts through our imagination, which is closely linked to our bodily senses." James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, in *Cultural Liturgies*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009) 62-63.

<sup>11</sup> Millard Erickson, for example, weights theological statements from strongest to weakest according to the classification of "direct statements of Scripture", "direct implications of Scripture", "probable implications of Scripture", "inductive conclusions from Scripture", "conclusions inferred from the general revelation", and "outright speculations." Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 83. Apart from the degree of relatedness to Scripture, there are other concerns that determine the way in which we hold and evaluate doctrines. For example, the *regula fidei*. "On the whole, then, if that is evidently more true which is earlier, if that is earlier which is from the very beginning, if that is from the beginning which has the apostles for its authors, then it will certainly be quite as evident, that that comes down from the apostles, which has been kept as a sacred deposit in the churches of the apostles." Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.5.

"Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all." Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory* II.6. Every local church has a responsibility to define or adopt a standard of universal orthodoxy. This requires both historical and contemporary considerations. For a historical standard, the Seven Ecumenical Councils are helpful. Though contemporary issues are often so difficult to handle that they necessarily fall into heterodoxy, in cases such as homosexuality and transgenderism, the Bible and the apostolic tradition speak so clearly that churches can and must take a definitive stance. However, taking such a stance does not satisfy the complementary responsibility of the church to speak the truth in love.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor 13:8-13. The ideal in creating a statement is not that it is True, but that it has the greatest possible participation in the Truth wherever it is spoken, read, or heard. "The mood of philosophy [and theology] is not that of the person who waits until he finds a solution utterly free from difficulties; it is rather the mood of one who knows very well that the best available is itself imperfect... Philosophy in this, as in so many intellectual decisions... is the

art of balancing imperfect alternatives.” D. Elton Trueblood quoted in Graham A. Cole, *Against the Darkness: The Doctrine of Angels, Satan, and Demons, Foundations of Evangelical Theology Series* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019), 138.

<sup>13</sup> Eph 4:9-16; Phil 1:27-2:11. We might disagree with one another because of ignorance, irrationality, selfishness, or evil. We also might disagree because of our unique perspective, giftedness, commitments, or love of what is good. Wisdom in disagreement is the courage to name the former and the humility to celebrate the latter. On top of that, our God is infinitely deep and wonderfully mysterious. “Oh, the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways” (Rom 11:33)!

<sup>14</sup> “The end of modernity... means the end of a single system of truth based on universal reason... With this ending, there ends also the modern predicament of theology. It no longer has to measure up to the accepted secular standards of scientific truth or normative rationality. Nor, concomitantly, to a fixed notion of the knowing subject, which was usually the modern, as opposed to the pre-modern, way of securing universal reason. This caused problems for theology, because an approach grounded in subjective aspiration can only precariously affirm objective values and divine transcendence.” John Milbank, “‘Postmodern critical Augustinianism’: a short summa in forty-two responses to unasked questions,” in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, ed. John Milbank and Simon Oliver, 49-62 (New York: Routledge, 2009), 49.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Tim 3:16. The Scriptures do not contain the Word of God, as Ritschl taught, nor do they become the Word of God, as Barth taught. In the normal sense, they simply are the Word of God, τῇ γραφῇ θεόπνευστος. “We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative Word of God. We deny that the Scriptures receive their authority from the Church, tradition, or any other human source.” Article I, *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* 1982.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Pet 1:21. The words, not merely the intended meaning, are inspired by God. “Let us listen to what the Holy Spirit has said through the mouth of the holy prophet in the words of the Psalm.” Augustine, *Exposition of Psalm 33* On the gifting of the writers, Hodge and Warfield say, “The Scriptures were generated through sixteen centuries of this divinely regulated concurrence of God and man, of the natural and the supernatural, of reason and revelation, of providence and grace. ... Each sacred writer was by God specially formed, endowed, educated, providentially conditioned, and then supplied with knowledge naturally, supernaturally, and spiritually conveyed, so that he, and he alone could, and freely would, produce his allotted part.” A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, “Inspiration,” in *The Presbyterian Review* 2 (1881), 230. On the intention of the writers, Chou says, “The intent of the scriptural authors is sophisticated. ... the biblical writers are complex and careful readers and writers of Scripture. They understood Scripture with immense precision, from its intertextual context down to the very word. They carefully interwove various passages (which are themselves tied to various passages) to formulate profound theology under the superintendence of the Spirit. They consequently set up for later writers to do the same and so Scripture has a compounding complexity.” Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 231. This understanding of plenary verbal, dual-authorship inspiration motives a hermeneutic that seriously considers tense, syntax, semantics, metaphors, types, forms, genres, geography, artifacts, literature, philosophy, and many other related and interrelated factors.

<sup>17</sup> Ps 119:160; John 17:17. The doctrine of inerrancy is a corollary of the doctrine of inspiration. If the God who is True speaks, he does so truly. Further, if he means to be heard and understood, he will be. “The statements, however, of holy Scriptures will never be discordant with truth. A corrupt tree will never yield good fruit, unless the better nature be grafted into it; nor will a good tree produce evil fruit, except by the same process of cultivation.” Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul* 21.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Tim 3:17. “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.” *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* 6. “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word; and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and the government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.” *Westminster Confession of Faith* I.6.

<sup>19</sup> Job 28:28 cf. *Ex* 31:3. The Scriptures uniquely present the meta-narrative of creation and redemption, from beginning to end, oriented around the Lord Jesus Christ, the *logos* and *telos* of all things (John 1:1; Eph 1:10).

<sup>20</sup> Ps 1:3. John MacArthur represents the modern fundamentalist position when he says that the Scripture is a “qualified guide for every situation,” and that “it meets every need in life.” John MacArthur, “The Sufficiency of Scripture,” in *The Masters Seminary Journal* 15 no. 2 (2004): 166. This is a significant and unwarranted amendment to the traditional protestant doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture.

Commenting on 2 Timothy 3:17, Yarbrough magnifies the value of the Scriptures for everyone without losing sight of the special relevance that they have to church elders. “Paul asserts here the outcome of Scripture’s origin and utility. He stresses its effect on Timothy: he will be able to rise to meet whatever challenge presents itself—‘be thoroughly equipped.’ . . . Perhaps Paul is speaking generically, yet still mindful of the pastoral utility of the Scriptures he has just detailed in their particular relevance to Timothy’s flourishing as Paul passes from the scene.” Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, gen. ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018). EBSCOhost eBook Collection.

<sup>21</sup> Deborah, Elijah, and countless others spoke the Word of God. Though I have not personally experienced anyone gifted by God in that way, I understand that it will happen again (Rev 11:3-12). However, until then, the definition of prophecy has not changed. Prophecy as the Word of God is always consistent (Deut 13:1-5), and the mark of a true prophet is specific and demonstrable accuracy, often accompanied by supporting signs (Deut 18:15-22).

<sup>22</sup> Isa 55:11. We have no evidence to suggest that the 1st century church met to canonize texts; however, there was an evident Scripture-consciousness inherited from Judaism. Peter refers to some of Paul’s writings as being of the same quality as the Old Testament (2 Pet 3:16), and it is likely that Paul referred to some of Luke’s writings in a similar way (1 Tim 5:18 cf. Luke 17:10). The earliest Fathers recognized inspired texts and promoted their use in the church. “[Paul], when among you, accurately and steadfastly taught the word of truth in the presence of those who were then alive. And when absent from you, he wrote you a letter, which, if you carefully study, you will find to be the means of building you up in that faith which has been given you.” *Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians* 3. Though agreement did form on the quality of a core collection of texts, there was widespread and enduring disagreement about a number of texts from the earliest Fathers all the way to the Reformation. For example, Athanasius’ *Easter Letter* 367 is notable for containing the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. However, it includes Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah while excluding Esther.

As oral tradition, apostolic succession, and the unity of the episcopate proved to be insufficient means of arbitrating church controversy, canonical lists were developed as a more objective source of church unity. For an extended discussion on canonization, see D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, “The New Testament Canon,” in *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 726-743. EBSCOhost eBook Collection.

<sup>23</sup> In hindsight, it seems best to accept only the *Tanakh* as the inspired Old Testament Scriptures. This is the position of the Jews as well as the Orthodox and Protestant churches. Roman acceptance of the seven Hebrew apocryphal texts, though justified in part by appeal to Augustine, feels contrived. The Orthodox position evidences that it was a decision heavily influenced (and compromised) by the theological drift of the late scholastic period and the resultant chaos of the Reformation.

Regarding the New Testament, it seems best to accept those first-century writings with apostolic association, catholic value, and doctrinal consistency. On this point, among the churches grounded in the ancient faith, there is no controversy. However, that lack of controversy should not be taken for granted. Even Luther felt comfortable challenging the inspiration of several New Testament books. This underscores the fact that the church has always cared more about the authority of Christ than a list of books.

<sup>24</sup> The New Testament in particular has been so well preserved and so rigorously scrutinized that we know exactly what the original text is everywhere it really matters. Wallace says, “The wealth of material available for determining the wording of the original NT is staggering: about 5700 Greek NT MSS, as many as 20,000 versional MSS, and more than one million quotations by patristic writers. In comparison with the average ancient Greek author, the NT copies are well over a thousand times more plentiful. . . . This is indeed an embarrassment of riches.” Daniel B. Wallace, “Laying a Foundation,” in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, editors Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 43. For an introduction to textual criticism see Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Study of the original text is invaluable, but part of the purpose in that, possibly the greatest purpose, is to fill the world with the Word of God. Translations are a beautiful representation of the God who incarnates and enculturates himself to seek and save the lost.