Chapter Two

Where Do We Find the Right Words to Say?

The Doctrine of Scripture

In the last chapter, we focused on the character of what we can know and say about God. We discovered that we can say things about God that are true, even though we can never exhaust who God is or what God is like. This does not mean, however, that *whatever* we say about God is true. Sometimes I think of it this way: while there are an infinite number of points on a line, this does not mean every point that exists or can be imagined is on the line. In addition, some things said about God are more meaningful than other things, even when everything said is painstakingly accurate. "God is with us," for example, often carries more weight than "God is immutable," particularly if what is being said is being said to a person who is suffering.

Our goal in speaking of God, then, should not be to make statements that are only technically correct. Rather, we should also aim to articulate truths about God that can impact lives and transform the life of the world. Remembering this, we will in this chapter continue reflecting on the doctrine of revelation by considering *where we should go* to gather words about God and *how we should go about discerning* among them. What *norms and*

sources do we engage to find the words that best convey who God is and what God is doing in our world?

"Authority": A Recommended Exercise

Before we move any further into the discussion, it might be helpful to pause and reflect on how you, the reader, are already negotiating among various sources as you seek to know what is most meaningful and true. Do you privilege one source over others, in making your assessments? The exercise that follows is designed to draw you into reflecting on how you are already navigating multiple truth claims coming from various sources. My thought is that, if you have an awareness of how you are already working with the sources, this will help you reflect, in a more grounded way, on what you might want to do differently and/or which approaches you might want to claim as your own methodological brand.

Let me offer one further word of guidance related to the instructions given for the exercise. It has to do with the word *authority*, a word that receives mixed reviews in our day and age, when claims to authority are rightly questioned. The reason I use this word is because it is a term people of faith have traditionally applied to Scripture, as a way of identifying the important role the Bible has in helping us discern words about God. More will be said about this as the chapter proceeds, but for now I'm asking that, if you are willing, you engage the exercise with whatever understanding of authority is operative for you. Getting at how you think about authority is, in fact, itself a goal of the exercise—so it is important that the term not be overly defined in advance of it.

That said, here is the exercise. Thanks for giving it a try, if you can, and I hope you enjoy it!

AUTHORITY EXERCISE (VERSION 1)

Rank the following statements according to how much authority you believe them to have (on a scale of 1–5, "1" being most authoritative and "5" being least authoritative):

a. _____ "In life and in death we belong to God."

b. _____ "By the way of Mount Seir it takes eleven days to reach Kadesh-Barnea from Horeb."

c. _____ "One contrary cannot be the cause of another. But evil is the contrary to good. Therefore, good cannot be the cause of evil."

d. _____ "I have accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior."

e. _____ "The earth revolves around the sun once every 365.25 days."

How did you do? Which of the five did you rank the highest, and which the lowest? What criteria came into play, as you made your determinations? Is there anything that surprised you about your own process for thinking through the ranking? What understanding of authority—if any at all—was operative for you?

It might also be worthwhile to consider whether you at any point wished for more information about where each of the statements you ranked came from. Think about whether it would have made a difference to you, for example, if the exercise had asked you to rank a different list of items, looking like this, instead:

AUTHORITY EXERCISE (VERSION 2)

Rank the following statements according to how much authority you believe them to have (on a scale of 1–5, "1" being most authoritative and "5" being least authoritative):

a. _____ Presbyterian Church (USA), Brief Statement of Faith[1]

b. _____ Deuteronomy 1:2

c. _____ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*

d. _____ a good friend of yours

e. _____ Dr. Saturna Galexa, well-respected astronomer[2]

Would knowing where the statements came from have changed your ranking in any way? Why or why not? And what if the exercise were to evaluate among *categories* of sources, like this:

AUTHORITY EXERCISE (VERSION 3)

Rank the following statements according to how much authority you believe them to have (on a scale of 1–5, "1" being most authoritative and "5" being least authoritative):

a. _____ tradition

b. _____ Bible

c. _____ logic (reason)

d. _____ experience (personal testimony)

e. _____ logic (scientific fact)

If you think the order of your selections may have been different if you had begun with versions 2 or 3 of the exercise, you are not alone. People who have done this exercise in live classrooms and churches frequently comment that they would have ranked the Bible first had they been handed version 3 of the exercise but that they were distracted by the statement about traveling to Kadesh-Barnea in version 1. Others say they would have given more credence to the experiential statement about accepting Jesus if they had known it was coming from a good friend (as in version 2). And a far greater number of people in the last five years, compared with those who did the exercise twenty years ago, select the astronomical statement as having the most authority. "It is the least subjective,"

they often say, "and therefore can be embraced by the greatest number of people. That's what gives it its authority."

Interestingly, I have had a handful of people choose the Kadesh-Barnea statement (version 1, choice b) over the years, telling me they did so precisely because they did know it was in the Bible. One man insisted he would rank it the same as one of the most beloved and oft-quoted verses in the Bible—John 3:16. For this person of faith, the *source* of the Kadesh-Barnea statement, even more than the *content* of the statement itself, holds the greatest sway in determining how much authority the Bible has. Though I myself would privilege John 3:16 over Deuteronomy 1:2, I admire this man for following through with what he held to be the implications of subscribing to biblical authority. He reminds me that, if I am going to say the Bible is God's Word and then privilege some verses over others, I am going to need to explain how to hold together my claims with my practice! I can also recall a couple of memorable moments that occurred in the context of discussing the logic statements included on the exercise. First, I once had a trained scientist in class who ranked the "365.25 days" astronomy question last because she said it was *imprecise*: 365.25 days is only an *approximation,* she posited, visibly frustrated because others in the room were referencing the statement as though it were a measurable *fact.* Much to my surprise, this same scientist said she had ranked the Kadesh-Barnea statement highest, explaining that she did this because it seemed to proffer very accurate and useful information for anyone traveling, by foot, from Kadesh-Barnea to Horeb. She thought the statement was actually more accurate than the 365.25 statement because it was only offering an approximate travel time (eleven days). Significantly, reasonably accurate approximations had more authority, for this scientist, than slightly[3] inaccurate statements presented as fact.

One further anecdote, thinking of past reflections on the exercises: it is of great interest to me, as someone who values philosophical and theological thinking, that the good/evil logic statement made by Thomas Aquinas is inevitably ranked the lowest of all. Additionally, associating the statement with Thomas (in the context of a group discussion) does not seem to lead participants to give the statement a second look, or to make

adjustments to the ranking. I'm not sure of the reason for this. Maybe the statement seems nonsensical to them, regardless of who said it. Or perhaps they aren't very familiar with Thomas, and therefore have no reason to be impressed that *he* is the one who said it. Or maybe it is the case that this type of statement itself represents a way of thinking that is so alien to the ordinary way we process things it is easier to dismiss it as outdated and irrelevant than to gain the skills needed fully to evaluate it.

As you have likely surmised in the reading of the last few paragraphs, what can make this exercise truly worthwhile is not simply doing it, but reflecting on what values came into play in the assigning of your rankings. Such reflection can help any and all of us think not only about what claims we want to make about where we learn our words about God, but also about what truthfully does come into play, in the shaping of our understandings. Knowing ourselves, what questions we have, what conflicts we are managing, and how we honestly operate can better position us to consider alternate approaches, to strengthen our own positions, or at least to have broader ways of imagining how we might pursue what is most meaningful.

With the insights we have gleaned from taking and reflecting on this exercise, let us turn now to deeper consideration of how we navigate these various sources as we discern what words to say about God. Along the way we will also consider what it might look like, practically speaking, to join people of faith in claiming that the Bible has privileged status in relation to all other sources.

The Bible Tells Me So?

Many Christians will quickly respond to the question "Where do I go to learn what is true about God?" with what they have been taught is the definitive answer: "the Bible!" The Bible, indeed, is always front and center when it comes to discerning what should be said about God. Sometimes Christian believers (particularly Protestant Christians) even proudly

identify themselves as "People of the Book."[4] While the Bible is the central source many Christians consult in seeking to know God, it is not the only source. We also learn about God from our communities—from our churches and our families, from our friends and our teachers. These communities have, of course, been influenced by their reading of and interpretations of Scripture. But—both for better *and* for worse—the reading and study of the Bible is never done in a vacuum. Interpreting communities are continuously shaped by the traditions they themselves are shaping—that is, the traditions of the church—including its creeds, confessions, catechisms, and other statements of faith passed down through the ages.

In addition to learning about God in the context of communities and their traditions, we might also learn of God by meditating on the natural world—standing in wonder (as Psalm 145, for example, puts it) of all God has made. Or we might utilize our reason as we *wonder about* certain things, working to assess what words do and what words do not make sense to say of God. Reason might lead us to marvel, for example, at how knowledge can deepen our appreciation of mystery. Or it might help us recognize that some of the most nonsensical words might nevertheless be the most meaningful. Reason can also help us eliminate from our discourse words that are untrue about God, words that are often misleading or cause harm.

Finally, a source that virtually always comes into play when we choose what words to say about God is our own experience. Who and what we have encountered as we have made our way through our lives affects how we read the biblical text, how we interpret the traditions valued by our communities, and how we go about deciding what is reasonable and what is not. Our experiences also supply us with a constant stream of readily accessible data we can draw from in thinking about God, and God's involvement in the world.

People of faith have always spent a good deal of time arguing about how the Bible, reason, tradition, and experience should be prioritized, and whether and how they mutually influence one another. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, emphasizes that the Bible was shaped by the traditions of the church, both in the content of its message and in the

process of its canonization, when church leaders developed criteria for assessing which biblical books should be included, and which should not. Those who value reason often hold that we should be open to the data and insights of all disciplines when formulating theological claims.[5] Liberationist scholars, including feminist, womanist, black, and Latin American liberation theologians, have emphasized that our experiences—both the context in which we have been formed and the stories that have shaped us—can never be laid to the side when we are interpreting other sources. Inevitably they affect which figures we identify with when we read Scripture, for example, and whether we resonate with particular creeds and confessions or find them meaningless.

Many Protestant Christians, trying to take all of these sources into account, argue that the Bible is the *norming norm*, that is, that it should have a "higher status" than the other sources, even though those sources are always in play as we seek to know and speak about God. The United Methodist Church, following the lead of John Wesley, often helps people of faith conceptualize how multiple norms and sources come into play by using the image of a quadrilateral—with each of the four sides representing Bible, reason, tradition, and experience, respectively. (Since Methodists emphasize that the Bible has greater authority than the other three, the side representing it is often depicted as longer.)[6]

In the remainder of this chapter we will consider how we negotiate among these various and often mutually affecting sources for speaking of God. In the language of theologians, this means we will be thinking not only of what sources we draw from in formulating our words about God, but also what norms come into play in negotiating between and among them. As was the case in the last chapter when we considered the character of our theological language, it will be helpful for us to consider not only the kind and quality of the sources and our norms for navigating them, but also what our own capacities and incapacities are as we read, explore, and discover. We might want to ask ourselves how prepared we are—intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually—to explore and interpret the content of the Bible, the confessions of our traditions, the philosophical logic that shapes the way we think about the relationship between God

and the world, and the stories of our own experiences as they relate to who we understand God to be.

Most of us probably feel as though we are not ready in relation to at least some of these areas of inquiry, especially if we are in earnest about discerning what it is that God has to say to us. We might be heartened by the realization that feeling inadequate or unnerved, in the face of what it is we are doing, might not be so problematic—as long as we continue to "hold faith," that is, and not give up! I once had a pastor friend tell me that the only time he ever worried, just before he preached, was when he wasn't worried at all. That was a sure sign, he said, that he wasn't taking the charge to learn and speak about God seriously enough.

When it comes to speaking words about God, remembering that we can never gain mastery of the subject matter might be the most important preparation of all. As we discussed in chapter 1, recognizing our creaturely limits reminds us that knowledge of God comes not as a result of our own efforts, but rather in the form of a gift. When we keep that in mind, we are then able freely to pursue knowledge of God because we believe—even when we have difficulty believing—that this God has already reached out and laid claim to us. (This last statement is, of course, an unabashed statement of faith—an affirmation of the very doctrine of revelation we considered in chapter 1.)

As we hold on to faith and dive into negotiating the many norms and sources for doing theology, it will be helpful to return to the distinction between general and special revelation raised at the end of chapter 1. These two overarching categories have been used by theologians including Thomas and Calvin to give people of faith a way to begin reflecting on the character of the sources from which we draw, and how able we are, in and of ourselves, to benefit from them. How and what do we learn from God by way of general revelation, and how able are we to receive what is extended to us? How and what do we learn from God by way of special revelation, and is there anything at all we can do to facilitate our receipt of it, if it is truly and only a gift?

General Revelation: Right before Our Eyes (but Tough to See!)

Calvin's favorite biblical passage about general revelation was Romans 1:18-32. Let me give you a sense for how he interprets this passage. In the opening of his letter to the Roman church, Paul is describing a problem with the human condition: we are unable to see, he explains, what is right before our eyes. "What can be known about God," Paul insists, is evident in "the things God has made."[7] But instead of coming to know the one true God by way of creation, Paul laments, human beings crafted for themselves idols resembling elements of the created order.[8] We humans gave up worshipping the immortal God and instead began worshipping that which is created. According to Calvin, this idolatrous behavior is indicative of our incapacity as well as our depravity—in and of ourselves, we simply cannot make our way to God. In and of our own strength, we are unable to see what is right before our eyes and available to us.[9] That is why, Calvin thinks, we need special revelation. Not because there is anything wrong with general revelation (through which everything about God has been made clear), but because there is something damaged in us that keeps us from seeing.

Wait a minute, some of us might be thinking, reading Romans 1 over Calvin's shoulder. While it looks pretty clear that humans did commit the sin of idolatry, on what basis does Calvin conclude all human beings will *necessarily* commit the same sin? Perhaps, you might say, there is a more positive way of reading this passage. Maybe it can serve as a warning to us, we might suggest, so that we who witness revelation will not follow in the way of "fools" (see verse 22), but will rather be led to pursue the God before whom there are no other gods.[10]

If you read Romans 1:18-32 more as a warning about the limits of human capabilities than as a devastating diagnosis, you are in good company. Calvin, as we have seen, emphasizes humanity's utter incapacity to access general revelation. Thomas (12th c), however, thinks differently, teaching that human strides toward knowing God can certainly be made by way of general revelation. Pascal (17th c) treats self-reflection as a form of general

revelation, referring to the "infinite abyss" that we might, however unsuccessfully, try to satisfy with other things.[11] John Wesley (18th c) believes God extends prevenient grace to all people, as is evidenced in the fact that all have "some tendency toward life, some degree of salvation, the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God."[12] C. S. Lewis (20th c) comments, following this same trajectory, that "if I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."[13] It is not surprising that Lewis, consistent with this statement, thought that helping people recognize their dissatisfaction could turn them toward belief.

Calvin, again, resisted any suggestion that dissatisfaction, or the ordered beauty of nature, or some innate sense of what is right and what is wrong could effectively lead us to faith. Apart from God's intervention in our lives, he would say, dissatisfaction will likely lead to rampant consumerism or gluttony, the beauty of nature to the creation of art that distracts us from the Creator of all, and moral sensibility to devising religious systems of our own making that are antithetical to "true religion" (as he and other sixteenth-century Reformers called it)[14] given to us by God. As the Israelites worshipped a golden calf instead of the one true God, so we in our sinfulness replace the God who stands right before us with gods of our own making. In the words of Paul Tillich, a twentieth-century theologian, our "ultimate concern" is not what it should be, or even what we claim it is.[15] Like Jesus's friend Martha, we are "worried and distracted by many things" rather than attending to what matters most.[16] It would be hard to find a person of faith who would disagree with this assessment, in our day. Nearly every sermon I've heard, lately, mentions this idea. The goal of every spiritual practice is to center our lives in that which is meaningful rather than that which is empty. And there might not be a one of us who hasn't asked, at least from time to time, why living in cognizant relationship to God is so difficult, if it is, indeed, what we were made for.[17]

Calvin has an answer to this, though it is, again, not the answer that every Christian thinker might give. He thinks all of us are, as a

consequence of the Fall, *totally depraved*. By this he means not that we are worthless or beyond repair, but that we are incapable, by virtue of our own will or wherewithal, of overriding the dullness that is symptomatic of our sin in order to perceive the God who is self-revealed all around us. Theological ethicist Paul Lehmann explains, along these lines, that "total depravity... simply expresses the fact that whatever it takes to overcome the ethical predicament of humanity does not lie within the powers of humanity. Human renewal is not intrinsic to human capacity; it comes to humanity as a gift."[18] Whenever this gift of renewal is received, Lehmann thinks (agreeing with Calvin), it has come by way of special revelation.

Special Revelation: Refuses to Let Us Go

Special revelation, when understood to name God's gracious but persistent pursuit of us, is generally identified with specific acts of God intentionally breaking through our dullness to sharpen our perception of what really is. What is tricky about describing special revelation is that we have neither the right nor the capacity to delimit the form it might take. Put another way, what this means is that God speaks to us in any way God chooses to speak. "God may speak to us through Russian Communism, through a flute concerto, through a blossoming shrub or through a dead dog,"[19] Barth famously asserts. Now, it is very important to note that this does not mean that God *does*, necessarily, speak to us through a flute concerto, a shrub, or a dead dog. What Barth is saying, rather, is that however and wherever God is saying something to us—regardless of how expected the vehicle of that speaking—we would do well to pay attention.

The Bible is full of stories of God reaching out to heal the perception of those who have not yet seen, so they can know who God is and witness what God is up to in the world, understanding who they are and what their relationship is to God's work. The ways God reaches out are varied and, in many cases, surprising (and even bizarre!). God promises Abraham and Sarah that they will become parents of many descendants

by taking Abraham out and showing him that sky full of stars.[20] God charges Moses with an impossible mission by commanding him from out of a burning bush.[21] God lets Joseph know his eleven brothers will one day bow down to him by speaking through a dream in which each of the brothers is represented by a bundle of wheat.[22] God corrects Balaam by causing a donkey to talk.[23] God calls Mary through a visitation by the angel Gabriel, telling her she is blessed to be the bearer of the Messiah.[24] There are whispers outside of caves, and tablets brought down from mountains, and stars that shine over stables, and angels that sing glorious choruses for lowly shepherds; there are visions, and callings in the night, and descending doves and wrong-flowing water and consuming fire and pillars of salt and dew-resistant fleeces—all ways in which God says: I am here, you are in relationship to me; I am up to something, here's how you are a part of it.[25]

Our God, the one who stays in relationship to us as God did for our forebears, is an active participant in the life of the world. Because this is true, we can understand God to be a God of history. Our story unfolds as a grander narrative in which God participates alongside us rather than dispassionately watching from outside. African American systematic theologians are among those who persistently remind us that God acts in history. James Evans writes, in *We Have Been Believers,* "Revelation is inseparable from the historic struggle of black people for liberation.... The history of revelation and the history of liberation are the same history," incomplete insofar as human history is yet unfolding.[26] That our God acts in and shapes this unfolding history is an aspect of our covenantal relationship with God, a part of the promise God has made never to abandon us. That our God is a God of history describes one way God is with us and for us. The stories remind us of the innumerable ways this participation has manifested itself.

The book that contains all of these stories is itself considered to be a vehicle of special revelation. This is not only because it recounts specific stories about God's claim on particular communities and particular people, but because people of faith have consistently testified that they, through hearing these stories, have come to perceive their own place in

the narrative of salvation. Through the story of God's fearsome love for Israel, we experience God's relentless love for us. Through lamenting and praising with the psalmists, we see that doubt, honesty, and wonder are all and together true aspects of faith. Through listening into Jesus's encounters with others, we encounter him for ourselves. Through reading the Epistles—Paul's letters to particular churches—we, too, are instructed, affirmed, and challenged to live our lives as disciples of Christ.

How does it happen, exactly, that we are drawn to hearing God speaking to us, in particular, by way of the biblical witness? Harkening back to Calvin, again, it is not by virtue of our own energies or strategies, as they are applied to biblical study. It is not that special revelation is contained, somehow, in the words of the Bible if we can only figure out how to unlock them. The key to hearing God speak is not reading the Bible with a certain interpretive method, or learning Hebrew and Greek (the languages in which it was written), or praying beforehand, or being more deeply sincere or humble. While all of these might be worthy goals for us to embrace freely and joyfully for their own sakes, they should never be undertaken as means to the end of knowing God. It should never in any way be suggested that we need to do a certain amount of grunt work if we are to reap the benefit or earn the reward of perceiving God. To proceed in such a way would be to focus again on ourselves and our own achievements, rather than to revel in God's bounteous gifts. And even if Calvin is only halfway right in what he says about total depravity, proceeding as though perception of God is something to be accomplished will likely lead us only to frustration; to wondering why it is that we haven't been successful in accomplishing *our* goal of knowing God better, given how hard *we* have worked.

To illustrate this point: In the context of teaching a workshop on the subject of Reading the Bible Theologically, I once asked a roomful of people about their Bible-reading practices. After a couple of people gave sincere but kind of typical answers (e.g., "I was in the 'Read the Bible through the Year' program last year";[27] "I try to get up early every morning and have my devotions, otherwise my day just doesn't go as well"), I was taken aback by a woman who suddenly blurted out, much to the shock of

the entire group: "I *hate* reading the Bible!" She looked kind of surprised, herself, that she had said it. And after she spoke the group immediately went silent, waiting to see how I would respond. Fortunately, the woman seemed to re-center herself before I attempted to answer, explaining to us that she had been reading the Bible diligently every single day for years, using a popular method of study recommended by her pastor. But all her reading and study had yet to pay off, she told me. She did not know God any better, and now she dreaded her devotional time and was at a loss to know what to do.

My advice to her was, believe it or not, to *stop* reading the Bible for a year. I suggested this because I suspected she was associating her reading so much with her own efforts and failure that she needed a break in order to approach her reading in a way that allowed the Holy Spirit to work. The advice I gave probably surprised some participants in the workshop even more than did the woman's initial outburst! Still, I thought I saw flickers of empathy in the eyes of some others sitting around the circle. Maybe they wouldn't say they *hated* Bible reading. But they might say there were lots of times when they found it boring and even more times when reading the Bible didn't actually seem to make a difference to their day, even when they were hoping it would.

This woman reminded me, just a bit, of the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus having "kept every one of the commandments since the day he was born."[28] He wants to know what else he needs to do to inherit eternal life. Isn't it interesting that keeping all the rules, as he understood them, wasn't enough to make him feel confident and secure in his faith? It is no accident, then, that Jesus tries to get him to let go of the letter of the law and live more in the spirit of it. He tells the wealthy young man to sell his stuff, give away that money, and follow Jesus's path.[29] In this effort, Jesus is trying to free the young man up from tallying his own spiritual credentials so he can engage, instead, that which matters most.

The woman I met in the workshop, unlike the rich young ruler, seemed relieved to be told she needed to let go of her self-imposed program for spiritual advancement. Maybe she had made the comment already suspecting her habitual Bible reading had in some sense become

her god, rather than helping her better to know God. It is probably true of most of us—right alongside of her—that we have at times felt dis-ease in relation to what we imagined were the most faithful spiritual practices. When this happens, it may help to remember that revelation is not a product of our own effort. Of course, there is a certain letting go of power associated with following through on our realization of this—a relinquishing the rich young ruler resisted. What we would all do well to remember is that faith is not about subjecting ourselves to certain rules or spiritual strategies, but only to the God we are hoping to hear. "Be still, and know that I am God!"[30] the psalmist wrote, exhorting us to pause and recognize God's presence even in the midst of the world's turmoil. But perhaps we have to pause and be still, even, in relation to the turmoil we create for ourselves—even if this turmoil has taken the form of the very best spiritual practices.

This brings us full circle, again, to special revelation. What God has to say comes to us as it comes to us, and there is no guarantee it will come to us through reading the Bible in a particular way, or with particular fervor, any more than there is any bar on how or from where it will come. That said, Christians have through the last two millennia consistently testified that the Holy Spirit speaks to them through the stories and teachings in the biblical text, "revealing to their minds" and "sealing upon their hearts" the "knowledge of God's benevolence toward us" as it is "founded upon the truth of the freely-given promise in Christ."[31] The Bible has a special place in the life of Christians because Christianity recognizes people have been changed when they read the words printed on its pages, when they listen to passages read and preached in worship and in Sunday school, and when they study and discuss the texts in Bible studies. Christians have confirmed, both in individual testimony and in communal statements of faith, that the Spirit has ministered to them as they have engaged the biblical text, helping them to perceive their own identity in relationship to God. As Calvin puts it, "The highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it."[32] According to this line of reasoning, it is not that we can make a case for biblical authority first, and only then move on to reading the Bible and being

affected by it because we are already convinced it is worthwhile. Rather, it is in the reading of it that we become convinced of its efficacy, and only then because God has spoken, through it, to us.

Looking through the "Glasses" of Scripture and Seeing What's There

Something that is often missed, by those who agree with Calvin that knowledge of God cannot be gained apart from special revelation, is that special revelation, once it is received, allows us to discern God's presence and work by way of general revelation. In other words, once we recognize God "calling us by name"[33] in particular ways (through the biblical witness, for example), we can look out at the beauty of a sunset (for example) and do more than wonder about the awesome intelligence that created it. Having received special revelation, we can look at that sunset and know even better the God to whom we have already been introduced. "I will sing to the Lord as long as I live," exclaims the psalmist,[34] following verses that extol God's creation of, presence in, and working through the earth and the waters, the wind and the grass, the darkness and the sunrise, the animals and the people. The psalmist, again, is able to look at everything around her and move from wondering at creation to knowing the Creator.

Pushing this point even further, when special revelation serves as a lens through which the natural world is interpreted, it leads us to stand in awe not only of who God is, but also of who we are in relationship to this God who has created such beautiful things. "What are human beings that you think about them; what are human beings that you pay attention to them?" the psalmist asks.[35] Notice something very important here, that is: the psalmist is able to ask this question only because he has experienced God's particular claim on him, as a particular person. Special revelation leads him to marvel, all the more, that this God who claims him is the God of the "heavens . . . the moon and the stars." And it is by way of marveling at God's majestic work that the psalmist is brought to a deeper

appreciation that he is known and cared for by God. So, it is not only that special revelation facilitates our perceiving God via the natural world; it is also the case that the capaciousness of nature leads us to construe God's particular claim on us as all the more miraculous.

How, again, might we understand the role of the Bible in relation to all this? The famed metaphor used by Calvin for that familiar book we pull off our shelves, fish out of our backpacks, or find on our bedside tables is "spectacles." Calvin describes the Bible as the eyeglasses through which we look in order to be able to see who God is and what God is up to in the world. Putting together some of the ideas we have been discussing, in the last few pages: God is self-revealed to us when we look through the *spectacles of Scripture*[36] and the Holy Spirit enables us to perceive what is true and real. Our "bleary-eyed" incapacity is corrected, Calvin explains, and we are able to see clearly.[37] With our eyeglasses in place, we do not turn away from God to create idols. Rather, we are drawn to stand in awe of the majesty of God and the glorious inclusion of ourselves.

Giving the Spirit a "Leg Up": Three Suggestions

While revelation is initiated and accomplished by God, this does not mean we are merely passive recipients of it. On the contrary, we may live intentionally as people of faith seeking understanding while still honoring God as sovereign actor. Because the character of God's power is not to lord over others, but to include them, it is possible to envision revelation as an event that is at once both all God's and also ours. This idea correlates, theologically speaking, to the Christian conviction that our "life is hidden with Christ in God."[38] Because, in and through Jesus Christ, we are included in God's life and work, our active participation is part and parcel of God's saving story without any loss of distinction between us and God. We will discuss the details and relevance of this when we come to the doctrines of incarnation and Trinity. For now, however, our task is

to think through what it would look like to partner with God in relation to our reading of Scripture. How is it that we can position ourselves to participate in the revelation being gifted to us by way of this central source of our faith?

I have three suggestions I believe might help us engage God's self-revelation, as it comes to us by way of Scripture. Allow me to list them, and then to consider them in a little more detail as a way of moving toward making a practical plan for how, exactly, we might go about reading and interpreting Scripture in ways that are faithful.

First, if we are to be "people God can find" by way of the biblical witness, it will serve us well to think broadly about the genres and purposes of various biblical texts. We will benefit from considering figurative, as well as literal, meanings.

Second, and returning to some of the reflection done at the opening of this chapter, it will be fruitful to make some considered decisions about how we engage multiple sources, as we seek to hear what God is saying to us. If we hold that Scripture is the norming norm for all other sources that come into play, we will seek to consider, as we read it, how it might challenge the wisdom we have derived from our experiences, the conclusions we have drawn from our reasoning, and the value we assign to our traditions.

Third and finally, when we read something in Scripture that seems completely incoherent or just plain wrong, keeping Christ at the center of our readings will make it possible to name real problems while at the same time honoring Scripture's authority.

Thinking Expansively about Biblical Meanings

I have found there is often an association made between reading the Bible literally and valuing its authority. I want to be clear: I reject this association. To allow only for literal readings of the biblical texts is to limit the ways God can speak to us through the words of the Bible. If, through

engaging Scripture, we are seeking to know the God who is always greater than any of our knowledge,[39] we will practice thinking expansively about the range of genres, histories, contexts, audiences, and writers that the Bible engages in conveying its stories and wisdom.

For some of us, the idea that the Bible should be read other than literally might seem somewhat threatening. We might be worried that, once we move away from the straightforward meaning of the words, there is a danger we will impose on the text meanings that are not really there. This is a valid concern that should be kept in mind. Interestingly, however, history seems to reveal that those who subscribe to literal readings of the Bible are at least as guilty of leveraging Scripture to promote their own agendas as those who do not.[40] Further, I suggest that thinking more expansively about the meanings of the biblical witness does not mean interpretation will inevitably become a free-for-all. As we will discuss further, attending to how we order the sources from which we draw as well as to the interpretive keys that lie at the center of our readings, will help us guard against imposing our own agendas in ways that inhibit us from hearing what the Bible genuinely has to say.

For others of us, the suggestion that we can read the Bible more expansively while still honoring its authority will be something of a relief. For one thing, many of us find it quite boring to be confined to only literal readings in our quest to know God better. We may feel guilty about this, especially if we have come to the text with the hope and expectation that we will be transformed by its message. It might be helpful to know that some of the most influential theological thinkers in the history of the church were disappointed by the quality of the biblical writing, especially when they were comparing it with other great literature of their day. This was true, for example, of Augustine, who was encouraged by the preaching of his mentor, Ambrose, to overlook the simple prose of the Scriptures in order to gain from its message.

I remember being shocked to discover, when I was in college, that the idea that the Bible is literally without error is fairly new. A book that helped me think through this, and that I highly recommend, is George Marsden's *Fundamentalism and American Culture.*[41] In it, Marsden

explains how the idea that everything in the Bible is empirically true and could therefore in principle be tested by methods of scientific inquiry developed in the nineteenth century, following the scientific revolution of the Enlightenment period. In the course of this era, science continued advancing by leaps and bounds and all other disciplines were highly affected. Historical research, for example, became more focused on the importance of making only warranted claims.[42] Debates about how the limits of applying the so-called empirical method to nonscientific fields were lively then, and continue today. Historians often point out that historical events, unlike science experiments, are unique—they cannot be duplicated, because conditions inevitably vary. Many theologians are concerned, similarly, that attempts to align incarnation or resurrection with measurable facts may actually compromise on their truth. That said, modern theologians or historians are not apt to deny that empirical facts must be noted and taken into account as they engage the work of their disciplines. The question is: When does scientific method further understanding, and when does it impede it?

The problem with reading all passages of Scripture as though they are composed of literal facts is that it misses out on much of what the Bible has to offer, since not all passages were meant to be read and interpreted literally. Clearly, the Bible is full of literary genres and styles, including: poetry (e.g., Song of Solomon), instruction (e.g., Deuteronomy, Jesus's teachings, the Epistles), historical biography (e.g., 1 Samuel 8–15), parables (e.g., as told by Nathan in 2 Samuel 12 and as told by Jesus throughout the Synoptic[43] Gospels), songs (e.g., Psalms), prophecy (e.g., Daniel, Revelation), advice for wholeness (e.g., Proverbs), drama (e.g., prelude to Job), lament (e.g., Ecclesiastes), and—most controversially, perhaps—myth (e.g., Genesis 1–3). Each of these should be enjoyed and studied in the form it takes, otherwise something will be lost. We would not, of course, engage a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in the same way we would engage a lecture on addressing global warming. One is not necessarily more important or true than the other, but each invites us to explore matters that are meaningful in very different ways. Why would we, then, read the story of creation in Genesis in the same mode in which we read a biology textbook? Why

would we read the prophecy of John in Revelation as though it is a blueprint of the future, assuming our goal should be to map it with verifiable events in history so we might in that way master its code? Such approaches to biblical study run the risk of valuing literalism and fact-finding to the point of missing out on what is really there.

Genesis is a story that tells us far more than the blow-by-blow process for how the earth was created, for example. It bears witness to the creative, playful power of God; the goodness of all that was made; the created harmony between humanity and God, humanity and nature, and men and woman that was God's creative intention, but that somehow was lost. The Genesis creation myth (with *myth* naming the genre of the story without compromising in any way on its truth) names sin for what it is: an aberration that is contrary to what God made, intends, or desires. Sin is a problem, it says. A big problem. And this is the problem the story of salvation addresses. Any question about whether *God* literally *made Eve out of Adam's rib* pales into comparison with the truth that *God made Eve out of Adam's rib*, meaning that she is—and we all are, in relation to one another—bone of bone, flesh of flesh. This matters, simply put, because it says something about everything. When I know you are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh—I will love you as I love myself. I will treat you justly, doing you no harm. When each one of us knows they share bones and flesh with every other, violence will cease. Bodies will be valued, and fed, and protected. The wholeness and harmony that is God's creative intention will be restored.

This truth of the creation story can never be diminished (and might even be enhanced!) by whatever is true in evolution. Genesis 1–3 tells the story of the truth that lies at the heart of all existence, all relationships, all the cosmos. It is a truth about God's power, God's goodness, God's creativity, God's generosity. It is a truth about the goodness of creation, a truth that insists brokenness is *not* okay, but a terribly big problem. Genesis 1–3 sets our sights on redemption, not only because Eve and Adam fell but because their fallen nature is an aberration in a story where what God made is called good, good, good, good, good, and, finally, "very good."[44]

Whatever literal meaning the Bible's creation stories have might be compared to a thimbleful of sea water in relation to the ocean of truth of which they are a part. And to read them, interpret them, and make them our own is to participate in this truth. It is to participate in this truth, again, with no fear of learning whatever can be learned from the biological sciences, open to gaining a clearer perception of God in the interplay of multiple sources.

One of the advantages of reading the Bible expansively rather than literally is, then, that doing so helps us see where and who we are in relation to what we are reading. It invites us to identify with biblical characters or—when we don't resonate with who they are or what they are up to—to ask "wondering" questions about them.[45] "Wondering" questions tend to push off face-value statements in the biblical text, going on to engage them with imagination and even empathy. We might notice Sarah being left behind on the day, for example, when Abraham and Isaac climb Mount Moriah.[46] We might go on actively to wonder, for example, what she might have been thinking or doing.

Or we might wonder about Abraham. The texts of Genesis tell us a lot about him: he hears God, he obeys God, he is willing to jeopardize even God's promise for the sake of his relationship with God. We can rehearse these points and throw up our hands at the mystery of how Abraham was able to do these things, and how God was able to command such a horrific act. But to think expansively about the story would mean not only rehearsing the facts about it, or even only throwing up our hands in the face of the mysteries of it, but working hard at wondering about it—at asking questions about how Abraham must have been feeling; at how, really, he could have managed to be obedient to such a command. Sometimes, even, the question about this story takes the form of wondering whether God actually did require Isaac to be killed, or whether it was the authors of the story who somehow interpreted what happened in this way.

The thinker who first helped me think expansively, rather than only literally, about the biblical text is Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is masterful at asking wonder questions in relation to Bible stories—both the beautiful ones and the difficult ones. His "wonderings" demonstrate that

he has moved deeper than the face value of texts, stepping into the stories, teachings, and quandaries of the biblical witness in ways that show how affected he is by them.

There is no text, it seems, that affects Kierkegaard more than Genesis 22. When he tries to put himself in the sandals of Abraham, Kierkegaard has great difficulty. But he doesn't pull back from the text and label Abraham's behavior a "mystery," concluding there is no place for him to enter in and try to understand. On the contrary, his curious befuddlement leads him to pursue connection with Abraham all the more diligently. "Who can be an Abraham?" he wonders, asking the question again and again as he seeks to fathom how Abraham can possibly hear God, and obey.[47] I imagine Kierkegaard sitting at his desk and pouring over the story, examining it from all angles. Some of his imaginings are published, midrash-style, at the opening of his stunning but disturbing work *Fear and Trembling.* Trying to get not only into the mind and heart of Abraham, but also at the dynamics between God, Abraham, and Isaac, Kierkegaard paints four different scenarios: In the first, Kierkegaard imagines Abraham pretending to be a psychopath who has orchestrated the journey to sacrifice Isaac himself. He misrepresents himself, Kierkegaard suggests, so Isaac will not lose faith in the God who commanded his murder. In the second midrash, Kierkegaard imagines Abraham doing what God asks, but forever afterward living a joyless life as a person who has lost his faith. In the third, Abraham goes to Mount Moriah alone and asks God's forgiveness for having even considered sacrificing Isaac. (This rendition of the story moves the furthest away from a literal reading of Genesis 22; perhaps Kierkegaard has in mind, here, that Abraham's confession is represented by the ram being caught in the underbush.) Finally, in the fourth scenario Kierkegaard imagines Isaac becoming contemptuous of Abraham because Abraham falters, in his despair, while raising the knife to kill him. The hypothesis is that perhaps Abraham isn't as unquestioning in his obedience as he appears in a straightforward reading of the text.

When I was in college and reading these scenarios that were written by Kierkegaard, I experienced a range of conflicting reactions. Frankly, I was on the one hand panicked at how he seemed to be playing fast and loose with the biblical text. I mean—really!—how far can you take a

wondering approach like this before becoming unfaithful to what the text is actually saying? But I was also, on the other hand, overwhelmingly relieved. In my experience thus far at that point in my life, I had thought the only option for reading the Bible faithfully was reading it very narrowly, taking from it only what was delineated by the black and white words on its pages. Kierkegaard demonstrated for me that this approach, too, can often be unfaithful. This is because it keeps us at a distance from the story itself, learning it, rehearsing it, and being vaguely bothered by it, but never really entering into it and submitting to its message. Reading the Bible as people of faith must surely entail our engaging it in such a way that we are transformed by it, and wondering and imagining are essential to the work of engagement that leads to such transformation.

Practically speaking, then, I am suggesting that we think expansively about the biblical witness by approaching texts with a willingness to wonder and imagine. What we are wondering and imagining, specifically, depends on what text we are reading. If we are reading Genesis 22, as discussed, we will wonder how each of the characters is feeling and how the story can possibly be synchronized both with the promise God earlier made to Abraham and Sarah, and with the character of God as good. From there we might imagine, as Kierkegaard did, various scenarios that will help us make sense of the story. If we are reading a different kind of text, say—Isaiah 40—on the other hand, we might stand in wonder in the face of a world where no one dies an untimely death and wolves are no threat to lambs. Now, *that* world takes a lot of imagination to draw to mind! It is an example, truly, of what Barth referred to as the "strange new world within the Bible,"[48] and how what we find there might be very different than what we expect.

Engaging Sources with the Bible as the Norming Norm

Another way we can prepare to receive what God will gift to us through Scripture is by attending more intentionally to how we engage

the norms and sources that come into play as we seek to know, and speak about, God. The opening exercise to this chapter was geared to trigger reflection on how it is we actually work with and order our sources. What I am recommending here is taking the next step—attending to how we go about faithfully relating various sources to one another while valuing the Bible as the norming norm of them all.

The point of this is not to be rigid, or even always to order sources in exactly the same way. It is, rather, to have enough of a sense of what we are about, when we make statements about God or invoke biblical authority, that we can make persuasive arguments for our beliefs and be in productive dialogue with others about our, and their, convictions. If I can explain to a person with whom I am in conversation that the teachings of the church hold significant weight for me, when it comes to ascertaining what is meaningful or true, we will have a greater understanding of each other and why we disagree about something. This might be especially helpful, for example, if the person with whom I'm speaking values the discoveries made by scientific inquiry more than the theological arguments I tend to engage—at least they will know where I'm coming from! Where there is a problem being in dialogue with others about the most important things of all, it is often because we haven't been up front about what rules of the game we are operating with, or we have changed our rules mid-course without warning.

Allow me to give an example of where we have been having a problem in our conversations of late. In many churches, over at least the last fifteen years, there have been debates about the ordination and/or marriage of LGBTQ persons. Christians of all denominations and points of view have struggled to figure out what the Bible has to say about these issues. The challenge is: the Bible doesn't say a whole lot. What is said is, at face value, only condemnatory of LGBTQ sexual practices. The ordination or marriage of gay persons is not ever specifically mentioned in Scripture, one way or another.

Christians who are more literalistic have often argued that the Bible is clear in its condemnation and that, therefore, LGBTQ persons should not be ordained to church leadership or married in an ecclesial context. Many Christians, looking to think more expansively about these verses in the context of the biblical witness, point out that "homosexuality," in

the biblical texts, was not associated with the monogamous, committed unions most Christian pro-LGBTQ supporters are rallying for today. Further, they argue, the Bible speaks clearly about God's love for all, and God's desire that we love one another. These central biblical themes, they hold, should be taken into consideration in developing biblical arguments for supporting LGBTQ persons.

Both the more literalistic person and the one who tries to argue for the Bible's central message of love may well be identified as people of faith who are trying to respect Scripture's authority. Regardless of the fact that they handle biblical texts differently and have different views about LGBTQ equality, neither refuses to push the Bible to the side in making assessments about issues of controversy in the church. But what if someone who claimed the Bible as the norming norm all of a sudden, in the course of an ecclesial debate or one-on-one conversation with a colleague, invoked an insight drawn from a source other than Scripture as a way of trumping a person making an argument with which she disagreed? If the self-proclaimed biblical literalist, debating with the person arguing for the centrality of love, suddenly brought into play that all the homosexuals she knew were promiscuous and unhappy, this would not really be fair, according to the very rules she had established. To reference her own experience as a higher authority than the biblical text, even as she was claiming to be doing otherwise, would be out of bounds. If the person arguing for love, on the other hand, suddenly left behind the work of wrestling with Scripture in order to leverage the fact that scientists suggest there is a genetic explanation for sexual preferences, this would also be less than fair. The point would be interesting, but it would change what the discussion was about. It would no longer be about what the Bible says about LGBTQ issues. It would be about drawing from whatever source works best to support LGBTQ people being ordained and married. Now, that might be a perfectly worthy discussion. But if one of the participants' views is ultimately grounded in her concern about promiscuity and the other is ultimately swayed by what science has to say about genetics, neither can accurately claim that the Bible is really their norming norm for all other norms in relation to this matter.

To engage the Bible as the norming norm even as other norms and sources are brought into play would mean having a manifest commitment to thinking through insights drawn from other sources in relation to biblical readings. These readings would not necessarily be limited to one's own interpretations, as though the only approach to taking Scripture seriously, as we debate important matters, would be to go off in a corner by ourselves, heavy-duty concordance in hand, and look up all key words related to whatever it is we are considering in an effort to figure out what the Bible says. While it is the privilege and responsibility of every person of faith to search the Scriptures for themselves, we don't go at biblical interpretation alone. On the contrary, we join in our exploration of the biblical witness with Christian believers from all over the world and from down through the ages. From the person sitting across from us at Bible study, to the pastor who preaches each week from the lectionary; from our grandmother who used to recite entire chapters by heart, to the new convert who identifies more with the person lying in the ditch than with the Good Samaritan who offers help;[49] from the community of biblical scholars who have labored over biblical commentaries, to the theologians who have, through the ages, worked to formulate Christian doctrines that take into account both the resonances and dissonances heard in the symphony of the sixty-six books that constitute the whole, to our forebears in the faith who developed criteria for what should—and should not!—be included in the biblical canon, we do not go at biblical interpretation in a vacuum. As we read, study, and explore we have all of these to turn to for conversation, insight, and guidance not only in relation to what the Bible has to say to various issues, but also to how multiple sources from real life come into play in relation to all our interpretations and discernings. To engage the reflections of others in the course of our own biblical study reminds us that we are part of a great, ongoing enterprise that people of faith have found to be life-giving, even if it is challenging at times.

An important and practical way into benefitting from the interpretive wisdom of our faith communities is to attend to the creeds and confessions made by Christians through the ages. While it is important to respect the fact that different Christian traditions weigh these more or less

heavily, when it comes to granting them interpretive authority, they at the very least serve almost as "summaries" of the insights particular ecclesial communities have believed most faithfully draw from Scripture in relation to particular contexts and struggles. My own tradition, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has, as part of its constitution, an open collection of creeds and confessions called *The Book of Confessions.* Confessions can be added to *The Book of Confessions* whenever people of faith understand there to be something "new" God is offering to us, by way of Scripture, that speaks to a particular concern or context. The first confession included is one shared by Christians throughout the ages—the Apostles' Creed.[50] The Apostles' Creed came into being in the first century of the church, when Christian believers were developing a liturgy for baptism as well as moving toward developing the doctrine of the Trinity. "Do you believe in God the Father?" the baptizing pastor would ask. "In God the Son? In God the Holy Spirit?" The most recent confession to be adopted is the "Belhar Declaration."[51] Affirmed by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa in 1986, Belhar speaks firmly against apartheid, drawing from the biblical witness in making a case for inclusion and equality.

Church traditions—including its creeds and confessions—can serve as helpful checks and balances to particular readings of Scripture. If someone were to read the Bible and decide, for example, that the Bible is *not* trinitarian, the Apostles' Creed would offer a formidable challenge to that interpretation. This is because it represents the fact that Christians through the ages have recognized that the Bible teaches God is triune.

Interestingly, however, to hold that the Bible is the norming norm is to be open, at least in principle, to making adjustments even to our church traditions, if these traditions come to be understood as antithetical to Scripture. While challenges to God's triune nature, drawing from Scripture, have not held much sway, other challenges to church traditions, made by reference to Scripture, have led to significant changes in the traditions themselves.

Consider the church's tradition of ordaining only men, for example. This tradition, supported by reference to several biblical passages, is

practiced by the majority of Christian churches around the world—Protestant as well as Roman Catholic. And there are also Christian denominations that have never imposed limits on who might be ordained. Wesleyan Christians, open to ordaining women as well as men, are fond of citing the verse from Scripture that reminds us "the Spirit blows where it wills."[52] Of particular interest are churches that were once convinced Scripture teaches ordination is for men only that now ordain women. My own church—the Presbyterian Church (USA)—is one of these churches. We reversed our thinking on women's ordination in the late 1950s precisely because we read the Bible, again, and decided our earlier interpretation was wrong. Certainly, emerging cultural values oriented toward the inclusion of women came into play in goading us to struggle, anew, with what Scripture had to say. But in the end it was not cultural pressure that was invoked as reason to change our church's tradition. In the final analysis, a biblical case was made that recognized the ecclesial leadership of women in Scripture, acknowledging (with the Wesleyans!) the inclusive movement of the Spirit and interpreting the New Testament household codes (i.e., that recommend women keep silent[53]) as applying only in particular and limited contexts. As important as tradition was as a source, in relation to this issue, it is the fact that the Bible was engaged as norming norm that led to the historic change.

Remembering this, as well as other instances when churches have changed positions on issues in light of their study of Scripture (in relation to, for example, infant baptism, divorce, and slavery), it becomes clear that the point of honoring the primacy of Scripture is not only to guard us against idolizing our own experiences and traditions, but also to give us a way of working for social change consistent with the convictions of our faith. When Luther and Calvin worked to get the Bible translated into the vernacular and into the hands of the people back in the sixteenth century, they were empowering members of the *priesthood of all believers* to read and interpret in ways that sought to understand not only how the will of God was understood in the course of history, but what God was saying in relation to their specific context. Similarly (and even more readily, in our

day and age, with the books, educational opportunities, religious liberty, and leisure time to which we have access) we also have the opportunity to read and study Scripture, reflecting on what it has to tell us about the shape of God's Kingdom and how we can contribute to bringing what God desires to "earth as it is in heaven."[54]

Finally, the most important thing we can do to order our sources in relationship to Scripture is simply to read the Bible consistently and reflect on it often enough and with enough of our life energy to go deep. When we know the biblical canon—when we know it so well its stories become our stories and we hear its teachings in relation to ourselves and our own lives—it will then serve as a ready-at-hand arbiter, inspiring us as we ponder what can be learned from experience, tradition, reason, and the other sources that feed our lives.

To suggest that the Bible will begin to function as norming norm for us if we simply give it adequate time, attention, and energy might seem too simplistic, and perhaps even dangerous. Certainly, it is possible to know one's way around a Bible and still make all kinds of problematic claims. As we discussed earlier, to read the Bible is not to be guaranteed access to truth or a monopoly on right answers. To read and reflect on it is, however, consistent with living into our identity as those who have been gifted by the grace of God. What if we were to read Scripture habitually not because it is something we know we should do, or something we know we have to do in order to have any shot at living according to God's will, but because we are excited and curious about knowing what it says, and receiving its benefits? What if we approached our reading and study with gratitude and wonderment, amazed that we have had the good fortune to inherit it and the opportunity to join in conversation with those who wrote it and with all those who have read it along with us? What if we thought of reading the Bible as a way into understanding ourselves, our communities, and the predicament of and hope for the world in which we live? What if we engaged it with the interest of those eager to incorporate into our lives a life-changing gift? Then, it seems, honoring the Bible as the norming norm that norms all other norms would be for us a way of life, rather than a contrived method for ascertaining words about God.

Keeping Christ at the Center

A third way we can position ourselves to receive the gifts God desires to give us through Scripture is to keep Christ at the center of all our interpretations. A theological term for this is *christocentrism*. This is the idea not that every word in the Bible is, ultimately, about Jesus, but that what we know to be true of God in and through Jesus Christ cannot be rightly overturned by any particular biblical reading or interpretation. This idea has often been identified, in Christian traditions, as the *Rule of Love*. Specifically, it argues that any interpretation that contradicts what we know of God's love in the Gospel message of Jesus Christ must be rejected.

Allow me to give just one example of this. It is what to do with another 1 Timothy verse, an odd verse found at the end of a strange passage in which Paul calls on women to be silent because Eve, and not Adam, fell into deception in the Garden of Eden. Avoiding the temptation to exegete the entire passage and staying with our purpose here: 1 Timothy 2:15 concludes the passage by asserting that "women will be saved through childbearing" if they continue to live in a faithful manner.[55]

Now, if we read this verse only literally, we run into trouble. We run into trouble not because all literal readings are automatically bad (sometimes literal meanings work—when the passages are meant to be literal!) but because a literal reading of this verse violates what we know to be true in and through the person of Jesus Christ. In and through the Gospel, centered in Christ, we know that women are saved not through childbearing, but through God's redemptive work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as made known to us by the Spirit. Whatever this verse means, the interpretation that women who do not bear children are not saved is just plain wrong.

Thinking christocentrically, as we read and study Scripture, also helps us make sense of why we are disturbed by biblical texts in which God seems mean or unduly vindictive. Of course, we prefer the stories and passages in which God is more obviously loving and forgiving, because this is the kind of God we desire, the kind of God in whom we would put our trust. But choosing the loving God over the mean one because we like this

God better does not in itself help with the interpretation of the passages in which God seems to be less than loving. Invoking the Christ who stands at the center of our interpretations offers help because it gives us a basis, other than our own preference, for saying God acts in certain ways and not others. A Christ-centered approach might even serve as justification for reading some accounts of God's actions more as a community's limited interpretation of God's role in an event and less as an historical account of how God actually acted. An example of a case in which christocentric interpretation might helpfully come into play is in reading the prologue to the book of Job. In this prologue, God allows Satan to kill Job's family and torture him in order to prove Job's faithfulness. This is not something we like to imagine God doing. But it is also something that the God we know in Christ would not do. Applying the Rule of Love to our interpretation of Job's prologue, then, we have tended to understand it more as a creative setting of the scene for what will ensue than the recollection of an historical sparring between God and Satan.

Related to this, keeping Christ at the center of our interpretation helps us stay open to hearing all that God has to teach us through Scripture by making it possible for us to trust the text enough to be productively suspicious of it. Let me explain. What I have in mind, here, is what biblical scholars often refer to as a *hermeneutic of suspicion*. A hermeneutic of suspicion is a method of interpreting biblical texts that welcomes and encourages us to think more expansively (including reading between the lines) when something seems off in what we are reading. A classic example of this is given by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *In Memory of Her.* Schüssler Fiorenza points out, in the framing story to this book, that when the New Testament woman anoints Jesus's feet with perfume and wipes them with her hair, Jesus promises that the story will be told in perpetuity, alongside the story of his death and resurrection, *in memory of her.*[56] Applying the hermeneutic of suspicion, however, Schüssler Fiorenza notices that we do not know the name of this woman who is to be remembered. We know the name of the crook in the story—Judas—but we do not know hers! Schüssler Fiorenza goes on to hypothesize that Jesus must have wanted us to know the woman's name, given what he said. But it has been

lost somewhere, she surmises, in the historical, patriarchal shuffle. Applying a hermeneutic of suspicion allows us to think more expansively about the story in ways that are inclusive and hope-full, particularly for women who have been excluded.

While Schüssler Fiorenza does not identify her approach in her reading of the story as christocentric, it certainly is so. Christ is quite literally at the center of the story, and it is his presence and positive words about the woman that precipitates the productive suspiciousness about her missing name. It is because we trust Christ's affirmation of the woman that we have the wherewithal to be suspicious of the text, speculating that the name has been lost and thinking about what can be done with our interpretation of the text to honor Jesus's intention.

Keeping Christ at the center of our biblical study also ensures that our agendas do not become idolatrous ideologies, for they are continuously relativized by Christ. When we come to the Bible as though it has no central message, we tend to engage it as a kind of compendium of helpful resources that are compiled to address our questions and problems. There is a real danger we will treat it more as a blueprint or as a Fodor's guide that is there to be gleaned from for our purposes than as a coherent narrative. Barth wrote about this problem, playfully personifying the Bible in a voice of complaint:

> When we come to the Bible with our questions—How shall I think of God and the universe? How arrive at the divine? How present myself?—it answers us, as it were, "My dear sir, these are *your* problems: you must not ask *me!* Whether it is better to hear mass or hear a sermon, whether the proper form of Christianity is to be discovered in the Salvation Army or in 'Christian Science,' whether the better belief is that of old Reverend Doctor Smith or young Reverend Mr. Jones...you can and must decide for yourself. If you do not care to enter upon *my* questions, you may, to be sure, find in me all sorts of arguments and quasi-arguments for one or another standpoint, but you will not then find what is really here." We shall find ourselves only in the midst of a vast human controversy and far, far away from reality, or what might become reality in our lives.... It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about [human beings]. The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what [God] says to us; not the right relation in

> which we must place ourselves to [God], but the covenant which [God] has made with all who are Abraham's spiritual children and which he has sealed once and for all in Jesus Christ.[57]

Part of what Barth so beautifully implies here is that a Christ-centered approach to biblical study understands that the Bible is always inviting us to participate in its story rather than promising to be useful to ours. An example comes to mind that illustrates the difference between coming to the biblical text for answers to our questions and submitting to being questioned ourselves. It draws us to reflect on a perennial controversy we have in our churches: Should we allow members of the congregation to clap after the children's choir sings?

I once got sneaky, breaking a class into groups and asking the class to explore what the Bible has to say to that question. We are, after all, "People of the Book," I told them. After breaking into groups and looking things up in concordances, we shared our results with the whole. All those who were *for* hand clapping said, with conviction: "Well... the Bible says 'the mountains and the hills shall clap their hands, so this obviously means *we* should too!'" And all those who were *against* hand clapping said, with the same amount of conviction: "Welll... the Bible says '*the mountains and the hills* shall clap their hands.' But it doesn't say anything about *us* clapping, so..." We had gotten nowhere by way of the exercise. Or so it seemed. But then I suggested, à la Barth, that perhaps the Bible was not all that interested in whether we clapped our hands or not. Thinking christocentrically, clapping our hands or not clapping our hands after the children sing has little to do with the message of the Gospel, one way or the other, it seems. Perhaps we should go to the Bible looking to see what important issues it would like us to address, rather than going to it with the idea that it will address the issues we find to be important?

A final benefit of reading the Bible christocentrically has to offer is that it reminds us we don't have to spend a lot of time trying to separate out the words of the book from the Word of God. As the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ in a way that the two are never separated, so the word and the Word, when we read and study the biblical witness, are inextricably joined, used together by the Spirit to communicate who God is, and

who we are called to be. We can read the Bible with the confidence, then, that we do not have to figure out how to in some way get underneath the words in order to benefit from the deeper meaning. Whatever language study, historical study, and textual study we engage need not be devoted to dissecting words. Rather, we can enjoy the range of words and genres that come into play, as we read, wondering at how they are used to convey truths that cannot be confined to words, even as Jesus is truly known in the flesh that also cannot contain him.

Conclusion: The "Right Words" to Say

Earlier in this chapter I told the story of a woman who had become bored with her reading of Scripture. We also mentioned that there is a problem with biblical literacy in our American culture—we do not read the Bible, perhaps, because we find it boring, or confusing, or upsetting (e.g., because God does not always seem as loving as we want God to be). I have tried, here, to offer some ideas for faithfully engaging the Bible in ways that honor it as the norming norm. My hope is that these ideas will help readers engage the Bible in ways they find interesting, in ways that facilitate their participation in the wonder of the narrative. If the Bible testifies to the story we believe matters most to ourselves, there must be a way we can become more captivated by it! Again, Barth speaks to this matter of boredom and interest by recounting a story of his encounter with a colleague who was bored:

> A professor of theology once told me that he had learned much more from his devout mother than from the whole Bible.... It is all very well to realize, perhaps, that one may learn more from all kinds of greater or lesser prophets or apostles of a later period, or even of our own time, than from reading the Bible. Yet the issue is not where we learn most, but where we learn the one thing, the truth.... Let us presuppose that it really is Jesus Christ or revelation that is mediated to us; the question then arises how we know this, how we are to recognize it.[58]

Barth's quote helps summarizes the chapter and moves us forward to the next. It reflects, as we have, on the fact that there are all kinds of sources we are negotiating in this world, as we seek to discern what we can know and say of God. It suggests, further, as we have, that Christians have identified the Bible with the special revelation of God that gifts us with knowledge of the most meaningful thing of all: the truth of God's love, as revealed to us in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. When the Spirit shows us God's revelation through the spectacles of Scripture, our audacious claim is that we really can say something about everything, something that gives hope and promise to each one and to all.

What, then, are the right words to say about God? They might be found anywhere, but they are always consistent with the story of the Christ who is at the center of the biblical witness. And so, we study the Bible, enter more deeply into its story, and set other sources that matter to us in conversation with what we are always discovering. It is from that vantage point that we live our lives not as know-it-alls, but as those determined to share something about everything in a world brimming with beauty, pain, and a perennial desire to know more.

Part Two

God Meets Us

primary reason Calvin invokes it at all is because he understands it to be a logical extension of the idea that God is sovereign over all things, including every person's eternal destiny.

94. John 1:14.

95. We will discuss this in more detail in ch. 8.

96. See Col 3:12.

97. This is the "Master of Divinity" degree—the degree you commonly get when you are preparing to become a pastor.

98. See 1 Kings 19.

99. I Kings 19:15.

100. For more on this, see Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014).

101. *My Bright Abyss* alludes to the psalmist's claim that God is somehow present in even the most desolate of places and circumstances. Psalm 139, for example, contains the exclamation that God is present even in the depths of "Sheol" (v. 8 NRSV).

2. Where Do We Find the Right Words to Say?

1. In the *Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church* (USA) (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2016).

2. This name is fabricated.

3. I should note that my scientist student would likely object to my use of the term *slightly*. Which suggests 365.25 is "accurate enough" (my view) instead of just plain wrong (and lacking in authority).

4. This is a phrase that is habitually used not only by Christian communities, but by faith communities from the two other Abrahamic traditions—Judaism and Islam.

5. These include those who do work in the field of theology and science (including Wenzel van Huyssteen, Nancy Frankenberry, and Keith Ward, for example) as well as those who, in the field of biblical studies, resonate with the work of the Jesus Seminar.

6. The quadrilateral itself did not originate with Wesley. Albert Outler developed the concept as a way to remember and teach Wesley's theological method, as he

understood it, from Wesley's sermons and other pastoral writings. See Albert Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (1985): 16–17.

7. Rom 1:19.

8. Rom 1:23.

9. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill (Philadephia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.5.

10. This is an allusion to the first commandment, which condemns idolatry such as it is described in Romans 1: "You shall have no other gods before me."

11. "What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself." Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (New York; Penguin Books, 1966), 75.

12. Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," John Wesley's *Sermons*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 486–92, 488.

13. C. S. Lewis, "Hope," in *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), III.

14. Calvin writes, for example: "Let those persons take note of this who are looking for miserable excuses to defend the execrable idolatry by which true religion has been overwhelmed and subverted" Calvin, *Institutes* I.11.9.

15. Paul Tillich, "Our Ultimate Concern," *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), chap. 3.

16. See the story in Luke 10:38-42.

17. We will consider this further in ch. 7.

18. Paul Lehmann, *Forgiveness: A Decisive Issue in Protestant Thought* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1941).

19. Barth, *CD* I/1, §3, 55.

20. Gen 15:5.

21. Exod 3:1–4:17.

22. Gen 37:5-8.

23. Num 22:22-30.

24. Luke 1:26-28.

25. In order: 1 Kings 19:11-13; Ex 30:15; Matt 2:1-12; Luke 2:8-20; Gen 15:1; Gen 46:2; John 1:32; Ps 114:3; Heb 12:29; Gen 19:26; Judg 6:36-40.

26. James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 11, 12.

27. This program has been wildly successful in the United States in the last few years.

28. See the story in Matthew 19:16-22.

29. Matthew 19:21.

30. Ps 46:10, NRSV.

31. Calvin, *Institutes* III.2.1–43.

32. Calvin, *Institutes* I.7.1.

33. See, for example, Isa 63:7; and the Luke 19:1-10 story of Zacchaeus called by name by Jesus.

34. Psalm 104:33.

35. In Psalm 8:4.

36. "For just as eyes, when dimmed with age or weakness or by some other defect, unless aided by spectacles, discern nothing distinctly; so, such is our feebleness, unless Scripture guides us in seeking God, we are immediately confused." Calvin, *Institutes* I.14.1.

37. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.6.1

38. Col 3:3.

39. For more on this, see the introduction and ch. 1.

40. For example, Robert Lewis Dabney argues for the "righteousness" of slavery as it is apparent in the "common sense" reading of the Old and New Testaments. Robert Lewis Dabney, *Defence of Virginia and through Her, of the South, in Recent and*

Pending Contests against the Sectional Party (New York: E. J. Hale and Son, 1867), ch. 1.

41. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

42. For more on this, see Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*.

43. The Synoptic Gospels are Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

44. See the story of God's creation in Gen 1.

45. The Montessori-based Godly Play method of children's Christian education is based on wondering. For more, see Elizabeth Caldwell, *I Wonder* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016).

46. Described in Gen 22.

47. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Maxine H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

48. Karl Barth, *Word of God and the Word of Man* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1978), ch. 2.

49. See this story in Luke 10:25-37.

50. *Book of Confessions*, 5–7.

51. *Book of Confessions*, 299–306.

52. John 3:8.

53. See this much-discussed verse in 1 Timothy 2:12.

54. As we hear said in the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer.

55. Do see, if you are interested in reading a beautiful, expansive interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:13-15, Aída Bensaçon Spencer's *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1985).

56. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), xiii. You can read this story in Luke 10:37-47. The same story is in all three other Gospels in a variation.

57. Barth, "Strange New World within the Bible," in Barth, *Word of God and the Word*, 42–43. I have made Barth's language inclusive with bracketed changes.

58. Karl Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction of the Christian Religion* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1991), 213–14.

3. Where Does God Meet Us?

1. This last stanza is a verse I memorized when I was young and have carried around with me ever since. It is attributed to James Allan Francis, *One Solitary Life* (n.p.: 1963), 1–7.

2. From Cynthia L. Rigby, "More Than a Hero: The Practical Implications of the Incarnation in Ministry with Youth" (paper presented at Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, Princeton Theological Seminary, NJ, 1999). Published by the Institute for Youth Ministry: http://www.ptsem.edu/lectures/?action=tei&id=youth-1999-06. Used by permission.

3. "Westminster Catechism: The Shorter Catechism," in the *Book of Confessions*, 203–21 (7.001–7.110).

4. Matt 16:16.

5. To be fair, Calvin understands God's giving of Scripture itself to be a revelatory act, and Calvin sees Scripture confirming the attributes of God that he presents as true to who God is.

6. Calvin, *Institutes* I.13.1.

7. Calvin describes the attributes of God early on in the *Institutes.* He explains that because humanity has knowledge of God, we are able to recognize that God, "governs all things; and trusts that he is guide and protector, therefore giving itself over completely to trust in him." Calvin, *Institutes* I.2.2.

8. Calvin states, "Surely God does not have blood, does not suffer, cannot be touched with hands." Calvin, *Institutes* II.14.2.

9. Gen 6:5-7.

10. Gen 18:16-33.

11. John 11:35.

12. See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery,* especially ch. 7, "Spirit-Sophia," and *Abounding in Kindness: Writings for the People of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), especially ch. 17, "Remembering the Holy Spirit: Love Poured Out."

13. This is interesting because Barth understood himself to be very much in Calvin's debt. Barth took very seriously the Reformation principle that the church is "Reformed and always reforming, according to the Word of God." That is why Barth was committed to correcting and improving upon Calvin's theology whenever he believed this was necessary. We, of course, should do the same with his.

14. See Daniel L. Migliore, *The Power of God and the Gods of Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), *passim.*

15. Rom 8:22.

16. These ideas will be discussed further in chs. 7, 9, and 10.

17. Luke 1:35.

18. Miriam is the sister of Moses and Aaron in the Hebrew Scriptures.

19. Exod 15:1.

20. Luke 1:53.

21. Luke 2:11.

22. Q is translated literally as "what" in the German language, but in this context is understood to mean "source." This is a contested document among scholars; I have described but one way Q is understood to have functioned. For a description of this position, see Burton L. Mack, *Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993). Other scholars posit that Luke used the material from Matthew and Mark, but did not include a document called Q. Marc Goodacre's work describes this opposite position. Marc Goodacre, *The Case against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

23. This is my imagined conversation John may have had with himself!

24. John 1:14, NRSV.

25. John 1:1

26. John 3:1-21; 4:7-30.

27. John 11:35.

28. John 20:27.

29. John 14:9-10.

30. You can read more about Athanasius in Kelly's "Early Christian Doctrines."

Cynthia L. Rigby

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For my parents, Charles and Ethel Rigby,
who taught me faith would hold.