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What is Theology?

**[A]God-Talk: The Impossible Possibility**

The tongues of Pentecost declare the wonders of God! So says Acts 2:11. The church was born with this praise and witness on its lips. Theology is bound to that witness and especially to the biblical witness that surrounds it. What *is* Theology? Theology is talk about *God*. It is first about what we know of God from what God has revealed. Indeed, it’s about God’s action to save us by redeeming us in Christ and imparting divine love to us by the Spirit. It’s also about our participation in God through praise and witness that occurs as a consequence. A report on the early spread of the Pentecostal Movement in William J. Seymour’s *Apostolic Faith* paper says the following of “Bible salvation”: “The object and end of all precious Scripture is that a definite work may be wrought out in our hearts by the Holy Ghost. God’s design through the ages and through all His work with the children of men has been to implant His own nature—love, in a fallen race.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Theology as speech about God speaks about such mysteries and their roots in the divine self-giving to us in Christ and in the Spirit.

Theology is not the *only* speech about God in the church. We all speak the truth of God in love in fellowship with one another so as to grow up into Christ (Eph. 4:15). Special gifts of prophecy and wisdom are at work. There is also pastoral preaching and instruction as well as the outward witness of the church in the world. We worship as well, even by speaking in tongues. These tongues can be said to declare “the wonders of God” as they did in Acts chapter 2. An audience of diaspora Jews were present in Jerusalem from many different Gentile lands to celebrate the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:11). When the Spirit fell on the original disciples, they began speaking in tongues, an event that was accompanied by the sound of a mighty wind and signs of flaming tongues resting on each of them. Many among the audience that was drawn to the event heard the wonders of God declared in their native tongues by the disciples of Jesus. The wonders of *God*! Human language exceeds its own capacity as it reaches by the Spirit beyond natural boundaries to bear witness to a transcendent mystery that is not at our disposal. Tongues may point to the transcendent mystery of such love most dramatically but all authentic speech about God implies it by pushing us to the boundaries of our thought and speech. Not only that, but the overflowing Spirit of God finds voice in an overabundance of prophetic communication that is understood in the many languages of the audience that had gathered and comprehended the wonders being declared. This is prophetic overload![[2]](#footnote-2) No single discourse community could capture the total richness of the event! Each one must exceed its own boundaries to do so! All of this means that only a consciousness that is humble and receptive, what Amos Yong calls the “pneumatological imagination,” can make the most of speech about God.[[3]](#footnote-3) God’s love is sovereign and free. God loves in freedom. We become free by being constantly receptive and obedient in repentance and faith to divine love. In a spreading flame of diverse prophetic communication, these tongues signal a gospel that will reach the ends of the earth. All flesh in all of its diversity will partake; social privilege or domination will play no role and is even undermined. Young and old, bond and free, male and female, and Jew and Gentile will partake of this witness within a just communion or “society” redeemed by Christ and sanctified and empowered by the Spirit (Acts 2:17-18; Gal. 3:28). This fellowship, this praise, and this witness will represent the instrument of the gospel to the world. With the help of academic research and reflection, theology takes its place within this corporate speech to and about God to help explain and guide it. Theology as speech about God is unique (in part) in being an academic discipline.

What is theology then? Theology is academic “God-talk” or speech about the God who creates, redeems, and indwells. The term “theology” literally means a word about God (*theo* coming from *theos* [Θεόϛ] meaning *God*, and *logy* deriving from *logos* [λόγοϛ] meaning *word*). More expansively, theology represents an effort to understand and speak of the ultimate mystery of divine love at the source, sustenance, and horizon of all life. Using academic tools of research and reflection, theology joins the faith of the church in seeking understanding and expression. The challenge behind God-talk has to do with its possibility. What accounts for it? What informs it? How is it to be authenticated?

Theology has typically answered such questions with reference to divine *revelation* in the form of concrete *norms*, principally, that of Christ and the biblical witness. Without God’s self-revelation, theology lacks a basis and a norm for its work. At the base of *epistemology* (what we know) and *communication* (praise and witness) is *ontology* (the *reality* of the divine self-communication). Behind the legitimacy of our God-talk is the assumption that God has spoken and still speaks. But where has God spoken? The question is an important one. The reason why revelation is so vital to God-talk is due to the fact that revelation is our only access to knowing God. God’s free and gracious self-disclosure becomes the only way of knowing and speaking authentically of God. Revelation is not granted by God from a distance but through God’s coming to redeem and indwell, to change humanity into Christ’s image. Those who receive this revelation do so in the midst of their being taken in and changed by it. It cannot be merely abstract. Theology as an academic discipline partakes of the reality of which it speaks.

Though divine revelation possesses and changes us, allowing us to know it, revelation can never be wholly grasped by us. It maintains its freedom and mystery. There is always more to know. Revelation never places God at our disposal or within our grasp, for we cannot grasp God; God grasps us:

You hem me in behind and before,  
    and you lay your hand upon me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
    too lofty for me to attain (Ps 139:4-5).

Indeed, “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). We cannot currently grasp God in the way that God grasps us, nor should we try, for our grasping is too controlled by our self-serving ends. Any God graspable by us is thus an idol. It is much better to yield and obey. As our model, Christ did not grasp after the heavenly Father but emptied himself out on behalf of sinners in obedience to his Father (Phil. 2:6-8). Philippians 2:6 literally states that Christ did not aggrandize himself as divine as an act of “grasping after” or robbery (ἁρπαγμὸν) like the figure of Prometheus in ancient Greek mythology who defied the gods by stealing the fire of knowledge for the human race. Christ rather “emptied himself” (ἐκένωσεν) into the depth of human shame and suffering in obedience to his loving Father so as to be exalted on behalf of sinners for their salvation. He pours forth the Spirit from the spiritual fullness of his risen life but also in line with his self-emptying in becoming flesh and going to the cross. We receive revelation from God in a Christ-like manner, yielding to divine love in repentance and faith, for the Spirit comes bearing witness to him. The discipline of theology must conform to love as well if it is to be done in accordance with the direction of divine revelation. “Whoever does not love does not know God” (1 John 4:8). As Robert Webber wrote, “Christian intellectuals have turned Descartes’ dictum (‘I think therefore I am’) into something like, ‘I think about the knowledge of God, therefore I know God.’”[[4]](#footnote-4) But this is not true. Theology does speak *about* God but is properly to do so in the service of knowing God by participating in the embrace and cause of divine love. Ontology (that which is revealed of God) precedes epistemology (knowing this reality) and determines its path. We only know God from God and through submission to God. We receive revelation in the midst of Christlike self-emptying in repentance and faith for the sake of God’s purposes in the world. There is no “grasping” this knowledge for *our* purposes, only receiving a mystery with humble and grateful hands that never presume to be able to adequately grasp, grateful for what we do know and always open to learn more, and to learn anew.

What we do know and express by the grace of God is only *analogous* to the divine reality, meaning that the truths we learn are “like” God, *true* hopefully, but not in a way that simply *equates* what we say with who God is. And this includes theology. No truths expressed in finite language and known by finite minds can fully or adequately grasp the infinite divine mystery. We “know” the divine love “that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:19). We know the unknowable, speak the unutterable (Rom. 8:26). All God talk is the impossible possibility, possible only by grace but never so in a way that removes the impossibility, never in a way that removes the mystery entirely. God remains free and hidden, even in self-disclosure. God remains transcendent and free even when opening Godself to human knowing and speaking. Thus, we cannot simply *equate* what *we* say with *God* as though our knowledge and speech are able to adequately capture the heights and depths of the perfection and glory of God. Especially in the light of our finitude and penchant for idolatry, we must insist that our knowledge and speech about God always fall short of the divine glory. Only Christ did not fall short, for he alone is the “radiance of God’s glory, the exact image of his being” (Heb. 1:3). For this reason, Christ in the glow of the Spirit is ontologically (in essence) to be equated with divine revelation. Calling Christ the “parable of God” is not enough. Saying that Christ is aligned with God’s love is not sufficient. Christ is in his very being *essential* to God and God’s self-giving, meaning there is no possibility of the divine self-giving without him. He is from all eternity the Word of the Father (John 1:1, 18)! All other revelation (primarily scripture, secondarily other forms of God talk) is a parable of Christ. All other revelation is derivative and subordinate to Christ as his *witness* for he alone is the Word of the Father for all time. He is the “one and only” (John. 1:1-18). Scripture functions as God’s word in witness to Christ and is inspired or sanctified to do so faithfully and authoritatively, but only Christ can be essentially equated with God’s perfect glory and depth of love. Among the material means of divine revelation, only he shares fully in the divine perfection, transcendence, and finality. There is nothing that can compare with the incarnation when it comes to the mediation of the Word of God in history and in human life. Christ does not only bear witness to the truth like John the Baptist and other biblical voices. He *is* the truth to which they all bear witness (John 14:6).

God condescends so as to accommodate Godself to God talk, even that which exists in scripture. The Bible and theology speak of God *anthropomorphically* or in finite and human-like descriptions so that we could grasp something true about the infinite mystery of God. What we come to know from God is true but not exhaustively so, neither in quality nor extent. We presently cannot know God in a way that allows us to gaze upon God directly. Even one’s “immediate” experience of God is mediated (a mediated immediacy). The Old Testament expressed this truth anthropomorphically by noting that no one can behold God’s face.[[5]](#footnote-5) Even though Exodus 33:11 boldly claims that Moses spoke to God “face to face,” the narrative concludes with considerable “back peddling” by way of qualification, with God stating that no one can see the divine face and Moses having to settle for beholding the “backside” of the divine goodness or glory (33:19-23), not God’s being, mind you, only God’s glory![[6]](#footnote-6) God leads, we follow after where God’s goodness points us. And, at best, we only see the “backside” of God’s glory, but no one can see God’s face! Only the eternal Word of the Father has done that, “No one has ever seen God but the one and only Son” (John 1:18). One see God, only that which God reveals through a mediating reality, as, in Moses’ case, God’s goodness or glory, occasioned by God’s own proclamation of the divine name while “passing by.” Whatever the idiom “face to face” (perhaps, “presence to presence”) meant in Exodus 3:11, the larger narrative prevents the reader from taking it literally. The Reformer, Philip Melanchthon, noted that the exalted Christ is known only by grace and only in his benefits. Melanchthon must have had Exodus 33 in mind. Isaiah saw a theophany of the Son of God in the Holy of Holies of the Temple but all Isaiah could do was grasp the hem of his garment (Isaiah 6:1-4; John 12:41). Even John could not see the face of the exalted Christ, for it shone like the sun in full brilliance (Rev. 1:16). God hides behind God’s glory even while revealing it!

We shall see the exalted Christ *as he is* only when we are like him, meaning conformed through resurrection to his glorious image (1 John 3:2). We see him now more and more as we become more like him in the beauty and power of divine love in action. The sanctified life is the path of knowing Christ better. Again, “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8). The pentecostal pioneer, C. H. Mason wrote that as he was filled with the Holy Spirit he was able in his mind’s eye to behold Christ from the cross “groaning” for suffering humanity on the cross. He suddenly felt himself at one with Christ’s groaning out of love for the world as he spoke in tongues. “It was not my voice but the voice of my Beloved that I heard in me.”[[7]](#footnote-7) His path to knowing Christ and the significance of his death took place in Mason’s yielding to the love of Christ for humanity. His deeper reception of the Spirit was a deeper reception of the self-giving of Christ for the world. He didn’t presume to grasp this mystery completely, only to yield completely to it. The more we increase in knowledge through loving God and others, the more we appreciate God’s freedom and transcendence. He remains the transcendent LORD in revelation. There is profound grace in the very fact that God would grant any genuine measure of knowing the divine life and works and then bless our witness to it by using it as an instrument of the divine self-disclosure to others.

*Christ in the witness of the Spirit is the possibility of knowing the unknowable and speaking the unspeakable*. Conformity by grace to Christ and the way of the Spirit in repentance and faith opens this possibility to us. Take note of John 1:18: “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God, and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” Only the Son has beheld God the Father directly with limitless intimacy and fullness from all eternity, for the Son shared the Father’s nature and was with the Father from eternity past (v. 1). This Word was not only with God the Father but was himself God, or of the same nature as God the Father (v. 1). From this uniquely direct intimacy with the Father, the Son is made flesh in the Spirit to tabernacle among us so as to reveal the Father’s glory by revealing his own (v. 14; cf., Luke 1:35). Jesus is the human face of God. Notice that we do not behold the Father directly; and even our beholding of the eternal Son comes only through the tabernacle of his flesh which reflects his *glory*. “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (v. 14b). The Word becomes flesh to reflect the glory of God by way of the Spirit. Reminds one of Moses, does it not? One could indeed look upon the man Jesus but fail to see the glory of the one and only Son. The flesh of Jesus was both a barrier to seeing that glory and a vehicle of seeing it, depending on whether one repents and believes. Note the reaction to Jesus among people of his hometown: “Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. ‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?’ they asked. ‘Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?’” (Matt. 13:54-55). His fleshly life was both a barrier to seeing his true essence and a vehicle for seeing it. It all depended on whether or not the beholder believed. But even perceiving the revelation by faith did not remove the mystery entirely.

Can one see the glory of divine love at the cross, at an event of execution and shame? C. H. Mason did and it profoundly changed him. But he yielded his entire being to it by faith. Can one behold the divine glory at the cross? This is John’s question. For John, Christ shows the Father’s glory throughout his life and he asks the Father just prior to his death to glorify him “now” as he approaches the cross (17:4-5). Of course, people would not be expected to see it until after the fact. But it was there hidden at the cross, beneath the sorrow and despair. Moses saw the backside of God’s glory from behind in the midst of the desert as God led the faltering Israelites toward the promised land. The cross allows us to see the “backside” of God’s glory too as Christ was on his way through the cross of sorrow and shame to lead humanity to the promised era of resurrection hope, of the blessings of life in the Spirit! Can one believe that God was with us at the cross, with us in the depths of our despair? Could Moses believe that God was with him and the others in the desert? Could he see the glory even there? Could we see the glory at the cross? To those who have eyes to see! The same cross that is a barrier to seeing the glory is at the same time an open portal. Even those who see cannot penetrate the full depths of it all. God remains hidden, even in self-disclosure.

In speaking of God, the church is to bear increasingly fitting witness to the love of God revealed in Christ through church practices that structure that witness. Through proclamation, sacraments, worship, spiritual gifts, mission, and acts of love and justice, the church bears witness to the gospel of the kingdom of God revealed in Christ. Theologians partake of these practices from within their gifted concern for the theological authenticity and depth of these different forms of witness. Theologians proclaim Christ too but with an eye towards enriching and guiding that proclamation academically. Theologians receive and join themselves to Christ as people do in baptism and receive and remember him along with the church’s practice of the LORD’s Supper. But as theologians they seek to exercise their gift so as to enrich and guide that sacramental life. Theologians use their gift to glorify God alongside the worship of the church but in a way that enriches and guides that worship theologically. Theology is a spiritual gift along with all other gifts but participates from its concern for the theological depth and meaning of the church’s charismatic structure. Theology is missional too, for it has a dialogical and apologetic edge, but it joins the church’s mission with a theological concern to enrich and guide the church’s missional life.[[8]](#footnote-8)

However, all of this does not mean that the church has no secular social concern. Far from it. The church’s social witness on behalf of the poor and the oppressed in the world is a vital element of the church’s role as the sign and instrument of the coming justice and mercy of the kingdom of God, a role that the church discredits if any part of it sides with injustice in the world and turns its back on those in the world who suffer unjustly. Indeed, a number of those who suffer injustice in the world will include many in the churches as well. Will we show the love of Christ for the people of the world if we ignore their suffering and the unjust conditions that cause it? Can we bear witness to the mercy and righteousness of the kingdom of God before the world if we behave unrighteously when encountering sin and injustice all around us? Theology is to enrich and guide the church’s social witness theologically.

**[A]Theology as a Constructive Discipline**

Theology is a constructive discipline, meaning that it focuses on points of doctrine in the biblical text and throughout the milestones of dogma in the church’s history in a way that is coherent and has relevance for our social and cultural contexts. That theology “constructs” means that it seeks to build a coherent doctrinal framework that can guide the church’s God-Talk today. The theologian reads the Bible first with an eye towards discerning the “scope” of its overarching gospel. One cannot construct a coherent doctrinal framework without this at its core! The task is not easy! The Bible is a very large and diverse book! Biblical scholars have produced an ocean of scholarship concerning its many voices set within their own historical and canonical contexts and literary forms. Biblical scholars honor *exegesis*, which methodically takes the ancient meaning of a text *out of* the text itself. This practice is contrasted with *eisegesis* which is the reading one’s own contemporary ideas *into the text*, which we should be discouraged from doing. The best approach is to remain true to the text’s own witness in the light of its own context but then to bring this meaning into conversation with one’s contemporary context. So in discerning the biblical gospel, the theologian must deal with all facets of the biblical message.

It helps the theologian to recognize that there is a world *behind, of, and before* the text of scripture.[[9]](#footnote-9) The world *behind* the text is the ancient setting of the scriptures detectable more or less in the text itself. The biblical authors wrote to ancient audiences; they did not write directly *to us*. The more we know about that ancient audience and its setting the better. But these ancient texts were not simply products of their ancient cultural environment. By the Spirit’s inspiration and authorial creativity, the authors also wrote in a way that was to some extent innovative for its time, having its own integrity as a proposal that confronted its setting with something new. So, in addition to the world *behind* the text, there is thus also the world *of* the text, which is the world implied by the narrative of the text itself, what Karl Barth called “the strange new world within the Bible.” Each author offers a unique voice concerning this world but they also converge in interesting ways. This world ofthe text was offered originally to subvert the world behind the text in the times in which the Bible was written. But the world of the text was in the providence of God written for us too. The strange new world of the text wishes to subvert our world too. Our world is the world *before* the text. Biblical scholars remind us that the contemporary relevance of the Bible in *our* world cannot bypass the Bible’s own unique inner world as it was presented in answer to the worlds behind the writing of the Bible. But the contemporary relevance of biblical texts is essential to theology’s *constructive* work. The theologian seeks to be responsive to the contemporary social and cultural contexts in thinking about the relevance of strange new world of the Bible for their time.

Biblical scholars concentrate on how the strange new world within the Bible was constructed in its own setting and what it meant then, when it was written. The systematic theologians wants to know what it means today and seeks to answer that question systematically along the lines of major doctrinal concerns. Because theology honors the results of biblical scholarship, it respects the practice of *exegesis*, or taking the meaning of texts from the texts themselves, in the context in which they were written. While exegesis is the practice of biblical interpretation, *hermeneutics* is the theory that informs the practice. For example, while one exegetes a parable in the light of its historical and narrative context, hermeneutics asks what parables were crafted to do in the first place, or, more broadly, how one is even to understand the entire process involved in the interpretation of texts. Biblical scholars are concerned with theology too but they are concerned with the particular meaning of texts *first* and there are a great many of them with which to be concerned! They tend to deal with theological issues mainly in discerning the theological battles involved in the formation of biblical texts. They focus on the particular and not on the more broadly thematic. Biblical theology is the branch of biblical studies that is most concerned with theological themes within the Bible, but, even then, these themes are tied to the theology that is found within a particular biblical book, author, or tradition within the Bible. Most biblical scholars are wary of broad and sweeping theological proposals for the theological unity of the biblical canon. They may venture now and then into how their craft informs theology as a set of proposals today but they know that they are driving in another lane when they do so.

The *biblical theology movement* in the mid-twentieth century and beyond blessed the church with bold statements about the sweeping theological themes of the Old and New Testaments. History was widely viewed in the heyday of this movement as the all-encompassing framework of biblical revelation and the key to its canonical unity. But such boldness is uncommon in biblical studies today.[[10]](#footnote-10) The focus on history was also used by theologians in the years following the waning of the biblical theology movement (the 1960’s and beyond) to support a secular turn in theology from the church to the challenges of the secular social context. The contemporary context of theology (what the Bible means today) became important, though not necessarily in the service to constructing a full-blown system of doctrine as systematic theology attempted. This led to *liberation theology* and to an extent indigenous *contextual theologies*. A countermove occurred later in *postliberalism* that returned the focus of revelation to the biblical text and the practicing church that gathers around it so as it interpret it for its own life in the world. Within this countermove, revelation may be said to occur in history but not in a way that reduces the biblical text to functioning as an instrument of secular, social transformation. Rather, revelation occurs prominently in the text, especially its narrative world, as a source of renewal for the church and its witness. We will discuss these trends in our third chapter. The key point here is that theology is constructive in that it proceeds beyond the strange new world within the Bible to ask larger doctrinal questions of relevance to the faith of the church today. In doing so, theology proceeds beyond biblical studies, while still being reliant on it.

Systematic theology as a constructive discipline relates in a similar manner to the historical scholarship on church history and the diverse history of doctrine and of theology. Church historians can deal with theology too but mainly in the larger effort to understand what caused churches and movements to diversify, grow, and take shape in various times and places. Historical theology deals more directly with theology, but mainly as tied to the developments of creeds, confessions, dogmas, and the theologies of key individuals, churches, and movements. Again, systematic theologians draw valuable insights from this work, but unlike these historical investigations, systematicians are uniquely concerned with theological proposals in their own right with all of the issues that have accompanied this unique inquiry, especially in terms of how they can make sense to *us*. Theological ideas that arise from bygone texts, battles, individuals, and movements, are pulled together and discussed by systematicians as objects of study in their own right and as meaningful for the life and mission of the church today.

In distinction from both biblical studies and church history, systematic theology, the effort of this volume, discusses doctrinal proposals in a way that shows the coherence and unity of truth across the specific topics (loci) of doctrine. Systematicians think *across doctrines* making sure that what is claimed in one place is consistent with what is claimed in other places. The conviction is that these topics are not fragmented and isolated from each other. They have a scope and a unity. This does not mean that theology constructs a system that is closed, as some kind of final statement that is not open to fresh and transformative input. The “pneumatological imagination” (Amos Yong) of the systematician remains fallible, limited, and open to diverse voices.[[11]](#footnote-11) Barth would say that the core “principle” of theology is a person, Jesus Christ, and this person remains free, not fully graspable or contained by humanly-constructed systems of thought. As Barth was fond of saying, theologians must maintain the capacity to return to the scriptures again and again with a fresh ear and even as a result to be willing to begin again at the beginning (*mit dem Anfang anfangen*). Open theological systems should have aesthetic appeal. Like works of art, they are not all the same, though they will have essential points in common. There is room for many of them to bless the church’s worship and ministries and to guide its communication of the gospel.

Systematic theology is thus doctrinal but it is still not the same as church doctrine. Doctrine is typically done by church bodies that give rise to doctrinal statements to inform and play a regulatory function throughout the church’s communicative practices. Doctrines “are normative statements of Christian beliefs adopted by ecclesiastical authorities and endorsed as the official teaching of the church.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Unlike doctrine, systematic theology is far more voluminous and is typically done by individuals who participate in the praise and witness of the church but also to some degree in the academy (the academic study of theology and to some extent other academic fields of study), thus being devoted to the doctrinal faith of the church and yet serving a critical function in relation to it. Doctrine is corporate, regulatory, and official and theology is individual, critical, and unofficial. The latter explains a great deal more than regulates. As such, systematic theology is far more extensive in scope. But the two, doctrine and systematic theology, do overlap. Doctrines are systematically stated and systematic theology is doctrinal in that it deals with the significant areas (loci) of theological concern needed to guide the church’s witness, covering the same or similar areas of concern. Doctrinal statements are informed by theological treatises and theologians write with an eye towards affirming, explaining, and perhaps critiquing doctrinal milestones. Individual theologians do belong to the history of doctrine but not on their own terms, for theologians are servants of the church and its faith. Thus, the works of systematic theology over time should not be simply equated with the history of theology lest we exaggerate “the significance of the idiosyncratic thought of individual theologians at the expense of the common faith of the church.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus doctrine is pervasive throughout the communicative practices of the church and can play a regulative function within them, including the practice of individual theologians! Theologians seek to enhance and guide the church’s communicative practices with attention to their doctrinal integrity but do so individually and critically, with an eye towards appreciatively and critically remarking on the church’s doctrinal heritage and its all-pervasive influence. A number of theologians have written commentaries on church creeds, confessions, and statements of faith.

Vital points of doctrine that attract the most attention by theologians are called “dogmas.” Dogmas are generally discussed as doctrines that are vital to the gospel and its appropriation in the life of the church. Doctrines such as salvation by grace, the true deity and humanity of the Savior in one person, Jesus Christ, the atonement that comes exclusively through Christ’s death and resurrection, and the outpouring of the Spirit to give rise to the life of the church and the new creation have historically constituted the very core of dogma. The Trinity represents its flowering. As theologians of dogma, systematicians are theologians of the Trinity. The word “dogma” has a negative connotation outside of theology, viewed commonly as a term that depicts a close-minded, ideologically-driven, and even politically-imposed approach to an object of inquiry. But the theological use of the term is something else entirely, at least it should be! Even in cases where dogmatic conclusions in the form of ancient creeds were enforced by political authority, such enforcement should be viewed as alien to the dogmas themselves and not adequate as an explanation for their significance to the life of the church.

Dogmatics as a term used in the place of systematic theology is more common among European theologians today than elsewhere in the world. This term is not simply to mean a collection of dogmas (though it has been used that way). It is rather an appreciative and critical study of the church’s dogmas or chief doctrinal assertions with an eye toward clarifying and explaining them for the church’s current life and communication of its gospel. Dogmatics can thus be understood as synonymous with systematic theology. In the words of Wolfhart Pannenberg, dogmatics “has to be systematic theology, namely, a systematic theology of God and nothing else.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The loci (topics or doctrines) covered are indeed primarily all about the Triune God and only secondarily about God’s economy or work of salvation in history. They are: [**BL 1-6**]

Theology Proper (God’s existence, attributes, God as One and Three)

Christology (Christ)

Pneumatology (Holy Spirit)

Soteriology (Salvation)

Ecclesiology (Church)

Eschatology (Final Purposes and Fulfillment) **[/BL 1-6**]

From early in the history of the church a distinction was also made between ethical and doctrinal instruction, “the ethical part and the precision of dogmas” (Theodore of Mopsuestia), the ethical placed under the commandments of Jesus and the doctrinal under the catechism and preparation for baptism. Neither of them were “acceptable to God without the other” among the church fathers.[[15]](#footnote-15) Theology has ethical and life implications. Theology will always have an eye towards these implications, especially as it engages the social and cultural contexts of the churches. Theology is not only to aid in understanding the kingdom of God but is to facilitate and guide our liberating and transformative participation in it. Theology, along with ethics, is primarily caught up in the praise and glory to God. Theology is also doxological. Overall, theology as a constructive discipline for the sake of better understanding and articulation of the mysteries of God maintains its importance in the church—*fides quaerans intellectum* (faith seeking understanding)!

Doctrine and theology are indeed sometimes rejected by those who wish to stress instead united worship, discipleship, or social concern. We need unity rather than division! We need deeds rather than creeds! Doctrine and theology, it is sometimes said, are too driven by useless abstractions and human opinions that can only further distract, divide, or isolate us. It is not that this protest is without some merit. Theology can indeed become too detached from the concrete life and social witness of a church. Pentecostal pioneer, William J. Seymour, thus wrote in the preamble of his Mission’s paper: “We are not fighting men or churches but seeking to displace dead forms and creeds and wild fanaticisms with living, practical Christianity. ‘Love, faith, unity’ are our watchwords.”[[16]](#footnote-16) But united worship, discipleship, and social concern can *also* lack theological awareness and depth. Even if the protest against doctrine or theology is backed by a genuine concern, it cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged. To begin revealing the one-sidedness of this argument, one need only ask a question like why we glorify Christ or follow *him* in our life or ethical commitments. If Christian, the answer is bound to rely on a principle of doctrine or theology. Their answer can then be probed for greater depth. It should soon become apparent that we need deeds *and* creeds. We need our faithful deeds so that creeds are not abstract principles but rather wisdom needed to guide a life of doxology, mercy, and justice, and we need creeds to locate our deeds primarily and fittingly in the divine self-giving. Ontology or divine revelation precedes obedience! Revelation needs to be understood and that requires in part research, discussion, and articulation.

The loci of systematic theology rightly puts God *first*. The triune God! Theology as reflection on God precedes the economy or the divine self-giving in the world to save it. The triune God does not need the economy to be God. God does not need creation for communion. The triune God has communion in perfect fullness eternally within Godself. So when God overflows to create and love the others, God does not do so out of necessity so as to find fulfillment. God does so freely. God loves in freedom. The divine economy merely allows others to partake of and enjoy divine perfection. Among the triune loci of Father, Son, and Spirit, the Father is granted primacy. From the Father alone and to the Father alone are all things (1 Cor. 15:20-28). The Father eternally grants the Son and the Spirit to have (to be) the divine life in themselves as the Father does (and is) (John 5:26). The Father sends the Son and the Spirit into the world to save it, but the Father is never sent. There is especially to be a mutual cooperation between the Son and the Spirit in fulfilling the redemptive and renewing love of the Father. This was one of the rallying cries of the early pentecostal tradition: “the Spirit falls in answer to the blood.”[[17]](#footnote-17) What was meant by this was that the redeeming blood of Christ makes us worthy of the Spirit. The atonement and Pentecost were regarded as the two towering dogmas that defined the Christian life. In this theological intuition, they were completely right. This is how the second and third articles of the Creed are to be counterbalanced. The victory of Christ’s taking on flesh so as to conquer sin and death in his life, death, and resurrection, opens the path to Pentecost, the bestowal of the Spirit on all flesh. “He redeemed us… so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit” (Gal. 3:14). There is to be a perichoresis or mutual (interpenetrating) working of the two economies of the Son and the Spirit, which requires an adequate counterbalance of the two. We will show in the next two chapters how important this issue is to theological method.

In the West, the link between the incarnation and the atonement was commonly used to grant Christology its due weight in relation to pneumatology. Forging this link between Chalcedonian Christology (the incarnation of the truly divine Son in true flesh as one person) and the atonement was Anselm’s great contribution to the Christology of the West. His atonement doctrine secured the fact that Christ was in himself the redemptive event for all time.[[18]](#footnote-18) Christ is not the mere instrument of the Spirit’s presence in the world. He is more than an ideal example of the man of the Spirit or of “new being” in the Spirit. He does not merely exercise in his perfect alignment with God a redemptive *influence* on us. As we will see, this is the problem of liberal theology. In this framework, pneumatology lacks an adequate Christology. In answer to this imbalance, we must follow the New Testament witness in insisting that Christ is the redemptive event of reconciliation in his own right, not only in his exemplary life, but in his atoning death and resurrection. On the other hand, the Spirit’s power of actualizing God’s salvific work in flesh is often used to grant the Spirit adequate weight in counterbalance to Christology. Though the Son takes on flesh, the Spirit may be said to actualize the incarnation of the Son in flesh (Luke 1:35; 3:22). Though the Son obeys the Father in his journey to the cross, the Spirit may be said to empower the Son’s redemptive mission in flesh and actualize the Son’s sonship in his flesh leading all the way to his self-offering on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. Though Christ pours forth the Spirit from his redemptive victory, the Spirit may be said to overflow the Son’s life so as to unite him to others. Though Christ followed the leading of the Spirit in his life, the Spirit now bears witness to that life and shapes us in its image. A theology of the Spirit today is needed to counterbalance the heavy emphasis in the West on the redemptive work of Christ, which has tended to reduce pneumatology to a witness to that work in the world, not granting the Spirit a role in that work itself. But we dare not proceed in a way that reduces Christ to a mere religious ideal, the chief man of the Spirit, merely the chief witness to the Spirit’s work.

In short, the first three loci of the triune God have prime of place in depicting the fullness of divine perfection and the following loci of salvation, church, and the perfection of new creation flow from divine grace or God’s freedom to love. God does not need to love in this way to be perfect, though such perfection is revealed in it, and is thus fitting to it. God does not need such external love to be God, though God desires and delights in it. It is the only way that God can give outwardly in doing so, for God is always faithful to Godself. But God decides from all eternity to give outwardly freely and not for personal fulfillment. And in the economy, all things flow from and to the Father and there is to be an inseparable mutual working of Son and Spirit that contains a fitting interpenetration (*perichoresis*) of the two. My recent Christology, *Jesus the Spirit Baptizer: Christology in Light of Pentecost* was an effort to achieve this balance. Led by the Spirit, Jesus passes redemptively through the fire of condemnation and death and rises in the fullness of the Spirit so as to pour forth the Spirit (and the faithfulness and benefits of the Son) upon us.[[19]](#footnote-19) Christ himself is present in the presence of the Spirit and it remains by the Spirit that we confess Jesus as LORD to the glory of the Father. The Father’s love finds its victory in this mutual work of the Son and the Spirit in the world.

**[A]Scripture: The Primary Instrument of Salvation**

The church is by the Spirit the sign and instrument of salvation and of the kingdom of God in the world. But it legitimates itself as such in loyalty to the primary instrument of salvation, the holy scriptures. The scriptures are not the only means by which the Spirit speaks; far from it. *Sola scriptura* (scripture alone) means that scripture alone is the supreme standard for discerning the voice of the Spirit in the churches. This is not the same as the biblicist *nuda scriptura* (only scripture is the instrument of the Spirit’s voice). Theology seeks to enrich and to guide the church’s witness in loyalty to scripture in its privileged place as the chief instrument of salvation and standard of discernment. Christ mediates salvation in the Spirit, the scriptures are their chief instrument. The church with all of its practices can be called the chief instrument too but in a way that recognizes its subordination to scripture. Christ came to us in flesh, flesh that is conceived and anointed by the Spirit, but flesh that was also wrapped in the garb of the Jewish scriptures, dedicated to their fulfillment, and wrapped further in the witness of the apostles. He still comes to us wrapped in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. These very same scriptures were written to bear witness to him (“it is written about me in the scroll,” Heb. 10:5). In a sense, all scripture was born from the Word of the Father made flesh by the Spirit, Jesus Christ. His life, death, and resurrection represent the victory of God over sin and death passed on to us at Pentecost. Christ is himself the core gospel of scripture that comes to us through the instrument of scripture and (secondarily) church’s practices. “To all who did receive *him*… he gave the right to be children of God” (John 1:12).

The tongues of fire at Pentecost seek to glorify the exalted Christ in anticipation of the gospel of his death and resurrection reaching the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8; 2:32-33). The scriptures were inspired of the Spirit to bear witness to him to the very ends of the earth until all things are accomplished (Matt. 5:17-18). Since the scripture’s gospel is embodied in the risen Christ, it cannot be fully grasped by any single community, in any one idiom, in any one context, not even in all of them together. The life promised and called forth by this gospel can only be “grasped” without being fully grasped in yielding obedience and as a mere foretaste in our hearing, and always in ways that carry new and deeper nuances of meaning in the context of this sinful and dying world that we inhabit. This gospel does indeed involve doctrinal propositions that are analogous to the divine action to which they point. But the gospel cannot be reduced to a set of propositions. It is at its core a life that grasps and changes us and that causes us to yield to the divine mystery at the core of it, “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,  things too wonderful for me to know” (Job 42:3).

The Bible bears witness to this life as it bears witness to its truth. In bearing witness, it becomes the authoritative instrument of the living Christ to speak and to heal in the presence and work of the Spirit. The Bible is inspired by Christ in the Spirit (sanctified to be the privileged voice of the Spirit in the churches) but it is also human. Its authors, like us, were vessels of clay that were sanctified to carry a treasure of glory (2 Cor. 4:7), except they were set apart from us to speak with unusual depth and eschatological reach. The Bible’s witness, however, is still powerful only by the Spirit, a case of divine strength revealed in weakness, as are all finite human authors, even those blessed with special insight and authority. There are places in scripture where the witness to Christ may seem eclipsed and must be carefully discerned. But discerned it must, for all scripture is fulfilled in him (Matt. 5:17). Luther even went so far as to write, “And the scriptures must be understood for Christ, not against him. Therefore, a passage of scripture must relate to him or it cannot be regarded as true scripture. If, therefore, our adversaries should use scripture against Christ, we shall use Christ against the scripture.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Luther’s bold rhetoric has shock value that is provocative, even to some disturbing. This statement cannot be taken to mean, however, that we can simply disregard scriptures that present us with an interpretive challenge. As Athanasius noted, we are urged by the Bible’s own witness to Christ as LORD to interpret all texts in the light of the “scope” of the biblical message that centers on Christ and the narration of the new humanity in him. Athanasius writes:

**[EXT]**Perhaps you are wondering why, when we have set out to discuss the incar­nation of the Word, we are now narrating concerning the beginning of humans. But this also is not foreign to the *scope* of the narration. For it is necessary for us, in speaking about the appearing of the Savior, to speak also concerning the beginning of humans, so that you may know that the charge against us was the reason for his descent.”[[21]](#footnote-21) **[/EXT]**

The location of biblical texts within the mercy of God shown at the cross, where God overcame wrath to reach out to sinners in grace, will raise the issue of how these texts are now to be viewed. A biblical text has its own voice to be sure. We are not to flee to other texts to mute the voice of a text that is not of our liking. But, ultimately, no biblical text stands alone but is contextualized by the scope of the biblical gospel. *The Bible interprets itself in the light of its own gospel, which is itself centered on the person and work of Christ*. This is the theological import of having a canon. 1 Peter 3:19-20 notes that after Christ’s resurrection “he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits” who were disobedient and judged in the time of Noah. Try reading the story of Noah (and of the entire Old Testament) in this light![[22]](#footnote-22) The Bible in its witness to Christ will not deceive or mislead. As 2 Peter notes, “We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it” (1:19). We must rightly divide the word of truth according to its witness which points to Christ. As 2 Peter adds, we must not be guilty of distorting the word out of ignorance of its message (3:16).

Hebrews 1 illustrates this truth of Christ’s role in summing up and clarifying the prophetic (and apostolic) message of the Bible. 1:1-2 notes that God spoke through the prophets “in various times and in various ways” but in these latter days through a Son whom the Father appointed heir of all things. Notice the implication here. The Son sums up, clarifies, and fulfills the various and diverse voices of the Old Testament. Christ, especially in his atoning death for sinners, grants readers the hermeneutical key to interpreting the Old Testament aright. As noted above, Christ alone is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” But this radiant glory is but the victory of a life poured out for the salvation of sinners: “After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (v. 3). The Spirit is poured out from the victory of this love over sin and death. The ancestors of holy writ pointed in various ways to this victory but only Christ fulfills it. According to Paul, the glory of self-giving love shines through the text “whenever Moses is read.” Of unbelieving Jews, Paul adds, “Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the LORD, the veil is taken away” (2 Cor. 3:15-16). That glory shines forth through the text of scripture onto us and through us to one another, which becomes the beauty of a life given over to the love of Christ. We are transformed in the text’s hearing “from glory to glory” from the Spirit (v. 18). In the next chapter, Paul notes that both the text and we are clay vessels of this glory (2 Cor. 4:6-7). But by the Spirit of Christ’s victory we are strong; we endure. “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (vv. 8-9). As for the scripture, not one stroke of a pen will disappear until all things are accomplished (Matt. 5:17-18). All attempts to destroy this scriptural testimony in history have failed and must fail. The church will endure too, for Christ will be with the church always (Matt. 28:20). Only at the resurrection will our glory fully mirror Christ’s; only then will these vessels of our embodied life be fully fitting as bearers of his glory. That fulfillment will be part of what must be accomplished before the sanctified task of scripture is fulfilled.

When we speak of scripture as sanctified of the Spirit for a consecrated task we speak of the scripture’s “inspiration” as the chief instrument of Christ in the divine mission of salvation.[[23]](#footnote-23) Prophets were “carried along by the Holy Spirit” when they wrote, granting their texts insight that would end up proving to be a great deal more significant to the people of God than a mere collection of ancient religious ideas (2 Peter 1:20-21). It is not only the authors who are inspired but also their texts, which are *verbally inspired*. This obviously does not mean that the Spirit dictated these texts, since they reflect the unique style, points of emphasis, and context of the human authors. But the Spirit consecrated these texts for a special purpose. The scriptures in this world are thus “a light shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (v. 19). The scripture reflects his light in a dark world. The scripture does this until “the day dawns” or the sun rises to flood the world with his light. This occurs when the Son appears at his return; it will be like the dawn in which the moon is no longer needed. The “morning star” of his light in us will rise as well in our resurrection in his image! Meanwhile, that light is in us and is to shine forth from us, the light of God’s love and truth given and poured out for our salvation.

The Bible is both inspired and being inspired. Christ through the Spirit addresses us through this text, not *only* through this text but *primarily* so. The biblical text in the hands of the Spirit is the light and wisdom of our journey into Christ! How important are the scriptures! Paul had to remind Timothy not to neglect his gift of publicly reading and proclaiming the scriptures. Timothy was not to allow any weakness he may have felt as a young and relatively inexperienced minister to discourage him (1 Tim. 4:11-15; 2 Tim. 1:3-7). We are all vessels of clay! The scriptures are “God-breathed” as a path of wisdom into Christ (ever deeper into Christ) for the people of God. Paul reminded Timothy how from early childhood he had “known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). The scriptures are thus “God-breathed” or inspired and “useful” for correcting, nurturing, and teaching the people of God (vv. 16-17). Timothy was to allow the scriptures to be his strong arm in ministry, his competence in weakness; he was to rely on it to guide others as it guided him in his own life.

The inspiration of scriptures receives its authenticity from the risen Christ who fulfills and authenticates them as his primary witness, his primary instrument of salvation in the world. One cannot start one’s systematic theology by “scientifically” proving biblical inspiration so as to then authenticate Christ! For all of the emphasis of the Protestant Reformation on the authority of scripture, “The Reformers did not seek to prove Scripture. They simply spoke out of a scriptural worldview.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The Father authenticated Christ by raising him from the dead and exalting him as LORD to reign! Further authentication came in the presence of the Spirit (Rom. 8:16; Gal. 3:4-5). I do not believe that our science is required to authenticate any of this. Do not get me wrong. There is a place for showing that rational arguments against Christ or the scriptures need not be barriers to faith. But God and God’s word are fundamentally self-authenticating. “Taste and see that the LORD is good;  blessed is the one who takes refuge in him” (Ps. 34:8). *Ontology* (divine revelation) precedes and accounts for the role of scripture in human knowing or *epistemology*. Those who participate in the church’s communicative practices thus assume the self-authenticating witness of the Spirit to Christ through the scriptures when granting these scriptures first place in the witness of the church (“how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,” 2 Tim. 3:15). The scriptures do not just guide the communicative practices of the church from a distance; they pervade these practices, for the reading of scripture is to be prominent within all of our church practices. We will have confidence as Timothy was urged to have that the Spirit will bear strong witness to the crucified and risen Christ through these scriptures. The message of scripture is occasionally followed by signs and wonders that draw attention to the risen Christ as sufficient to salvation (Gal. 3:5).

We are also to embody the scriptural witness through our practices, becoming “living letters” from Christ written on our hearts by the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:3). The challenge of ministry is not just to help people *understand* the biblical canon but be transformed by it, to embody and live it out together. Leaders in the ministry are to mentor their flocks, encouraging, challenging, and nurturing them in this word. The ministry of the word is never to be confined to a pulpit. Pastors of large churches should do this with those who serve directly under them, giving them the charge to do this among those who serve with them as well. We do this prayerfully, knowing that there is a spiritual life, a spiritual discipline, that undergirds this entire process. Scripture is best read from a spiritual life shaped by it and dedicated to living it. The church’s witness to the love of God in response to scripture is to be characterized by both purity and power.[[25]](#footnote-25) There is no proper understanding of the scriptures apart from the path of discipleship that they lay forth before us.

Inspired by the Spirit, the scriptures are to speak to the church’s communicative practices and through them. Theology is involved in these practices and seeks to bless and guide them theologically. “Theology is actually meant to be lived wisdom.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The church is to provide the social context for this journey. As Robert Wilken said of the early church, “Christianity enters history not only as a message but also as a communal life, a society or city, whose inner discipline and practices, rituals and creeds, and institutions and traditions were the setting for Christian thinking.”[[27]](#footnote-27) In fact, these practices played a role in the birth of the scriptures. From ancient Israel to the church of Jesus Christ, the proclamation, creeds, doctrines, worship, forms of service, and missional life of the people of God gave birth to the scriptures. Would we have the Psalms without Israel’s worship or Philippians 2 without the early hymns of worshipping Christ as LORD in the church? Would we have texts like 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 without the early church’s creedal life or 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 without the church’s sacramental practice? Would we have the book of Acts or Paul’s letters without the church’s missional life? However, these scriptures in becoming canonized quickly became the ongoing measure by which these practices continued to discern the authenticity of their witness. Why is this? The reason is that the Spirit gives rise to the scriptures; the church was the mere instrument of their birth. Like Mary’s miraculous conception of Jesus by the Spirit, so were the scriptures birthed by the Spirit from the womb and substance of the church’s witness. Of course, we cannot press this analogy too far. The scriptures are not divine, and Christ is more than a Spirit inspired witness! Christ is thus the LORD of scripture.

The Bible is a *canon*, or a collection that functions as a living *standard*. But its formation required a process. Historically, the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament) that became the Bible of the earliest Christians was in most cases not the Hebrew Bible of Palestinian Jews but the larger Jewish collection of scripture called the Septuagint, which was the Greek translation of the Old Testament begun at Alexandria, Egypt in the middle of the third century B.C. This collection was the same as the standard Hebrew canon, except it also involved with varying degrees of acceptance the “Apocrypha” which were the books added to the Hebrew scriptures when translated into Greek. The Septuagint became popular among Greek-speaking Jews of the diaspora. The result was that the Jewish scriptures were not firmly fixed in the Jewish world surrounding the rise of Christianity. When the church made the Jewish scriptures their Bible, they inherited this Septuagint and this canonical problem. Controversy was thus inevitable. Most citations in the New Testament from the Old Testament are in fact taken from the Septuagint and this certainly would have been the scriptures that Paul used in his missionary travels. In the second and third centuries of the church, the Apocrypha was thus widely accepted, even though Palestinian Judaism had come to reject it. However, Christian leaders who were in touch with Palestinian Judaism in the early centuries of the church began raising doubts about the Apocrypha. By the fourth century, dissent began to grow among Christian leaders especially among some from within the Eastern Christian tradition. Athanasius thought that the Apocrypha can be used in the church but in a way that was subordinate to the universally-accepted canon of the Old Testament. Those from the West (e.g., Augustine) were more favorable. Jerome, however, marginalized the Apocrypha, though he felt that it could still be used for church edification.[[28]](#footnote-28) In the sixteenth century, Luther included the Apocrypha as an appendix, possibly useful for edification as well, in his translation of the Bible into a popular German tongue. Eventually, Protestants came to join Judaism in rejecting the Apocrypha. But the Catholic church accepted it, which is the only substantive difference between Protestant and Catholic biblical canons.

Paul refers to the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament) as the παλαιᾶς διαθήϰής or scriptures of the “old covenant” (Old Testament) (2 Cor. 3:14). This designation implies that Christ’s covenant with his church is the new covenant. But since Paul’s reference to the old covenant is a body of scripture, the door was wide open for the new covenant established by Christ’s death and resurrection to have a canon of scripture too. The New Testament canon came to inscripturate the witness of the original apostles as it was handed down. Their teaching was the doctrinal foundation of the church’s practices after Pentecost (Acts 2:42). The Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles were thus regarded as foundational to the church (Eph. 2:20) though these foundation stones were built on the only foundation there can ever be, Christ Jesus. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). After all, the biblical canon was inspired chiefly as *his* witness, his and the Spirit’s chief instrument of salvation. Paul claimed an apostolic authority equal to that of the twelve. He asserted unquestioned authority over the Corinthian prophets (1 Cor. 14:36-38). Indeed, Paul regarded his commission and reception of the gospel as from the risen Christ, which placed him in a position of authority equal to that of the pillars of the Jerusalem church, Peter, James, and John (Gal. 1:11-12; 2:1-10). Later, in 2 Peter 3:15-16, Paul’s letters are referred to as “scripture,” an inevitable outcome. It is indeed interesting that Paul’s letters would be regarded as scripture at a time that most likely predated the close of the first century.[[29]](#footnote-29)

But Paul’s letters were not sufficient for the New Testament canon. The story and teachings of Jesus from which Paul drew at least implicit inspiration required inclusion as well. Luke takes note of “many” accounts of the story of Jesus in existence in his day but defends the thoroughness of his own research into the sources, including that of eyewitness testimony (Luke 1:1-4). Mark, however, was most likely written first. The Gospels were understandably the necessary complement to Paul’s proclamation and doctrinal instruction to the churches. Actually, Paul’s letters (sometimes excluding Titus) and the four Gospels (and Luke’s Acts) were not disputed in the earliest centuries of the church, forming the backbone of the New Testament canon from the beginning. A notion of a New Testament canon arose relatively early in the history of the church, not in the sense early on of a closed collection but nevertheless as a uniquely authoritative one.

With this broader definition of “canon” in mind, we can recognize a canon formation clearly evident throughout the second century, as Michael J. Kruger has convincingly shown.[[30]](#footnote-30) The second century church father, Irenaeus, who mentions a New Testament canon, quotes from the Gospels and Paul 206 times with the designation “the scripture says” perhaps implying that there was already a collection that included them.[[31]](#footnote-31) In the fragment of the so-called “Muratorian canon” of the late second century, we find a list of New Testament books that contains all of the New Testament books familiar to us except Titus, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter and III John. The so-called Revelation of Peter and Wisdom of Solomon are added. The canon listed by the church father, Origen, in the third century omits these latter two books as well as Titus, Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and Jude. Eusebius at the end of the third century omits Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude (he includes Titus). In the fourth century (367 CE), the church father, Athanasius, includes in his Easter Letter all of the New Testament books familiar to us.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Kruger rightly rejects the idea that the decision as to which Christian books were “scriptural” prior to the fourth century was wide open, with any number of books competing for acceptance. Such was not the case. The idea that gained some traction that the Council of Nicea chose the New Testament books to ram through its understanding of orthodoxy is pure fiction. Kruger shows that there is rather broad acceptance as early as the second century for the bulk of the New Testament canon as scripture. The formation of the New Testament canon was not provoked by the narrower selection of books favored by the second-century Gnostic sympathizer, Marcion. His narrower selection, consisting of an expunged Gospel of Luke and collection of Paul’s writings, was but a challenge to an already-gathering consensus concerning the New Testament canon.[[33]](#footnote-33) The chief criterion for acceptance of writings into the canon by the church was the apostolic nature of the writing, as either coming from an apostle or sanctioned in some way by apostolic authority. The apostolic witness lives on *principally* in the New Testament canon and not in a church office. I agree with John Webster that the Holy Spirit was at work not only in the writing of scripture but throughout its formation and canonical acceptance in the church. The church does not form the canon as much as receive it as a gift through their ongoing discernment, “a receptive rather than an authorizing act.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

There is no question, however, but that the scriptures are read through the practices and traditions of the church, of one’s particular church family and more broadly of the church as a whole. As we read scriptures today, we do so in a way that may be called “traditioned.” A church’s creeds, confessions, worship (and liturgy), charismatic experiences, theological treatises, and missional life all play a role in how a church or an individual reads a text. Such influences are not necessarily to be despised. Different church families are gifted with different insights into the biblical canon. For example, I have learned much from the Wesleyans about holiness or from the Lutherans about justification by faith, or from the Reformed about divine freedom and sovereignty. The Pentecostals taught me about the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Not that all that is said from these sources is biblical. But Oscar Cullmann is right, different church families function like spiritual gifts meant to edify the global church in unique ways.[[35]](#footnote-35) And who can deny the significance of the anti-gnostic polemic of the Apostles Creed, the deity of Christ heralded at Nicea, or the unity of Christ’s person, divine and human, embraced at Chalcedon? These doctrinal milestones are not beyond question by any means, but they’ve gifted the church with a truly helpful framework for understanding the role played by Jesus Christ in the story of salvation as depicted in Bible. Anyone who claims to read the scriptures in ways untouched by tradition will reveal soon enough in their better interpretations of this text the historical or ecclesial traditions that have influenced their reading. A theologian who listens to their expositions with an expert ear will catch the connections (a potentially annoying element of their craft). It is best to recognize this influence from tradition and be grateful for it, but also critical of it if one has sound biblical bases for criticism. Theology will play a role in both this appreciative and the critical process. Not that one can rid themselves of their ecclesial lens entirely, nor should they try. Pure biblicism, besides being impossible, tends to be arrogant, not giving credit to whom credit is due for their insights and looking down on all others for doing so. Yet, traditioned readings have their limits, which dialogue with others will show. And biblical scholarship will help us all to discover afresh the strange new world within the Bible. This discovery allows for a remarkable amount of unity among theologians from different denominations who gather together around a biblical text in ecumenical (interchurch) discussions. This is what I have learned during my years of involvement in the ecumenical movement.[[36]](#footnote-36)

But, again, not all elements of tradition are helpful in one’s reading of the Bible. One can appreciate and respect tradition without being bound to it. In the early centuries of the church, when appeal was made to the authority of the bishops to secure the proper interpretation of scripture against the Gnostics, tradition as taught by the bishops (especially through the rule of faith taught to catechumens) and preserved in the church’s worship was widely thought to be faithful to the core message of scripture. Tradition in this role was sometimes in those days called part of the church’s “canon” (standard) of truth. By the fourth century, when the Gnostic threat had largely passed, the New Testament canon, which had by this time gained widespread recognition as canonical, was regarded as foundational to the tradition of the church. Over 1000 years later, Luther rightly called upon the church to reassess its confidence that tradition will indeed always align itself with scripture. This challenge is essential to the ongoing renewal of the church and must not be neglected. The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church helpfully notes that the teaching office “is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit” (*Dei Verbum*, #10). Sage and orthodox advice. What is missing, however, is the important point that the scriptures also serve a corrective function vis-à-vis the tradition of the church. The Catholic assumption at Vatican II is that no such correction will be needed. Rather, “Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God” (*Dei Verbum*, #10). One would like to think so! But unfortunately, such is not always the case. There is indeed a unity detectible between scripture and tradition in the gospel of Jesus Christ, but that unity is dependent on the faithfulness of tradition to that gospel, which in every case is not simply to be assumed. The gospel exposes some elements of tradition to criticism. The greatness of the Protestant movement is in its assumption that the churches everywhere must return to the scriptures time and again with a fresh ear to discern in the Spirit something that has been neglected or betrayed. The Monastics did this with regard to the spiritual discipline involved in following Christ; the fathers at Nicea to affirm Christ’s and implicitly the Spirit’s equality with the heavenly Father; the Reformers to defend justification by grace; the anabaptists to preserve the uncompromising cost of discipleship; the Wesleyans to highlight the sanctified life, and the Pentecostals to accent the power of the Spirit and the normality of the spiritual gifts that dot the landscape of the church’s life as depicted in the New Testament. In supporting the need for the ongoing renewal of tradition in the light of scripture, I am not intending to promote the idea that the church as a whole ever defects entirely from Christ. The radical rejection of tradition on that scale is in my view sectarian and untenable. Though I would not defend the infallibility of tradition, I would hold to its indefectibility. Jesus promised to be with his church to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

**[A]Historically Situated:**

The church’s witness is historically situated, and this includes the sacred scriptures. Being historically situated means that all that is said about God is mediated through the finite and socially-conditioned language and experience of the people talking. This insight changed the course of theology in the modern era, exposing the limitation of all God-talk when it comes to capturing the infinite mystery of God. As Wolfhart Pannenberg notes, “The historicity of human experience and reflection forms the most important limit of our human knowledge of God. Solely on account of its historicity all human talk about God unavoidably falls short of full and final knowledge of the truth of God.”[[37]](#footnote-37) The gospel of the risen Christ is final; this is the faith “once and for all entrusted to God’s holy people” (Jude 3). But our witness to it is limited by being historically situated. It was through historicism or the understanding of the historically-situated nature of scripture and theology that theology was able to enter the academic arena in the European universities and beyond as a legitimate academic discipline. Historical criticism was applied to the Bible and to the history of Christian dogma in a way that exposed their historical conditioning and limitation. This point was taken to an extreme. In the modern rise of historical criticism, texts that were heralded as inspired by God were all taken down from their pedestal of universally valid truth and were relativized as belonging to the complex history of religious ideas. Religion became the overarching rubric under which both scriptures and Christian theology were placed. The Bible was viewed as a narrative of ancient Israelite and early Christian religion, an ancient and historically-conditioned effort to understand the religious quest.

Since it was thought at the dawn of liberal theology late in the eighteenth century (e.g., Friedrich Schleiermacher) that the concepts of God and salvation in the Bible were spun out from the religious consciousness of God under the influence of culture, the object of theological reflection shifted from scripture to the religious consciousness, how it reveals the effects of God’s working upon it. The Bible became a time-bound or symbolic expression of this religious consciousness; the evolution involved in the biblical text was the evolution of religion. Since the expressions of scripture were culturally conditioned, that which seemed irrelevant to modern sensibilities was called into question. Historic dogma such as the deity of Christ and the Trinity were placed under the critical knife as well and pruned so as to become more relevant to current ways of thinking.

Though this historicization of scripture and theology legitimated the place of theology in the university curriculum, it raised serious problems for the faith of the church. It is into this situation that Karl Barth’s rediscovery of the “strange new world within the Bible” fell like a bomb. As we will explain in our next chapter, Barth did not find in the Bible primarily a story of the evolution of ancient religious consciousness. He saw at the core of the biblical witness a gospel, the story of God’s turning with grace to a humanity bound not only to its time and place but to sin and idolatry, not a word about the religious quest for God but of God’s quest for humanity. Though Barth left the door open for a full recognition of the historical limitations of the biblical text, he affirmed with much greater emphasis the truth that is found in this inspired text and the grace at work in God’s condescension to speak through this text with great force to save us. Barth helped to explain to the church in the light of historical criticism why the scripture is still its norm for faith and life.

Yet, since both scripture and theology are historically conditioned, it is impossible to think about embracing the truth of Christ without a historical context involved. For both good and ill, the history of theology involved interaction with historical (social and cultural) context. We might as well recognize this and seek to be contextual in a way that is faithful to the gospel of scripture. Though having its home base and foundational loyalty in the strange new world within the Bible and the church’s witness shaped by it, the church still uses socially conditioned language and other means of communication drawn from secular society. We have no choice but to do so. That process occurred in the formation of scripture as well. No matter how profoundly shaped we are by the Bible’s strange new world we are also conditioned by a larger use of language and set of experiences. The boundary between the church and the world cannot be so neatly drawn. This fact presents the church and theology in particular with a creative challenge.

As we will note in our next chapter, liberal theology and its renewal in correlation theology emphasized the need of theology to be apologetic, meaning a theology that answers the questions of culture concerning the meaning of human existence or other matters of concern. Barth was wary of allowing the questions of our cultural context to set the agenda for theology. He never tired of noting that the most important questions of theology arise from its own norm in scripture. But the questions of culture cannot be treated as a luxury item, as Barth himself illustrates. Theological reflection takes its primary direction from the questions posed by scripture, but it turns in all seriousness to the questions and challenges of the secular context as well. After all, the Bible, though inspired, is still an ancient text. Our questioning cannot remain confined to its pages. Otherwise, the church gets caught up in an echo chamber in which it only talks to itself.

In confronting the challenge of relating a biblical truth couched within an ancient conception to a modern setting, scholars will sometimes point to a modern school of thought or method that can serve as a conduit in the reformulation of the ancient conception. Such a creative exercised should be welcomed. The risk, however, is that the modern interpreter becomes overly enthusiastic about the possibilities opened up by the conduit and can overreach by granting too much significance to it. It can become a reductionistic lens through which everything is read. For example, Bultmann found in existentialism rich possibilities for making the biblical message relevant to modern times.[[38]](#footnote-38) Existentialism was a movement of thought in the mid-twentieth century that was preoccupied with discovering authentic or meaningful human existence at a time of social upheaval and threat. In this context, Bultmann came to regard the Bible’s chief question to be: “*how is man’s existence understood in the Bible*?”[[39]](#footnote-39) He notes that “existentialist philosophy can offer adequate conceptions for the interpretation of the Bible, since the interpretation of the Bible is concerned with the understanding of existence.”[[40]](#footnote-40) So, we speak of God “acting” only in the realm of meaningful existence. “Statements which speak of God’s actions as cosmic events are illegitimate.” [[41]](#footnote-41) The result is an obvious reduction of the biblical message to the hope and meaning that can be found within the limited confines of one’s existential crisis and its resolution. Bultmann’s effort to demythologize the biblical text, or interpret its mythological worldview so as to unearth its existentially-relevant message, brings to the biblical text an anti-supernatural bias as well as a lack of appreciation for the cosmic dimension of salvation. Contextualization must proceed with greater caution than this. But proceed it must.

The contextual challenge must be guided by a variety of voices from different contexts, especially from those that have been marginalized and speak from a context of suffering. How else can it be if the cross and the liberation of the resurrection are at the core of our gospel? We cannot presume to speak from a marginalized context if we do not belong. Such a move would be inauthentic and presumptuous. But in speaking from the challenges of our own cultural context we can dialogue appreciatively with these other voices and draw attention to their ongoing significance and challenge to us all. This entire contextual challenge require the help of other disciplines of study besides those that directly belong to theology. Amos Yong has suggested that one can view the different academic methods with which theology converses as different “tongues” in the sense that they construe the world through a particular academic lens.[[42]](#footnote-42) Karl Jasper’s intriguing *Kleine Schule des philosophischen* *Denkens* (little school of philosophical thought) characterizes all of the different academic disciplines as ways of interpreting the meaning of human experience and natural phenomena. They all point to a transcendent mystery that none can fully capture. Philosophy points to that mystery with its ceaseless questioning.[[43]](#footnote-43) After reading this book, my thought was that if philosophy points to this transcendent mystery, theology names it and explores it through scripture, dogma, the life of the church, and external context.

Theology in dialogue has an aesthetic nature to it; there is not just one way to communicate the gospel in the diverse and creative work of the Spirit. In dialogue with others, the theologian will come to recognize that their chorus requires greater inclusiveness or that some voices in the choir have sung too loudly, unharmoniously, or somewhat off key or in a way not fitting to the gospel. So, the theologian makes adjustments and tries again. None of us has the final or all-encompassing word of interpretation and there is certainly room for many attempts across the spectrum of cultures, disciplines, traditions, and giftings. In our zeal for truth, we dare not be intolerant of diversity and difference. In fact, embracing otherness is key to any theology that is faithful to the incarnation and Pentecost. But the indispensable commitments revealed in Jesus Christ cannot be sacrificed or muted. This is the challenge that we will continue to take up by the grace of God.

**[A]Final Word:**

What *is* theology? It is speech about God (God-Talk) that is rooted in thinking, research, and study. It shares in the larger search for wisdom in the church, the larger effort to bring to “speech” words and other communicative actions both to and about God. But theology is unique in that it functions as a discipline that thinks and speaks loyally and critically about God for the sake of the church and the world. Theology seeks to inspire and guide the church and aid in its worship and its witness to the world. Theology is thus based in the worship and witness of the church but also freely engaged in the larger academy. Theology is an academic discipline. There are other academic tools (e.g., history, language, philosophy, sociology) that can aid theology in its critical tasks. Similarly, theology is based in the worship and witness of the church but also freely engaged in the larger social and cultural context. The academy can aid in meeting these contextual challenges. Yet, theology is to be devoted primarily to the worship and witness of the church, and in being so committed, theology is to be accountable first to the church’s scriptures. It honors tradition but it constantly asks the church to listen to the biblical text time and again with a fresh ear, always urging us to have an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying on behalf of Christ. And in being freely engaged with the academy and social context, theology is attentive first to those who suffer and are marginalized, whose voices are not adequately being heard. If the cross and the resurrection opens the path to the Spirit for us, the path of the Spirit itself will be one in which we all seek through self-giving love to hear and speak with the suffering of others primarily in mind. The many tongues of Pentecost implicitly cherish diversity and otherness. Those whose otherness causes them to be marginalized need to be grants a special hearing in the chorus of the church and in the larger conversation coming from the world. Theology is also unique in attending to the theological themes implicit in biblical studies, church historical investigation, and practical theology. Systematic theologians study these doctrinal themes as areas of research and reflection in their own right, with an eye to their overall continuity and coherence. Yet, the system remains open for dialogue and revision, for we seek with humility to hear that which transcends our hearing, never assuming that we have the final word or that we’ve adequately grasped it.

2

Towards a Theology of the Third Article:

Liberal, Neo-Orthodox, and Correlation Theologies

The tongues of Pentecost are spoken in the power of the Spirit, the promise of the Father bestowed through the redemptive work of the Son. The Father is the first article of the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, the Son the second, and the Spirit the third. A theology of the “third article” highlights the Holy Spirit without neglecting the Father or the Son, especially not the Son. In recent theological method, Myk Habets, Leopoldo Sanchez, and Lisa Stephenson, among others, have raised the issue of a theology of the “third article” that will give the Holy Spirit adequate weight in counterbalance to the second article on Christology.[[44]](#footnote-44) My own contribution to this effort has spanned four monographs that seek to look at various loci from the lens of Pentecost.[[45]](#footnote-45) The issue is this: In the West, the gospel of the divine Son in his incarnation and atonement has triumphed over heresies to define orthodox faith. But was this triumph of Christology won without adequate attention paid to the Holy Spirit? An argument can be made that it has. What role the Spirit played in Christ’s redemptive work, especially on the cross, lacked adequate development. The Spirit poured out at Pentecost was rightly explained as accounting for power of the gospel behind the life of faith. But lacking was the role of the Spirit in the fulfillment of that gospel of Christ’s redemptive work which we come by the Spirit to embrace. Christology in the West tended to reduce the Spirit to an instrumental function, bearing witness to Christ in the world. The Spirit is indeed involved in the witness to Christ in the world. But the challenge is to base this work in part in the Spirit’s work in Christ’s incarnation, life, death, and resurrection as leading to Christ’s outpouring of the Spirit. One should not in accenting a Spirit Christology reduce Christ to the instrument of the Spirit. The triumph of Christology in affirming Christ’s true deity and humanity, Christ as the event of reconciliation with God in his very person and work. But Spirit Christology is also needed to grant the work of the Spirit its due in theology as well.

Our interlocutors for discussing this issue will be the classic figures of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Karl Barth (1886-1968), and Paul Tillich (1886-1965). These names have been identified by the labels “liberal,” “neo-orthodox,” and “correlation.” By using labels instead of names, the title of this chapter is potentially misleading. This chapter is not meant as a full-blown discussion of these methods, their history and diverse expression. That kind of discussion would take me far beyond the confines of this systematic theology. This chapter is rather my conversation with three representative voices, who are arguably the most prominent figures behind these labels. Furthermore, my conviction is that Schleiermacher is the dominant figure of nineteenth century theology and Barth and Tillich stand out in the first half of the twentieth. This is a simplification, I know. But it is one that contains a defensible element of truth. As we will see, Schleiermacher’s theology of spiritual renewal does not have an adequate Christology as its anchor. Barth provides that anchor but, arguably, without developing adequately the role of the Spirit. Tillich viewed himself as a mediating figure between these two giants with some success, but not enough to give Christology its due.

**[A]Schleiermacher’s Theology of Spiritual Renewal:**

Schleiermacher noted in his *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology* that dogmatics is part of historical theology as a modern expression of it. He said this because he was convinced that systematic theology should use historical method to deal with past expressions of the faith. Historical method was becoming popular in Schleiermacher’s time and place as a way of legitimizing theology as a university discipline. So, theologians like Schleiermacher were concerned with what Christianity has in common with religion in general and wanted to use historical science to discern how this general religious impulse found expression in various and changing historical manifestations.[[46]](#footnote-46) But Schleiermacher also thought of dogmatics as a constructive discipline that was true to Christian faith and therefore of guidance to the church. As such, the dogmatic theologian should also discuss doctrines of the faith in a way that demonstrates scriptural roots and systematic coherence.[[47]](#footnote-47) Of importance is his passion to do theology in a way that corresponds to the piety or experience of the church, which he anchored in Christ but wished to connect to the larger secular experience of transcendence as well, even though this is generally not well understood or developed among nonreligious people.

Overall, Schleiermacher’s contribution to theology focused on the spiritual life, more specifically in his earlier *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* on a rediscovery of the “World-Spirit” through the lens of its effects on the enlightened human soul or consciousness, which Schleiermacher calls God-consciousness or “feeling.” This feeling (*Gefühl*) was deeper than a mere emotion; it was rather more like a deep-seated religious intuition that is fleeting but which leaves its mark on the soul. This experience of God provided for Schleiermacher the contextual challenge that enlightens the church’s lengthy doctrinal tradition. Schleiermacher was raised under the influence of Moravian pietism, which emphasized a vibrant experience of Christ in the inner soul. Yet, Schleiermacher became dissatisfied with pietism’s failure to speak of its beliefs in ways that made sense to those cultured despisers of religion outside the church who might otherwise be open to receive it. In a letter written in 1802 after his father’s death, Schleiermacher calls himself a Moravian “of a higher order”:

**[EXT]**It was here that I awoke for the first time to the consciousness of the relation of man to a higher world… Here it was that the mystic tendency developed itself, which has been of so much importance to me, and has supported and carried me through all the storms of skepticism. Then it was only germinating; now it has attained its full development, and I may say that after all I had passed through, I have become a Moravian again, only of a higher order.”[[48]](#footnote-48) **[/EXT]**

Arguably, in seeking to make Christian experience relevant, Schleiermacher’s understanding of this experience was taken in part from a vision of the human experience of transcendence that was current in his cultural environment, especially the German Romantic tradition from which his unchurched dialogue partners were influenced. Romanticism was oriented towards a deep appreciation for the inner soul, for that core of human imagination as the place where all of human culture finds its inner unity and reaches for a grander unity of all things through the cosmic Spirit. During Schleiermacher’s years as a pastor and university professor in Berlin, he joined a circle of friends who were swayed by Romanticism. By rejecting Christianity superficially due to its outmoded doctrines, these “cultured despisers of religion” in Schleiermacher’s view revealed a lack of discernment into the true nature of religion. To connect with their experience of the world, Schleiermacher maintained that religious experience involves a “soul surrendered to the universe” or, rather, a soul surrendered to God who is active through the universe around us.[[49]](#footnote-49) He wrote, “Your feeling is piety, in so far as it is the result of the operation of God in you by means of the operation of the world upon you.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Though Schleiermacher sometimes implies pantheism (that God is the essence of all things) he also on occasions resists such an implication.

Locating revelation at the root of our experience of God rather than in doctrinal formulations meant that traditional Christian doctrines are not of primary importance to the understanding of religion, including the Christian faith. Doctrines are merely time-bound and changeable expressions of a deeper connection to the divine reality to which everyone belongs in some sense and on which everyone is dependent. Addressing the cultured despisers of religion directly, he notes in the *Speeches*, “If you have only given attention to these dogmas and opinions, therefore, you do not yet know religion itself, and what you despise is not it. Why have you not penetrated deeper to find the kernel of this shell?”[[51]](#footnote-51) Indeed, doctrine is not the core of religion but is simply the expression of a deeper experience: “Idea and word are simply the necessary and inseparable outcome of the heart.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Moving from a kernel/husk metaphor to an aesthetic one, Schleiermacher proposes that doctrines are weak and passing echoes of a deeper sound that occurs within the soul of every person. He states, “Wherefore you must not remain satisfied with the repeated oft-broken echo of that original sound. You must transport yourselves into the interior of a pious soul and seek to understand its inspiration. In the very act, you must understand the production of light and heat in a soul surrendered to the universe. Otherwise, you learn nothing of religion.”[[53]](#footnote-53) This religious feeling is not a shallow emotion or passing mood. It grows from an “immediate consciousness of the Deity as He is found in ourselves and in the world.”[[54]](#footnote-54) The immediacy of this pious feeling is essentially prior to one’s cognitive awareness of it, prior to our awareness of God as an “object” of awareness. Rooted in the preconscious immediacy of our unity with God, revelation for Schleiermacher is not subject to analysis; neither is it dependent on rational arguments for validation. “As revelation lies beyond consciousness, demonstration is not possible.”[[55]](#footnote-55) In this preconscious relation there is no division of subject (us) and object (God). God is not an “object” of our reflection or influence. We can have only a fleeting experience of this unity with God beyond the subject-object division “which you always experience and never experience.” Schleiermacher continues by describing immediate consciousness of God this way: “It is scarcely in time at all, so swiftly it passes; it can scarcely be described, so little does it properly exist. Would that I could hold it fast and refer to it your commonest as well as your highest activities.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Though fleeting, the feeling of God in one’s soul leaves its mark on the soul and we can become aware of it through self-conscious reflection. “These feelings” wrote Schleiermacher, “are the beautiful and sweet scented flowers of religion, which, after the hidden activity opens, soon fall, but which the divine growth ever anew produces from the fullness of life.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Though the “hidden flower” of the experience in this quote falls at the moment one encounters it, its “scent” lives on in the soul granting one an indication of God’s influence on us.

In contemplating the effects of one’s feeling of God in the soul, it seems to us that God becomes an “object” of thought, creating a division of the knowing subject and God as the known object. But the immediacy of an experience of God in which God is not an object apart from us is never lost entirely, for in knowing “you have not quite surrendered to this division and lost consciousness of your life as a unity.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Indeed, “along with the absolute dependence, which characterizes not only man but all temporal existence, there is given to man also the immediate self-consciousness of it, which becomes a consciousness of God.”[[59]](#footnote-59) This cultivated God-consciousness is called contemplation and is the pearl of great price so to speak for which humanity implicitly seeks:

**[EXT]**The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal. Religion is to seek this and find it in all that lives and moves, in all growth and change, in all doing and suffering. It is to have life and know life in immediate feeling, only as such an existence in the Infinite and the Eternal.”[[60]](#footnote-60) **[/EXT]**

There is an ethical component in knowing God through immediate experience in the soul for Schleiermacher. The feeling of God in relation to the Whole also starts with a sense of unity with all of humanity. Humans are the only ones in creation conscious of God as the highest unity of all things, so they play a special role as creation’s embodied soul. Indeed, in the immediacy of feeling, “You lie directly on the bosom of the infinite world. In that moment, you are its soul.”[[61]](#footnote-61) Humanity as the soul of the cosmos means for Schleiermacher that the sense of unity with the Whole involves one intimately in a unity with all of humanity. “In order to receive the life of the World-Spirit, and have religion, man must first in love, and through love, have found humanity.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Love is indeed the highest expression of feeling or true piety for Schleiermacher. In the awakened religious consciousness, one comes to view people not only as individuals but as lenses through which to discover humanity and one’s unity with humanity anew. “Seek this humanity in every individual.”[[63]](#footnote-63) In this unity of love with all others one discovers one’s own personal wholeness of being, an inner unity of life.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Yet, knowledge and moral guidance, as important as they are, are no replacement for pious feeling. “Piety cannot be an instinct craving for a mess of metaphysical and ethical crumbs.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Cognitive and moral responses are thus secondary to pious feeling which is most vital to human fulfillment. Neither knowing nor doing “constitutes the essence of piety: they only pertain to it in as much as the stirred-up “feeling” sometimes comes to rest in a thinking which fixes it, sometimes discharges itself in an action which expresses it.”[[66]](#footnote-66) Whether we attempt to “fix” (or intellectually grasp) feeling through doctrine or express it through moral action, the core of religion is feeling. One may thus view feeling in Schleiermacher’s thought as the core which unites knowing and acting. Yet, in the *Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher does not wish this distinction between piety and both knowledge and moral action to lead to a separation between them. Though feeling is primary, Schleiermacher adds that it exists “in a total state” that includes “Knowing, Feeling, and Doing together.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Indeed, “absolute dependence is the fundamental relation which must include all others in itself.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

The priority of experience to doctrine means that doctrines are to be judged by how well they function as living *expressions* of piety or feeling. Schleiermacher notes for example that divine attributes are to be understood according to how they might “correspond to the different ways in which the unity of the individual and the Whole expresses itself in feeling.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Doctrine is true according to how well it corresponds to and illuminates piety! For example, the idea of God as a “person” falls short of the God experienced in our surrender to God as the highest unity of life. The God implied by one’s absolute surrender to the Whole is beyond all particularized notions of personhood. “Hence we have an idea of the Highest Being, not as personally thinking and willing, but exalted above all personality, as the universal, productive, connecting necessity for all thought and existence.”[[70]](#footnote-70) Piety or feeling also implies that God is beyond all of our notions of “nature,” which is also a finite or creaturely characteristic. Hence, for Schleiermacher, the doctrine of the Trinity (three “persons” of one “nature”) fails ultimately to make sense as an explanation of our immediate sense of the transcendent God. In my view, such terms as person and nature did not need to be a barrier to our understanding of God. The fact that terms like “person” and “nature” cannot be applied literally (or univocally) to God does not mean that they cannot make sense of God in some *analogous* way (analogy referring to a similarity in difference). Rejecting this possibility, Schleiermacher’s trinitarian doctrine, placed at the conclusion of his *Christian Faith*, almost as an appendix, ends up being modalistic, or not indicative of immanent relations in God but rather descriptive of God as experienced and known in different ways in relation to piety. The divine “persons” are thus indicative of how God affects us with active love “both in the personality of Christ and in the common Spirit of the Church.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

Schleiermacher’s conviction that there is a fleeting intuition of God in the human soul is merely the context of an even more significant mystery, the clue to which is the more profound conscious awareness of God in the fellowship of the church. Why is there such a profound awareness of God in the church? The only answer for Schleiermacher is the miracle of Christology, namely, the ideal presence of God in the life of Christ and its influence on us in the church. Schleiermacher’s *Christian Faith* significantly develops the role played by Christ in influencing the rise and direction of our feeling of absolute dependence. God for Schleiermacher is pure action, the action of divine love. Christ’s pious God-consciousness was viewed as so perfectly surrendered to God from the beginning of his life that Christ was one with that divine action. The initial union of Christ with God was passively received by Christ but his ongoing state of the union with God involved Christ’s actions: “In the uniting of the divine nature with the human, the divine alone was active or self-imparting, and the human alone passive or in process of being assumed; but during the state of union every activity was a common activity of both natures.”[[72]](#footnote-72) This is Schleiermacher’s functional understanding of the incarnation or of Christ’s deity. Christ was divine according to Schleiermacher because his conscious existence was lived out in perfect unity with the divine love active in the world. Only in Christ does the surrender of religious consciousness to God’s active presence become actively one with that presence. “He is the only ‘other’ in which there is the existence of God in the proper sense.”[[73]](#footnote-73)

*Our* God-consciousness, however, even in the church, is fleeting, merely passive, and eclipsed by sensuous consciousness; it does not involve the presence of God in us.[[74]](#footnote-74) We realize in relation to the Redeemer that “we are never free from sin and that we never put forward a perfectly good action, namely, one that purely expresses the power of the God-consciousness.”[[75]](#footnote-75) Schleiermacher writes of Christ by contrast, “God consciousness in him was absolutely clear and determined each moment, to the exclusion of all else, so that it must be regarded as a continual living presence, and withal a real existence of God in him.”[[76]](#footnote-76) All doctrines that pass the test of correspondence to piety are therefore to be traced back to Christ because of his ideal God-consciousness, for everything traced to him is “connected to the power of God-consciousness.”[[77]](#footnote-77) One may say that all doctrines relate to our religious consciousness which then reaches for Christ as its chief standard and influence.

Significantly, Schleiermacher did not believe that there was a massive turning point at the cross between humanity condemned of God and humanity as a recipient of divine favor. Redemption through Christ for Schleiermacher resembles rather a continuously flowing river from an inexhaustible source in Christ to a massive flood that will engulf all of humanity. There is no atonement in Schleiermacher’s theology that functions as a redemptive event reconciling humanity to God. Schleiermacher reduces Christ’s reconciling work to the spread of his redemptive influence on others: “The Redeemer assumes the believers into the fellowship of his unclouded blessedness” or the power of his God-consciousness “and this is his reconciling activity.”[[78]](#footnote-78) Christ’s suffering and death merely signify the length to which Christ would go to remain aligned with divine love. His death is not necessary to his redemptive influence; belief in his resurrection plays no role in it as well. If this were not so, reasoned Schleiermacher, we would be at a loss to explain how Jesus’ disciples were able to be redemptively influenced by him before the crucifixion and resurrection occurred. “The disciples recognized in him the Son of God without having the faintest premonition of his resurrection and ascension, and we too may say the same of ourselves.”[[79]](#footnote-79) Schleiermacher is either unaware of (or unconvinced by) the notion in the book of Hebrews that the efficacy of the cross is timeless, casting its influence backwards through the practices of the law that foreshadowed the cross in hope and forwards to people who embrace it by looking back in faith and ahead to its perfect realization in the world (Heb. 10:1-14).

We enter the sphere of Christ’s redemptive influence “in the corporate life which goes back to the influence of Jesus” or into the realm of the common Spirit.[[80]](#footnote-80) Schleiermacher holds that redemption through Christ becomes only “a magical caricature” if we eliminate the founding of the community and attribute redemption to his suffering and death in and of themselves.[[81]](#footnote-81) As free beings we are assumed into Christ’s realm of influence only through “a creative production in us of the will to assume Him into ourselves.”[[82]](#footnote-82) He also contrasts his understanding of redemption with the “empirical approach” that reduces Christ to a mere *example* of perfect love. By contrast, Schleiermacher views Christ’s entire person as incarnating God’s active love.[[83]](#footnote-83)

In elaborating his own understanding of Christ’s redemptive influence, Schleiermacher does attribute to the Redeemer a *representative* function vis a vis humanity. There is a sense in which union with God is entirely accomplished by Christ *for us* as well as gradually in us. Our being assumed by him may be termed a *positional sanctification*. Though this perfect love is only relative and imperfect *in us,* it *is* nevertheless “recognized by God as absolute and eternal, and is affirmed as such in our faith.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Christ’s perfect union secures our relative union in Christ as eternal and perfect before God even while it is imperfect in us. This union thus fills the human consciousness with divine compassion and forgiveness precisely as one strives towards the perfection of Christ’s own union with God. This is about as close as one could get to Luther’s *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously just and sinner) within the framework of a theological system that lacks the classical understanding of original sin, total depravity, and substitutionary atonement.

Schleiermacher describes his version of Christ’s redemptive work as “mystical,” since it is anchored in the unfathomable riches of the union of God and humanity in Christ’s life and is continued by Christ’s assuming humans into the blessing of that perfection. More significantly, he contrasts his Christology with the penal-substitutionary understanding of atonement (which regards Christ as bearing our sin and condemnation and overcoming them so as to bring about a just reconciliation with God). He rejects this approach to Christ’s redemptive work as “magical” because those who hold it imagine that the redemption of the entire human race comes from the one event of the cross without needing historical and ecclesial mediation to be fulfilled. Not only does this magical approach to redemption not make sense to Schleiermacher, it implies a “crude” understanding of God as requiring divine punishment to be appeased before mercy can be shown to others as a reward for it.[[85]](#footnote-85) Schleiermacher holds that redemption must be accomplished *in us* and with *our participation* to be fulfilled, even in its offering. He even writes that as Adam represents us *only* because we have fellowship with *his sin*, so also does Christ represent us because we have fellowship with *his willful union with divine love*.[[86]](#footnote-86) Schleiermacher calls Christ therefore, “our *satisfying representative*.”[[87]](#footnote-87) He writes, “For Christ certainly made satisfaction for us by becoming, through his total action, not only the beginning of redemption in time, but also the eternally inexhaustible source, adequate for every further development, of a spiritual and blessed life.”[[88]](#footnote-88) His redemptive influence is like a river that flows from his life onto us. But bear in mind that for Schleiermacher Christ’s perfect union with God does grant us right standing with God during our realization of Christ’s redemptive influence.

In Schleiermacher’s theology, the Holy Spirit is not essential to Christ’s redemptive influence only our reception of it. Schleiermacher restricts the Holy Spirit to the corporate fellowship of the church that mediates Christ’s redemptive influence on us. He does not involve the Spirit in either creation or Christ’s God consciousness. The Creator, the presence of God in Christ, and the corporate Spirit of fellowship in the church are all one divine essence but with three different (non-interchangeable) modes of this essence that cannot be confused with one another.[[89]](#footnote-89) The different modes of operation of the three (Creator, God-in-Christ, and Spirit) in history are regarded by Schleiermacher as “essential” to God though they only indicate different modes of a single divine life. Schleiermacher confines the Spirit to the fellowship of the church so as to prevent confusing the distinct modes of divine operation. Christ plays a central role for Schleiermacher, for “we must now say that it is only through him that the human God consciousness becomes the existence of God in human nature.”[[90]](#footnote-90)

What are we to say about all of this? The quest of Schleiermacher’s theology is the alignment of the soul with God’s active and redemptive love. Though inadequate, there is something attractive about this quest. Karl Barth noted rightly of Schleiermacher’s feeling of God’s affect on the soul, that he “had that feeling himself—rather, it had him.”[[91]](#footnote-91) There is a noble tradition in theology that starts with the soul facing its God. Yet, Schleiermacher’s theology of God-consciousness never comes to terms with the depth of sin and alienation from God. The dark abyss caused by human sin and our unworthiness of the Spirit are never adequately faced or taken into account and conquered. There is no wrath to overcome, no atoning sacrifice necessary. God is not assailed or affected in any way by human rejection. What Christ did is of no consequence to God. As Barth noted,

**[EXT]**It is not of course fortuitous that the concepts of transgression, rejection and judgment are absent from his exposition of sin and that he almost entirely avoids the term ‘evil’ to denote that which resists God and is negated by him. In Schleiermacher’s teaching, the negation and therefore the ordination of sin are real only in our consciousness of God. For God himself they are unreal and irrelevant, and are treated accordingly. As Schleiermacher sees it, God has no part in this matter, but stands inviolate above it. He merely sees to it that we become conscious of it, of his grace and, therefore, in contradistinction of our sin… God himself has neither adjutant nor adversary. He is not assailed. He is neither offended, nor does he suffer. He is neither wroth against sin nor merciful to sinners.[[92]](#footnote-92) **[/EXT]**

Katherine Sonderegger agrees, writing of Christ’s redemptive work in Schleiermacher’s theology: “The conflict, the anguish, the wrath and judgment of the passion do not belong to the liberal Redeemer. He does not yearn or bear or overcome, but rather moves unimpeded through the misery of the world, as light effortlessly fills a darkened room.”[[93]](#footnote-93) There is no break in the river of divine love that flows in unison with the Christ so as to influence humanity’s own consciousness of God. But in the biblical narrative there is a break, a jagged line rather than a straight one. God enters into the depth of human sin, condemnation, and despair so as to raise us to the glories of communion.

In the absence of atonement, a theology of spiritual enlightenment and healing in the Spirit loses its anchor in redemption. Christ’s perfect union with God is indeed important to atonement. But Christ’s perfect union with us, vicariously in all of our sin and alienation from God, is also vital. It is this absence in Schleiermacher’s theology of redemption through Christ. The event of redemption is reduced to a “redemptive influence.” His perfection does provide for our forgiveness; there is some sense of Christological representation. But the trajectory of this theology will always bend towards Christ as the ideal example of the pious life at the complete loss of atonement, despite Schleiermacher’s effort to evade it. Theology becomes over time anthropocentric (human centered) rather than theocentric (God centered). Redemption becomes the story of the soul’s attainment of perfect love, first in Christ and then in us. We align with Adam because we choose to and we become aligned with Christ because we choose to. Redemption is an influence that draws us from one path to the other.

*The gravity of liberal theology remains on the journey of human soul rather than on the grace of God revealed in the journey of the divine Son in and for flesh.* B. A. Gerrish rightly wrote concerning Schleiermacher’s theological method, “when all is said and done, theology is nothing other than honest, persistent, critical reflection upon piety.”[[94]](#footnote-94) Piety is our spirituality, focused on what we learn from the soul’s persistent reach for God. Indeed, in Schleiermacher’s *A Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, he defines the science of theology this way: “Theology is a positive science, the parts of which join into a cohesive whole only through their common relation to a distinct mode of faith, that is, a distinct formation of God-consciousness.”[[95]](#footnote-95) Piety is the center here. Schleiermacher did write that “piety first begins when it is put aside, for the aim of all religion is to love the World-Spirit and joyfully to regard his working.”[[96]](#footnote-96) But what is this working apart from my all-important piety? In the end, we have here an effort at a theology of the Spirit that does not grasp the depths of human alienation nor the importance of atonement. Christology is not granted its due.

**[A]Karl Barth’s Rediscovery of Christology:**

Can spirituality be an adequate guide to theology? Karl Barth (1886-1968), a Swiss Reformed theologian, answered with a resounding “no!” He considered that theological method as “anthropocentric” (focused on the human spiritual quest for God) rather than Christocentric (focused on what God self-revealed in Christ). In his effort to cure theology of its anthropocentrism, Barth shifted the center of theology from human piety to what God revealed in Christ, especially within the framework of the “strange new world within the Bible.” For Barth, human piety must conform to that, be understood within that. We don’t shape our understanding of Christ from what we learn from the human soul about piety; we shape what we know of piety from what we learn within the scriptural witness about Christ! For Barth, theology’s Christocentric focus means that we can never conform God to our religious self-understanding. The God revealed in Christ is the God of blazing resurrection glory who transcends all human understandings or religion or of the soul’s quest for God. God remains hidden even while self-disclosing. We come to understand the soul’s quest for God in a new light, one that calls us continuously beyond ourselves so as to know ourselves more and more in Christ.

Barth is arguably the most significant theologian of the twentieth century. What Schleiermacher was to the nineteenth century, Barth was for much of the twentieth. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed unimaginable horrors in Europe where liberal theology once reigned. The religious quest of the soul for God and the interpersonal love ethic that was thought to accompany it seemed increasingly out of touch with a world besieged by existential, social, and global crises. The vast destruction caused by human idolatry was on full display in World Wars, holocaust against European Jews, the nuclear arms race, and racial segregation. The challenge that came from the nineteenth-century atheist, Ludwig Feuerbach, who viewed God as a human projection that served human wants and needs, suddenly seemed a fitting commentary on the religious quest of the soul. There seemed only one way forward, namely, to concede that Feuerbach is right, God is a human projection created for self-serving purposes. The burning question became, Is there is a gospel on the other side of this human projection? Barth’s answer was a resounding, *Yes!* Is humanity trapped in the prisons of their self-made worlds? Barth’s response was a resounding, *No!* For Barth, the accent of the gospel is overwhelmingly to be placed at the event of the divine condescension into flesh and to a cross so as to open the door to a just communion with God. Humanity is lost without Christ, without God’s elect will realized in him. The atonement looms large in this theological narrative. The Christ who exercises a redemptive influence on the soul became in Barth’s theology the Christ of atonement who breaks the hold of human idolatry and graciously brings those who repent into responsible covenant partnership with God in the direction of a new historical future. This message met the twentieth century with great power and relevance.

Barth was originally reared in liberal theology and was as a student enamored of it. But all of that changed dramatically when he was shocked at the dawn of the First World War to discover that an impressive list of German intellectuals had influenced public opinion by offering their names in approval of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s war effort, and among that list were the names of his most revered theological teachers. It was a dark day in Barth’s personal memory. Barth came to believe that the entire liberal project had failed. He came to view the moral failure of theological liberalism as more than just as an isolated lapse in judgment. It rather exposed a fundamental weakness in liberal theological method. For Barth, liberal theology’s preoccupation with the soul’s journey with God made it ill-equipped to deal with the massive social and political issues that the First World War occasioned. Even their interpersonal love ethic was potentially isolationist, impotent in the face of vast corporate evil. Such lack of insight placed liberal theology at risk of compromise with corporate evil at decisive points in history. Barth noted, “I suddenly realized that I could not any longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and history. For me, at least, the 19th century no longer held any future.”[[97]](#footnote-97)

Barth’s 1916 essay on “The Strange New World within the Bible,” reflects a massive shift from the soul’s religious journey to God’s act coming to us in grace.[[98]](#footnote-98) While reading the Bible afresh as a young pastor, Barth wonders aloud, “What is the chorus of prophets and apostles? and what is the burden of their song? What is the one truth that these voices all desire to announce, each in its own tone, each in its own way?” “What labors to come to expression in the texts of this strange new world of the Bible?”[[99]](#footnote-99) Such is a dangerous question for it will place our own self-understanding in question. Our own quest will surely be revolutionized by the Bible if we are willing to abandon ourselves to it. By the voice of the Spirit, the Bible’s meaning will not remain trapped within the restrictive confines of our limited quest for self-fulfillment, for the Bible urges us to see beyond. “Neither by the earnestness of our belief nor by the depth and richness of our experience have we deserved the right to this answer,” but “we must dare to reach far beyond ourselves” to find it.[[100]](#footnote-100) Barth is not looking for the face of God on the surface of the human soul but rather on the face of the biblical text. And the text is not the familiar realm of the soul’s quest for God but rather the unfamiliar realm of divine revelation in history; God’s quest for humanity. Barth asks the theologian to be attentive time and again to the strange new world within the Bible.

Those who seek only history in the Bible’s pages are bound to be frustrated for, “the Bible meets the lover of history with silences that are quite unparalleled.”[[101]](#footnote-101) Indeed, it is not religious history (our quest for God) that is primarily at stake in the Bible but the history of God’s dealings with us. The characters of the Bible are tragic failures as towers of ideal religious influence. They fall short as moral examples. One must be quite selective when using the Bible as a moral textbook in the Swiss public schools![[102]](#footnote-102) The Bible is rather a book primarily of divine grace seeking us down the twisted paths of our religious goals and outright idolatry:

**[EXT]**It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible but the right divine thoughts about men. The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what he says to us; not how we find the way to him, but how he has sought and found the way to us; not the right relation in which we must place ourselves to him, but the covenant which he has made with all who are Abraham’s spiritual children and which he has sealed once and for all in Jesus Christ. It is this which is within the Bible.[[103]](#footnote-103) **[EXT]**

Barth concludes, “We have found in the Bible a new world, God, God’s sovereignty, God’s glory, God’s incomprehensible love. Not the history of man but the history of God! Not the virtues of men but the virtues of him who has called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light!”[[104]](#footnote-104)

There are indeed stories and expressions in the Bible that arise out of human struggles, failures, and religious quest for God. But Barth asks, “is not God—greater than that?” We seek answers to our questions in the Bible, but, when we begin to read the Bible carefully, must we not grow beyond these answers too?”[[105]](#footnote-105) The Bible’s message of redemption is not centered on the pious soul, for the events of the Bible point beyond the redemption of my own soul, as important as that is, “to the glorious beginning of a *new world*.”[[106]](#footnote-106) So, that which we receive in a reading of the Bible “is something, but as we soon realize, is not everything.” [[107]](#footnote-107) We must never be content, for, “Ere long the Bible says to us… with regard to the ‘versions’ we make of it: ‘These may be you, but they are not I!’” We may seek our own reflection in the pages of the Bible but the Bible bids us, “Seek what is here!”[[108]](#footnote-108) Using a pneumatological metaphor, Barth continues, “There is a river in the Bible that carries us away, once we have entrusted our destiny to it.” Indeed, the Bible will interpret itself “in spite of all our human limitations.”[[109]](#footnote-109) If only we will allow ourselves the freedom and courage to take the journey.

Barth’s early turn from human religion (or spirituality) to divine revelation forms the background to his famous commentary on the epistle to the Romans (his *Römerbrief*). I refer to the 1922 revision where he sharpens his critique of the God projections involved in human religious quests and stresses the otherness of God over against them. There is a Christological focus to this critique. The cross shatters our idolatry and helps us to see the affirmation of the resurrection as pure grace. The God revealed on the other side of the cross is no human projection! There is no religious path beyond the cross to the resurrection. “The road, which is impassable, has been made known to us in the crucified and risen Christ.”[[110]](#footnote-110) Nor can historical research get us to this God, as valuable as it is in preparing us to hear the voice of the Spirit in the text with specificity of application.[[111]](#footnote-111) The voice of the Spirit through this text draws us into the Bible’s strange new world, a world in which we are called to die to sin so that the grace of God can come alive in us.

We end up justified sinners, slayed by the cross but made alive by the resurrection. The Spirit reveals the hidden acceptance of God’s grace in the midst of our sinful state, but Barth takes it further:

**[EXT]**It is precisely the hidden things, inaccessible to sensible perception, that are displayed by the Spirit of God. He promises eternal life to those who are dead. He speaks of the blessedness of resurrection-to those who are compassed about with corruption. He pronounces those in whom sin dwells - to be righteous. He calls those oppressed with ceaseless tribulation- blessed. He promises abundance of riches- to those abounding only in hunger and thirst… What, then, would be our fate, were we not powerful in hope, were we not hurrying through the darkness of the world along the road which is enlightened by the Spirit and by the Word of God?[[112]](#footnote-112) **[/EXT]**

We must die with Christ to live with him: “The death of Christ dissolves the Fall by bringing into being the void in which the usurped independence of men can breathe no longer.” At baptism, grace clutches us by the throat so that we can find life only in Christ.[[113]](#footnote-113) For Barth, putting the sinful self to death by grace is our only hope for redemption. The cross and the resurrection of the crucified One is thus the barrier to any human-made door through which God may be accessed but precisely in this negation we understand that the true door is the only hope there is. “Precisely because the ‘No’ of God is all-embracing, it is also His ‘Yes’.”[[114]](#footnote-114) This is the “despair which has its own consolation (Luther).”[[115]](#footnote-115) The Spirit is the denial of “direct immediacy” in our experience of God, an immediacy without the cross’s negation of our own efforts to reach God or the resurrection’s implication that our newly-born faith cannot grasp him. “If Christ be very God, He must be unknown, for to be known directly is the characteristic mark of an idol (Kierkegaard).”[[116]](#footnote-116) The dialectic stands: God remains hidden in divine self-disclosure. There can be no simple identification between our experiences, thoughts, or words and divine revelation. What comes from us is at best a witness, an analogy to God only by the grace.

Barth in the Romans Commentary so stressed the otherness of the revelation of the risen Christ that he wrote of it as a tangent touching a circle “without touching it.” He continues, “And, precisely because it does not touch it, it touches it as its frontier- as the new world.”[[117]](#footnote-117) The event of the risen Christ may be said to have occurred “in history” though in itself it “is not an event in history at all.”[[118]](#footnote-118) One could say that the resurrection for Barth is “in” but not “of” history, not belonging to natural occurrences as part of our cause-and-effect realm of existence. The tangent of the new world of the ultimate future does not touch the circle of the old because there can be no “fusion” of God and humanity, no common point of contact (*Anknüpfungspunkt*). “What touches us- and yet does not touch us- in Jesus the Christ is the kingdom of God who is both Creator and Redeemer.”[[119]](#footnote-119) So the appointment of Jesus Christ as Son of God by the Spirit in the resurrection (Rom. 1:4) can only be discerned by the Spirit. It is out of reach to historical science and is not dependent on it for verification or validation. “The appointment of Jesus to be the Christ takes place in the Spirit and must be apprehended in the Spirit. It is self-sufficient, unlimited, and in itself true.”[[120]](#footnote-120)

In response to Catholic ecclesiology, Barth turns his concern from the liberal Protestant effort to lay hold of Christ through religious consciousness to the attempt to do so via the rituals of the church. Barth rejects the implication that the church is the *Christus prolongatus* (extended Christ), for this would represent another form of an idolatrous identification of human faith or religion with revelation. Barth writes instead that the church is the “crater” left behind by the explosion of the bomb which is the word of God, for it is only by the “negation” of any identification of the church’s words and works with God’s that they become by grace and in the Spirit signposts of the Holy One.[[121]](#footnote-121) The Bible and sacraments become witnesses of Christ only as *Christ* uses them as instruments of grace. They have no capacity in themselves to carry the Word of God who is centrally Christ as present in the Spirit. We never presume perfection in our witness as the church. That belongs to the resurrection, which is presently out of reach.

Barth’s dialectic early on also involved the church’s social witness. Following Christoph Blumhardt, Barth notes that the church is to be involved in the world proclaiming and living the mercy and justice of God, calling out injustice, calling for repentance, and embodying justice and love before the world. But the church’s social witness is never to be viewed as simply identifiable with the coming kingdom of God. The kingdom remains transcendent and the church’s life and mission only its ambiguous parable turned by the Spirit into an authentic witness. But Barth also distances his understanding of the church’s social witness from dualism, which separates the church’s social witness from the kingdom of God entirely.[[122]](#footnote-122) We are to strive by grace to be a living parable of the kingdom, a parable that God can use as *witness*.

Barth is known for his rejection of a “natural revelation” of God through nature. For Barth, our perception of the witness of nature is in crisis too. The reason, again, is human fallenness in the face of the negation of the cross and the wholly other God of the resurrection. In response to Romans 1:18, Barth writes, that “the whole world is the footprint of God; yes, but, in so far as we choose scandal rather than faith, the footprint in the vast riddle of the world is the footprint of His wrath.[[123]](#footnote-123) Barth refers to the wrath of God revealed from heaven in the midst of idolatry (Rom. 1:18-21). Right in the midst of religion one finds idolatry, most explicitly there. “Wherever men pray and preach, wherever sacrifice is offered, wherever in the presence of God emotions are stirred and experiences occur-there, yes! precisely there, the trespass abounds.”[[124]](#footnote-124) But where sin abounds, grace all the more, “so that grace may be grace.”[[125]](#footnote-125) The divine Yes is offered in the No. There is no divine Yes to us without this No, just as there is no No without the offer of the Yes.

Yet, Barth does imply here and there in the Romans Commentary that there is a genuine reaching for God in fallen humanity. Barth notes in his commentary on Romans 1 that humanity implicitly belongs to God and needs God to be who they truly are. When we rebel, “we are in rebellion not against what is foreign to us but against that which is most intimately ours, not against what is removed from us but against that which lies at our hands.”[[126]](#footnote-126) Barth even speaks of a “memory of God” that lies deep within the human race and which confronts us “always as problem and as warning.” God is indeed a “hidden abyss” that warns us but God is also the “hidden home at the beginning and end of all our journeyings.” Indeed, “disloyalty to Him is disloyalty to ourselves.”[[127]](#footnote-127) The problem is that we have forgotten this memory of God. “Enveloped in a mist,” we forget that “all that passes to corruption” is *only* a “parable” of the grace of God by the grace of God, but still a parable! We trade the glory of God that should be discerned in the world for the emptiness of idolatry.[[128]](#footnote-128) As is well-known, Barth later wrote his “Nein!” (“No!”) against Emil Brunner in 1934 as a diatribe against natural theology, which Barth understood as the belief that humanity can develop a theology of God from religious intuition.[[129]](#footnote-129) But Barth does imply that we can feel a restlessness that implicitly thirsts for God.

In 1920, around the time that Barth was beginning to work on the revision of his Romans Commentary, he had a memorable encounter with his former professor, Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), that ignited a debate between them. Harnack was liberal in the anthropocentric tradition of Schleiermacher in the sense that the human soul in intimate relation to God was his core theological focus. Harnack also shared with Schleiermacher the belief that theology needed to develop a conversation with culture for the sake of attaining relevance. The difference was Harnack’s optimism that historical method can legitimate the focus of theology on the love of God and the value of the soul in its quest for God. Harnack confidently asserted that the historian could fully discover this revealed truth and wield it as a standard against all other voices, biblical and theological. The historian discovers that Christ was only significant in exemplifying this filial relationship with God. Hence the gospel was not about Christ. The church’s dogmatic focus on him as the incarnation of the divine redeemer was a tragic detour.[[130]](#footnote-130) Given Harnack’s theological method and core convictions, it seemed clear that he was on a collision course with his former student, Karl Barth.

Barth encountered his former professor at a theological conference where both were presenters. It was held in the Swiss town of Aarau. Barth spoke on “Biblische Fragen, Einsichten und Ausblicke” (“Biblical Questions, Insights, and Outlooks”). Harnack was in the audience. As Barth spoke, a sense of horror gradually overtook Harnack. He later wrote to his colleague Eberhard Vischer about his growing shock as Barth spoke:

**[EXT]**…the effect of Barth’s lecture was just staggering. Not one word, not one sentence could I have said or thought. I saw the sincerity of Barth’s speech, but its theology frightened me… The severity of the charges made in that address is still very vivid in my mind. Instead of losing any of its force, it appeared to me more and more hazardous, yes, in a way, even scandalous. This impression is in no way softened by the consideration that this sort of religion is incapable of being translated into real life, so that it must soar above life as a meteor rushing toward its disintegration.[[131]](#footnote-131) **[/EXT]**

A new theological movement was afoot in Barth’s talk that was leaving Harnack’s liberalism behind, and he sensed it.

Harnack’s impression that Barth’s theology soared above life “as a meteor rushing towards its disintegration” is significant. Barth was not nearly as confident as Harnack that God’s revelation in Christ was accessible to historical science or that we can grasp it directly. The gospel of Jesus can only be known when it slays one and calls one to a strange new world beyond their grasp. Barth writes, “If ‘God is love’ is the highest knowledge, how can we be in possession of it? Is not faith always also unfaith? Does not faith live by being faith in God’s promise? Are we saved in any other way than in hope?”[[132]](#footnote-132) Harnack saw Barth as a dualist who elevated the gospel beyond human grasp. The dialectical language of a gospel that is hidden in being revealed sounded nonsensical to Harnack. For Harnack, the simple gospel of Jesus who reveals the love of God and the worth of the human soul was something real, down to earth, and livable. What Barth was saying seemed to soar above our heads, going nowhere. As a Lutheran, Harnack should have been accustomed to paradoxes (a sinner who is righteous, a hidden God who is revealed, a slain person who is alive). Barth attempted to remind Harnack of this in their published exchange, but to no avail. Barth’s eschatological gospel of the risen Christ that grasps us without being grasped by us rocked Harnack’s neat and simple historical reconstruction of the gospel at its foundations. Harnack was later to even accuse Barth of gnostic thinking, interpreting the gospel as an ungraspable mystery entirely out of touch to reason. “How dare one rebuke reason and even eradicate it? Does not gnostic occultism rise up in the void?”[[133]](#footnote-133) Not surprisingly, he wrote to Barth, “I am filled with anxiety about the future of scientific theology.”[[134]](#footnote-134)

But the Barth-Harnack exchange does not end there! It ends with a concession by Barth much farther into the future that his version of the gospel in those early years was perhaps to one-sidedly “other” or out of reach and not connected clearly enough to the new world that the world of the risen Christ from “beyond” calls into being. A full thirty-six years later, in the year 1956, Barth stood up to speak in the very same hall in Aarau in which in 1920 his early lecture horrified his former professor. He starts by defending his earlier theology. He noted that a dramatic turn was needed in those early days. Liberalism which had made the religious quest of the soul the focus of attention required a turn to the deity (transcendence, freedom) of God self-revealed on divine terms. Barth said he had to push against a liberal theology that was by implication “religionistic, anthropocentric, and in this sense humanistic,” in which speaking about God “meant to speak in a scarcely veiled fashion about man… his revelations and wonders, his faith and his works.”[[135]](#footnote-135) God was in danger of being reduced to a pious notion, a “mystical expression and symbol” of human heights and depths.[[136]](#footnote-136) Concerning liberalism, “The ship was threatening to run aground; the moment was at hand to turn the rudder an angle of exactly 180 degrees.”[[137]](#footnote-137) So, to oppose this anthropocentric theology, Barth noted that he focused on the crucified and risen Christ so as to highlight the wholly other God who grants humanity a Yes by grace but only in granting an all-negating No to human religiosity as a path to God. Pointing towards Christ like John the Baptist in Grünewald’s famous painting, Barth was declaring of Christ that “He must increase but I must decrease.”[[138]](#footnote-138)

However, Barth admitted also in that self-reflection of 1956 that he had not granted enough attention in his earlier days to what he now termed the “humanity of God,” or God’s freedom *for* humanity (not only *from* human idolatry), turning to them in grace and by this grace elevating them to the status of a free covenant partner. Barth reflects, “I should indeed have been somewhat embarrassed if one had invited me to speak on the humanity of God—say, in the year 1920, the year in which I stood up in this hall against my great teacher, Adolf von Harnack.”[[139]](#footnote-139) Barth admits that his early lopsided emphasis on God’s deity and God’s “No” against human idolatry threatened to place God out of reach to us entirely and, thus, reduce his theology of God to an abstraction: “We viewed this ‘wholly other’ in isolation, abstracted and absolutized, and set over against man, this miserable wretch—not to say boxed his ears with it—in such a fashion that it continually showed greater similarity to the deity of the God of the philosophers than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”[[140]](#footnote-140) In those early years, Barth found in the Bible only one interest, *God*, and “that only *one* way appears, namely, that from above downwards.”[[141]](#footnote-141) Or, from God to us. Barth did indeed clear the field of anything that even hinted of an access to God along the path of religion. “How we cleared things away! And we did almost nothing but clear away!”[[142]](#footnote-142) In relation to the philosophical and religious trends of the day, “[w]hat should really have been only a sad and friendly smile was a derisive laugh!”[[143]](#footnote-143) He notes that his intention was the message of the resurrection as a source of true hope but it seemed more like the murder of humanity in its quest for God, “the report of an enormous execution.”[[144]](#footnote-144) It seems, he added, that he wanted to turn Schleiermacher on his head and “make *God* great for a change at the cost of *man*.”[[145]](#footnote-145) But now it was time to concentrate also on *humanity* elevated to communion and responsibility by grace!

Barth’s Christocentrism comes to full clarity in his turn from the freedom of God to humanity as liberated to responsible covenant partnership in God, for Christ in his incarnation, life, and death encompasses both. Indeed, it is “God’s *deity* which, rightly understood, includes his *humanity*.”[[146]](#footnote-146) In explanation of this statement, Barth gets right to the focus of his theological method: “How do we come to know that? What permits and requires this statement? It is a Christological statement or rather one grounded in and to be unfolded from Christology.” In Christ, neither God in divine freedom nor humanity as faithful covenant partner are in isolation or in the abstract.[[147]](#footnote-147) In Christ, the true God is revealed in the divine condescension into flesh (the incarnation and the cross). In Christ we see the Word given “from the loftiest, most luminous transcendence” and received “in the deepest, darkest immanence.” But true humanity is also revealed in Christ’s exaltation to God (from the cross to the resurrection). Christ is *both* without confusion or division, wholly one and wholly the other. He attests and guarantees God’s free grace and humanity’s free gratitude. Christ is the Reconciler between God and humanity while revealing them both in relation.[[148]](#footnote-148)

It was Barth’s anchoring of the atonement in the incarnation that most directly aided his new turn to humanity. It also helped to grant more space for the Spirit in Christ’s redemptive work. Since Christ is both the incarnation of God in flesh *and* the exaltation of humanity to covenant partnership and renewal, there is more space opened up for a Spirit Christology, a Christology from below (from Christ’s sojourn of faithfulness in the Spirit) as well as from above (the descent of the Son of God into flesh). Christ is conceived by the Spirit in Mary’s womb, granting pneumatology “material” significance in Christology.[[149]](#footnote-149) Christ bears the Spirit all the way to the cross and offers himself by the Spirit for our redemption.[[150]](#footnote-150) He sees a theology of the third article as the new horizon of his thought.[[151]](#footnote-151) Though the dialectic is never abandoned, there is more capacity now to speak of Christ as providing the standard by which we judge what it means to speak of divine revelation and its affects on the human life.

Barth’s turn to humanity and a more expansive pneumatology causes him to deal more sympathetically with the likes Schleiermacher. Though he still regards Schleiermacher’s gospel as inadequate Christologically, he comes to see him as a well-intended and even needed attempt at writing a theology of the Spirit (the third article of the Creed). Such a theology still needs to connect with an adequate Christology, and, thus, with an adequate link between incarnation and atonement.[[152]](#footnote-152) The devastation of idols at the cross and the transcendence of the risen life continue to caution us against merely identifying our conceptions with revelation. Barth ends up with an analogous relationship between revelation and our faithful theological proposals by way of witness. Actually, the link between God and humanity in both their otherness and communion that Barth sought can be forged from the start by the Spirit, and this includes both Christology (incarnation) and ecclesiology (our uniting to Christ as his body). The union of both the incarnation and ecclesiology are mediated by the Spirit who protects both otherness and relationality. D. Lyle Dabney notes that the Spirit of Pentecost is typically “otherwise engaged” or brings people into communion while protecting their God-given otherness or diversity. “Otherwise engagement” in the Spirit not only brings people together in God but also more basically God in relationship to people. Dabney writes,

**[EXT]**How is it that the Creator can relate to the creature as the Wholly Other, the One who is truly and utterly other than ourselves? How is it that the Word of God can be the Word of the Holy Other and not just our own word ‘spoken in a loud voice’? The answer is to be found in the Word of God in whom we are ‘Otherwise engaged’ from the first, in that we are established and maintained in relationship with the One who is truly other, the Wholly Other with whom we are not identical and yet with whom we are always related.”[[153]](#footnote-153) **[/EXT]**

True to the implications of his Christological center, Barth also comes to stress the need to couch revelation within a trinitarian framework so as to preserve the freedom of God in self-disclosure. Only a God who is perfect communion in Godself apart from us can be revealed for and in us freely, not needing us to be God but freely being this God for us and in us by grace. Schleiermacher attached a modalistic view of the Trinity to the end of his system, in which there are no relations in God; God is only one but is revealed in three ways. Against this, Barth structures revelation from the beginning with reference the one God who is interactively three, in which the Father is the depth of mystery for the Word of God, Christ is the Word incarnate, and the Spirit who is involved in the Christ event becomes the possibility of our reception of the Word by faith, God as LORD of salvation three times over.[[154]](#footnote-154) Revelation is an act of divine grace in every sense.[[155]](#footnote-155)

Barth’s Christological focus comes to sharpest expression in his doctrine of election, which was developed throughout the 1930’s. Election is the doctrine of God’s choosing people for salvation and obedience. It is closely tied to calling. Barth rejects a view of divine election as an “eternal decree” (*decretum absolutum*) “which is independent of Jesus Christ and is only executed by him.”[[156]](#footnote-156) Detaching election from Christ in this way not only reduces Christ to a mere instrument of election (rather than being its very content), it also opens up an abyss of uncertainty concerning who this God is who elects.[[157]](#footnote-157) Who is this God who decrees except the Father who from eternity is revealed in the Word of the Father (John 1:1)? And what can election be if it is not hidden in this Word to be made flesh? Apart from Christ, “there is no election, no beginning, no decree, no word of God.”[[158]](#footnote-158) As Thomas Torrance wrote in agreement with Barth, “There is no God behind the back of Jesus Christ.”[[159]](#footnote-159) Only the Father of the Word of the Father is the Father. Due to the incarnation, Christ is the God who elects humanity; he embraces flesh in the incarnation, chooses his disciples, and calls people everywhere to repentance. But Christ is also the one elected by God to perdition on the cross so as to be the one elected to exaltation and communion for all in the resurrection.[[160]](#footnote-160) For Barth, the wording in Ephesians 1:4 that we were chosen before the foundation of the world “in Christ” means that God chose us all by choosing *him* and we are chosen eternally in him, intended to be part of the unity of all things under him (Eph. 1:10). One could say that in Barth we “actualize” our election in Christ in the Holy Spirit by faith: “for his part man can and actually does elect God, thus attesting and activating himself as elected man.”[[161]](#footnote-161)

It seems, however, that Barth tilted the balance between Christ and the Spirit too far to the side of Christology. For him, the atonement is both the descent of God into the human plight *and* the exaltation of humanity out of it. The exaltation of humanity in Christ is “accomplished in his death and revealed in his resurrection.”[[162]](#footnote-162) The resurrection merely reveals, vindicates, and proclaims the victory of the cross. The resurrection of the crucified Christ (God’s promise to make us alive after slaying us) is thus the proclamation hidden in every proclamation in the church by the power of the Spirit. But in this construal of the counterbalance of the cross and Pentecost, the resurrection is not viewed as a redemptive event in its own right. The resurrection is more than the mere revelation, vindication, or proclamation of the victory of the cross. Without this resurrection, we are still in our sins, claimed by the reality of condemnation and death (1 Cor. 15:17-18). Christ was delivered up on the cross for our sins but raised by the Spirit for our justification (Rom. 4:25; cf., 1 Tim. 3:16). The resurrection is the very fulfillment of the victory of the Spirit over alienated and mortal flesh, which then accounts for the overflowing of that victory at Pentecost onto all flesh. By locating the entirety of the divine victory at the cross and reducing resurrection to a confirmatory and revelatory function, redemption becomes too juridical and not participatory enough, referring to God’s participation in our life and our participation in God’s. We end up eclipsing the victory and flow (overflow) of the divine life that moves through the cross to Pentecost. Schleiermacher’s effort to capture this river of divine love in its flow from the cross to the life of the church is admirable. One needs Barth’s understanding of the cross to qualify it. But I don’t want to lose that flow. The proper counterbalancing of Christology and pneumatology can benefit much from maintaining it.

**[A]Paul Tillich’s Method of Correlation**

The German Lutheran theologian, Paul Tillich, spent the bulk of his career at New York’s Union Theological Seminary in New York. He judged liberal theology as too bound to the human quest for self-understanding and Barthian theology as too confined to the biblical text (the strange new world within the Bible). He purposely intended to position himself as a mediating figure in the titanic struggle between Schleiermacher’s culturally relevant theology of religious piety and Barth’s theology of the proclaimed word of God in witness to Christ (which Tillich called “kerygmatic theology” from *kerygma*, the Greek word for proclamation). Tillich judged Schleiermacher’s contextually-relevant gospel as lacking an adequate grasp of *revelation* as having its own value independently of context and Barth’s theology of revelation as lacking adequate *contextual (religious and cultural) relevance*. Tillich wanted to arrive at a *correlation* between revelation and existential relevance (relevance for religious self-understanding). Though Tillich’s restatement of the liberal position does indeed grant more attention to revelation and does so in ways that I have found helpful in my theology, he does not in my view achieve the mediation that he seeks. He is in my view Schleiermacher for a new day, provocative but still Christologically inadequate.

In Tillich’s provocative little book, *The Dynamics of Faith* (which I liken to Schleiermacher’s *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*), Tillich makes the case that the linkage between revelation and cultural context is anchored in the reality of faith itself. He begins this bookby defining faith as “ultimate concern,” which is similar to Schleiermacher’s “feeling” as “absolute dependence.” The difference is that ultimate concern serves to depict faith as facing both the *Ultimate* (God) and contextual or existential *concern*. In regard to the Ultimate, Tillich refers to the “unconditional, infinite, and ultimate” as distinct from that which is “preliminary, transitory, finite.”[[163]](#footnote-163) Directing concern to that which is truly ultimate is, in fact, the critical criterion for judging the authenticity of theological speech that is spoken from and about faith. Tillich is keenly aware that our concern for the ultimate is prone to idolatry, which occurs whenever we direct ultimate concern towards finite things or purposes, no matter what they may be or how potentially good they may be in themselves. Conceptions of “God” can be an idol since the term “God” is a symbol like many others, accompanied by stories or symbolic myths that make God a figure in history along with other finite figures. We direct our attention and devotion to an idol whenever we take finite and conditioned symbols of God, whether they be words, images, rituals, or myths, both within the Bible and throughout church history, and turn them into literal realities as objects of ultimate concern. To protect the transcendence and freedom of God, Tillich referred to all depictions of God, including that of scripture, to be *symbolic*, never to be taken literally, never to be regarded as literally true.

Tillich is especially eager to regard God as the infinite Ground of all existence rather than an existing being among other beings, which Tillich held made God a finite idol. God for Tillich does not “exist.” God simply “is.” Tillich writes that the phrase “the existence of God” is an “impossible combination of words.”[[164]](#footnote-164) The real question then is not whether God exists but rather whether our speaking about God recognizes God’s unfathomable ultimacy.[[165]](#footnote-165) Since the ultimate is not an object of our finite world, it is beyond the subject/object cleavage (beyond making God the “object” of our subjective knowledge). The Ultimate for Tillich cannot be an object of finite reflection or interaction. The Ultimate acts upon us but we do not act upon the Ultimate. False ultimacies (idols) cannot transcend the subject/object cleavage but remain trapped within it because the object of concern is a finite reality that we shape and manipulate to our own destruction.[[166]](#footnote-166) For Tillich, the Ultimate grasps us with ultimate concern rather than our grasping the Ultimate.[[167]](#footnote-167) Grasped existentially, we actually participate in the reality of the Ultimate.[[168]](#footnote-168)

Since faith participates in the ultimate, the second term, “concern” reveals the subjective side of faith that is both existential (having to do with all dimensions of human existence) and contextual. Faith as “ultimate *concern*” shows that faith is existentially concerned or *involved*. Faith is not a neutral stance that is personally removed from the reality to which it refers. Faith as concern for the ultimate involves us fully in the Ultimate, being “an act of the total personality.” It is “the most centered act of the human mind.”[[169]](#footnote-169) Thus, if idolatrous “faith” becomes dominant it leads to existential disappointment, a loss of our center and a disruption of our personality.[[170]](#footnote-170) Attempting to master the Ultimate is a self-destructive act. But surrendering to the Ultimate is an act of freedom, of self-transcendence. “The reality of man’s ultimate concern reveals something about his being, namely, that he is able to transcend the flux of relative and transitory experiences of his ordinary life.”[[171]](#footnote-171) As we will note below, Tillich could also refer to faith as the “courage to be” when not emphasizing human finitude or transitoriness but rather estrangement or alienation from God.[[172]](#footnote-172) Whether ultimate concern or courageous affirmation of God, faith is a free and existentially engaged act, granting the human person the fulfillment of their deepest yearning for that which lies beyond the finite, the conditional, and the estranged. For Tillich, humanity is oriented to the Ultimate so that faith is not foreign to the self, not an imposition upon it from beyond, but is rather the freeing of the self to become what it was meant to become. Even in idolatry, humanity is seeking in a distorted way to surrender to the Ultimate. Even atheism if passionately held treats the understanding of a godless world as an ultimate concern, rejecting genuine faith for a false faith. Only disinterest in the ultimate is truly atheistic.[[173]](#footnote-173)

Faith truly grasped by the Ultimate is “ecstatic,” taking us beyond ourselves. Faith involves “standing outside of oneself” without ceasing to be oneself “with all the elements which are united in the personal center,” for self-transcendence belongs to us.[[174]](#footnote-174) Yet, actualizing self-transcendence by faith is always a freeing act of divine grace. It is always a gift that we never possess and have at our disposal. “Man is driven towards faith by his awareness of the infinite to which he belongs, but which he does not own like a possession.”[[175]](#footnote-175) Rather, we are grasped by ultimate concern and we surrender to the ultimate with our entire being. “Man experiences a belonging to the Infinite which, however, is neither a part of himself nor something in his power. It must grasp him, and, if it does, it is a matter of infinite concern.”[[176]](#footnote-176) “This alone makes faith a human potentiality.”[[177]](#footnote-177)

Following the lead of faith, Tillich seeks to correlate the revelatory with the existential situations. He maintains that theology “moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received.”[[178]](#footnote-178) Balancing these two in this movement between them is the challenge. Some will sacrifice important elements of eternal truth to speak to the situation; others will neglect the situation to protect revelation from distortion. Some combine both shortcomings. Afraid of distorting the eternal truth, Fundamentalists identify it with a limited version of it from history and impose this outmoded version of it on the church while disregarding the new situation that requires new interpretation. In doing this, they miss both the eternal message and the new version of it needed to answer the new situation of the church.[[179]](#footnote-179) “Fundamentalism fails to make contact with the present situation, not because it speaks from beyond every situation, but because it speaks from a situation of the past. It elevates something finite and transitory to infinite and eternal validity.”[[180]](#footnote-180) The implication here is that the eternal message has many different forms depending on the changing situation. Ignoring the existential situation is impossible, since it will impose itself on the church’s interpretation of the proclamation in subtle ways. The church might as well take up this challenge in faithfulness to its proclamation so as to answer the challenges of the situation. He contrasts kerygmatic (Barthian) theology that is faithful to the proclamation of Christ in scripture with apologetic theology that is responsive to the questions of cultural context. “Kerygmatic theology must give up its exclusive transcendence and take seriously the attempt of apologetic theology to answer the questions put before it by the contemporary situation.”[[181]](#footnote-181) The challenge is “to seek a theological method in which message and situation are related in such a way that neither of them is obliterated.”[[182]](#footnote-182)

The message of Christ is the anchor of theology for Tillich. If the ultimacy of the Ultimate is the *critical* *norm* of theology, the appearance of New Being (graced existence) in Christ is the *material* *norm*. Tillich claims that the mediation of experience through revelation has Christ as its chief material criterion and basis: “Christian theology is based on the unique event Jesus the Christ, and in spite of the infinite meaning of this event it remains *this*event and, as such, the criterion of every religious experience. This event is given to experience and not derived from it. Therefore, experience receives and does not produce.”[[183]](#footnote-183) He blames Schleiermacher for deriving his Christology from the needs of piety or the spiritual quest, saying of Schleiermacher’s theology, “the Christian consciousness, with lines drawn from it to its divine causation, was too weak to carry the burden of the system.”[[184]](#footnote-184) Our estrangement from God for Tillich prohibits our religious consciousness from being the material basis of revelation that leads to our understanding of Christ as merely its ideal.[[185]](#footnote-185)

Tillich does have a deeper awareness of our fallenness than Tillich did. “It is not an exaggeration to say that today man experiences his present situation in terms of disruption, conflict, self-destruction, meaninglessness, and despair in all realms of life.” It is the question of a reality in which the self-estrangement of our existence is overcome, a reality of reconciliation and reunion, of creativity, meaning, and hope. “We shall call such a reality the ‘New Being,’ a term whose presuppositions and implications can be explained only through the whole system.”[[186]](#footnote-186) The New Being is manifested in Jesus Christ, granting him a unique role in mediating revelation. “He who is the Christ is he who brings the new eon, the new reality.”[[187]](#footnote-187) As for us, “[e]ven the saint must listen to what the Spirit says to his spirit, because the saint is also a sinner.”[[188]](#footnote-188) Justification by grace through faith is ambiguous life receiving unambiguous life from Christ as a gift, a notion that I have found very helpful.[[189]](#footnote-189)

Yet, theology is also to be existentially relevant, or it remains abstract, a kneeling before the Ultimate revealed in Christ without existential concern with which to correlate it. Tillich contrasts Schleiermacher’s problematic experience-driven theology with Barth’s method which for Tillich commits the opposite error of imposing theology onto humanity without regard for that which is relevant to faith or experience of God. So, Tillich notes that it was a mistake for Barth in response to Schleiermacher to start his *Church Dogmatics* with a scripturally and dogmatically defined Trinitarian doctrine. “It could be said that in his system this doctrine falls from heaven, the heaven of an unmediated biblical and ecclesiastical authority.”[[190]](#footnote-190) It is not correlated from the start with existential questions. Barth would respond that we cannot take our lead questions from our context, since that allows context to set the agenda for theology. The primary questions arise from revelation itself. The material norm of theology in the biblical gospel and in dogmatic history generates its own questions that are worthy of answering today. Yet, existential and cultural questions dare not be ignored, especially since they have always played a role in the formulation of both scripture and dogma. Here is where Tillich has a valid point, though it must be qualified.

Tillich’s method of correlation is complex. As implied above, it deals on one level with the answers to existential questions formulated from revelation. Theology “explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence.”[[191]](#footnote-191) For example, the doctrine of the kingdom of God can be correlated with existential questions about the meaning of history.[[192]](#footnote-192) But there is another level at which correlation is at work, namely, through the interdependence of matter and form, or revelation and the symbols in scripture and theology that bring revelation to expression. There is here a correlation “in the sense of correspondence between religious symbols and that which is symbolized by them.”[[193]](#footnote-193) Symbols from scripture or theology are living so long as they can still be correlated meaningfully with the theological meaning that they convey. The symbols die if such correlation seems no longer credible.[[194]](#footnote-194)

There is no question but that Tillich’s correlation theology is provocative and creative. There are places in his writings where I have been helped immensely. On the one hand, when reading Schleiermacher and Tillich, I find it hard to significantly distinguish between them. Tillich tends to stereotype him so as to contrast his own position to his more starkly. Both find in Christ the perfect alignment of his consciousness (Tillich says human spirit) with God (Tillich says Spiritual Presence). Both find in Christ a powerful revelation of a life perfectly reconciled to God. Both find the solution to our own fragmented spiritual life in receiving the redemptive influence of this Christ figure by faith. Both find in Christ the decisive event of reconciliation with God and regard Christ as of enduring and universal significance for the life of faith as one that is awakened to God and aligned with God. Both are willing to radically depart from biblical formulations if they no longer seem culturally or existentially relevant. By the way, Tillich’s constant effort to stereotype Barth as isolated within the Bible and church dogma is manifestly inaccurate, another way for Tillich to make his own theology stand out by way of contrast.[[195]](#footnote-195)

But there is also a detectable difference. Whereas Schleiermacher speaks of God on occasion in the *Speeches* as the “World-Spirit” he is otherwise hesitant to speak of the Spirit outside of the narrow confines of the common Spirit experienced in the life of the church. Spirit language for God in Tillich is much more pervasive and fundamental to his understanding of God and of the divine self-giving. The volume of his system devoted to the Spirit is by far the largest of the three. He writes that “Spirit” is the “most embracing, direct, and unrestricted symbol for the divine life.”[[196]](#footnote-196) The Spirit is the existential link between God and humanity: “The divine Spirit, or God, present to man’s spirit, breaks into all history in revelatory experiences which have both a saving and transformative character.”[[197]](#footnote-197) David Kelsey notes that God for Tillich “is simply identified with the ‘divine Spirit’” and that in the Trinity “the Spirit has a certain priority to the other two persons.”[[198]](#footnote-198) Thus, Tillich writes, “we must begin with the Spirit rather than with the Logos. God is Spirit, and any trinitarian statement must be derived from this basic assertion.”[[199]](#footnote-199) In Tillich’s Christology, Christ surrenders himself entirely to the divine Spirit in life and especially in death. He surrenders his finite personhood as Jesus to the Spirit at death gaining universal significance as the mediator of New Being wherever it is experienced, whether within a Christian context or not.[[200]](#footnote-200) For Tillich, “Inasmuch as Jesus as the Christ is a creation of the Spirit… so is he who participates in the Christ made into a new creature by the Spirit.”[[201]](#footnote-201) Indeed, “up to the end of the world— the new being in Jesus as the Christ is present and effective.”[[202]](#footnote-202) Tillich has provided the pneumatological language lacking and called for in Schleiermacher’s theology.

Tillich also has a more robust appreciation for our fallenness (alienation, guilt, and idol-making) than Schleiermacher does, an appreciation due no doubt to his witnessing the horrors of the twentieth century. This deeper awareness grants his reflection on the atonement deeper existential relevance than that which may be found in Schleiermacher’s dogmatics. Tillich maintains that in Christ God *participates* in human anguish and suffering to overcome it, a notion that is noticeably lacking in Schleiermacher. Tillich wrote movingly:

**[EXT]**It is the greatness and heart of the Christian message that God, as manifest in the Christ on the Cross, totally participates in the dying of a child, in the condemnation of the criminal, in the disintegration of a mind, in starvation and famine, and even in the human rejection of Himself. There is no human condition into which the divine power does not penetrate. This is what the Cross, the most extreme of all human conditions, tells us.”[[203]](#footnote-203) **[/EXT]**

God in Christ participates in human alienation at the cross to overcome it with new Being in the Spirit. This is where Tillich himself distinguishes his atonement theology from Schleiermacher’s, maintaining that Christ for Schleiermacher is an abstract ideal (*Urbild*) that awakens and influences our soul’s journey but lacks a recognition of God’s participation in human existence so as to overcome it: “the New Being participates in existence and conquers it.”[[204]](#footnote-204) This idea of God participating in the human condition in Christ and conquering it does grant Tillich’s understanding of Christ’s death atoning significance. This grants Tillich some potential for counterbalancing Christology and pneumatology.

Yet, for Tillich, Christology still ends up being absorbed into pneumatology, for Jesus gains universal significance by surrendering to the Spirit and bearing witness to a life perfectly surrendered in this way. I thus agree with neo-pentecostal theologian, J. Rodman Williams (who studied under Tillich at Union Seminary), that Tillich tilts theology too far in the direction of pneumatology without an adequate Christological anchor.[[205]](#footnote-205) Tillich’s inadequate Christology begins with a weak understanding of the incarnation. He interprets the notion of an incarnation of the pre-existent Son in flesh pejoratively as a myth of a finite divine figure “transmuting” into a human in a way that eliminates true deity and true humanity. Of course, this is a caricature of the orthodox consensus on the incarnation. Tillich then describes the incarnation as the chief “manifestation” in Jesus of the New Being or existence surrendered to God as Spiritual Presence. Significantly, Tillich to his credit also adds that Jesus functions to manifest God “as a saving Participant in the human predicament.”[[206]](#footnote-206) This addition links incarnation to atonement: God participates in our predicament in Christ so as to open up human participation in God.

But this divine participation is still described exclusively in pneumatological terms for Tillich. God as Spirit proceeds from the Ground of Being to transcend the finite particularity of divine revelation (Logos) without leaving it entirely behind.[[207]](#footnote-207) There is no ontological union of the divine Son and the humanity of Jesus in the Spirit. Correspondingly, in the end, there is no incarnate Son for Tillich who rises to pour forth the Spirit so as in his glorified flesh to remain the sacrament of the Spirit to all flesh. In orthodox theology the glorified flesh of Christ is to be the enduring place where Christology and pneumatology reveal their eternal mutual working in a way that preserves distinctiveness, the Son incarnates and the Spirit anoints. But for Tillich, there is no glorified flesh. Jesus Christ surrenders himself to God’s Spirit on the cross to the point of passing from history as a distinct person so as to *become Spirit*. The cross for Tillich is the end of all “Jesusology” or of any eternal significance to Jesus Christ as the Jesus Christ of history.[[208]](#footnote-208) Christ does not become a “life-giving Spirit” as 1 Corinthians 15:45 puts it; for Tillich, he becomes “Spirit.” Jesus for Tillich is of enduring significance for human participation in New Being, but only through the ongoing impact of his life example, which illuminates and serves to define God’s participation in finite life wherever it occurs. There is no perichoretic or interpersonal communion of Jesus Christ and Spirit here, in which both endure as key to the divine self-giving; rather, there is a dissolving of Jesus Christ into the Spirit.

Special mention must be made of the problem in Tillich’s use of symbols, which is ambiguous enough to allow him wide latitude in his creativity and freedom to radically reformulate matters when dealing with the scriptures and tradition. When a formulation seems irrelevant to a contemporary experience of God, Tillich can talk of pagan myth or of dying symbols and simply reformulate the matter with little to no regard for what it meant in its original expression. By contrast, Barth’s biblical realism, which regards biblical or dogmatic formulations as *analogous* to the realities they depict, allows him to call their adequacy into question without dismissing them. Barth preserves an element of realism in biblical and theological language concerning the incarnation, atonement, and the triune self-giving in history.

I have found Tillich helpful in many ways. But, in the end, I do not find in his correlation theology a sufficient way beyond Schleiermacher’s inadequate Christology and Barth’s inadequate pneumatology. Tillich’s Christology is an improvement over Schleiermacher’s, especially in the area of atonement, but this ends up not being enough to prevent Christ from being dissolved into the overcoming life of the Spirit. Barth himself points the way towards a more adequate pneumatology in my view, though he never quite got there himself. The key in my view is to take Barth’s towering Christology, with its realistic notion of the divine Son in flesh overcoming human sin, condemnation, and death on the cross, and wed it with a more robust notion of Christ’s life as also the victory of the Spirit in flesh, a victory that comes to fullness in the resurrection and that overflows at Pentecost.

**[A]Final Word:**

Theology in the modern era can be viewed through the lens of the struggle to understand the top loci of systematic theology, especially Christology and pneumatology. Liberalism can be viewed as implicitly highlighting the Spirit. Christ becomes the instrument of spiritual renewal. There is no need for atonement (or for accenting the cross and the resurrection as *the* redemptive event), since Christ’s life witness can flow to us by way of the Spirit without this. The evangelical (neo-orthodox) response by Barth placed its weight precisely there at the cross as the redemptive event to which the Spirit bears witness. The incarnation has this redemptive event as its inner meaning and telos. Though a much needed remedy of a liberal weakness, the danger of Barth’s reaction is in reducing the *Spirit* to an instrumental function, namely, that of witness to the redemptive event of atonement. Tillich’s effort to grant the cross greater weight as the event of overcoming estrangement from God lacks adequate Christological undergirding. There is no incarnational doctrine in Tillich. Christ as the man of the Spirit is merely the symbol of New Being or of the spiritual life of the new humanity. If one follows the logic of this position, the cross becomes a symbol of reconciliation as well, one that is dissolved into Jesus’ life witness and as such is replaceable by other witnesses. A way to more adequately respond to Barth will be to view the atonement as the path to the life of the Spirit, one that is trod by Christ in the Spirit but which also regards Christ in his death and resurrection as the redemptive event in his own right.

3

The Word of God and Historical Context Revisited:

Liberation, Contextual, and Postliberal Theologies

The witness of the Spirit does not hover over our lives but is expressed through them in many and diverse tongues. Thus, a theology that is devoted above all else to the Word will also be engaged in *context*. We touched on that issue in our previous two chapters but I want to accent it here more sharply. The contextual theology of liberalism was preoccupied with humanity’s religious quest or the quest of the soul face to face with its God. Whether it be religious consciousness (Schleiermacher) or one’s existential predicament (Tillich) the focus was primarily personal and individual, dealing with a challenge that may be regarded as transcendental or common to people of all times and places.[[209]](#footnote-209) Both Schleiermacher and Tillich thus sought to understand that quest through both a contemporary philosophical lens and from within the life of the church, especially its proclamation of Jesus Christ from scripture. A conversation between text and context was encouraged, most explicitly in Tillich’ correlation theology. Meanwhile, Barth emphasized what was necessary to the theological conversation concerning the human situation from within the norms of theology itself, namely, scripture, witness, and dogma. He was also conversational with philosophical voices from outside the church but cautiously, so as not to allow them to set the agenda for theology.

All of this will change in the latter half of the twentieth century. Theology will take a more expansive turn to the secular context, especially to the historical and the social realms as the arenas of the divine self-giving. Several transitional trends set up the newer theological methods. First, the biblical theology movement of the middle of the twentieth century and beyond emphasized secular *history* rather than the life of the soul or the existential predicament as the primary focus of theology. As Brevard Child’s noted, “Few tenets lay closer to the heart of the Biblical Theology Movement than the conviction that revelation was mediated through history.”[[210]](#footnote-210) This trend had the potential of expanding revelation beyond the boundaries of the religious quest. Barth was inspirational here because of his emphasis on the “strange new world of the Bible” that was assumed to be informed by God’s revelatory acts in history.

Second, Harvey Cox’s seminal classic, *The Secular City*, explicitly used biblical theology to move the locus of revelation from the life of the church to that of secular (especially urban) society. The church was then located at the cutting edge of what God is doing to usher the kingdom of God in the context of secular society, as an instrument in this process. Cox’s shift from the church to society as the context of theology’s contemplation of revelation brought the turn to history as the medium of revelation celebrated in biblical theology to fulfillment. Investigation into the transcendental core of the individual’s quest for God was gone. The existential crisis of social upheaval and change is no longer relevant. Humanity in search of a socially responsible definition of human existence as a historically changing reality was now of contextual significance. Sociology rather than philosophical anthropology became the new dialogue partner to theology. Barth’s avoidance of philosophy as a dialogue partner and later turn to humanity as elevated by grace to covenant partnership with God became Cox’s major dialogue partner, ironic given Barth’s reputation as a non-contextual theologian! Cox wrote, “The triumph of Barth’s theology is a God who doesn’t need man; therefore, He can let man live. Only when God and man have been fully differentiated from one another can God come near to man without limiting and oppressing him.”[[211]](#footnote-211) This secularization of theology would lead directly to the rise of liberation theology, except the prominent issue then became the dehumanization of the socially oppressed rather than the self-sufficient urbanized population that allegedly no longer saw any need for God.

Third, in some quarters, eschatology became prominent as the horizon and chief explanation for history as the context of revelation. History was here viewed as filled with idols. Only the God of the ultimate future can free us from the bondage of history for the sake of historical fulfillment. Eschatology in this context is revolutionary, more than a “harmless little chapter at the conclusion of Christian Dogmatics” as Barth put it.[[212]](#footnote-212) Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope* is of seminal importance here. Barth was again the inspiration, but Moltmann felt that his eschatology was too “timeless” and not apocalyptic or future oriented enough. He writes, “That is why faith, whenever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in man. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world.”[[213]](#footnote-213) He contrasts this radical vision of the biblical God with the Platonic God of the “eternal present,” which tends to justify the status quo.[[214]](#footnote-214)

Lastly, the decline of colonial rule globally caused a number of theologians from newly independent contexts to do theology in other than European and North American ways of thinking. As of the middle of the twentieth century, around 750 million people, nearly a third of the globe, was under colonial rule by European powers. Today, that number is only about two million.[[215]](#footnote-215) Decolonialization caused theology to think indigenously about theology. History as the context for revelation was taking unexpected cultural turns.

**[A]The Liberation Theologies of Gutierrez, Cone, and Williams**

The turn of theology to secular social context in the 1960’s found its most impactful voices in liberation theology. Liberation theology is most widely known as a movement that began in Latin America in the early 1970’s largely among Catholic theologians. In reading classic texts from this movement, one can detect explicit and implicit dependence on the transitional breakthroughs discussed above, namely, the turn to history as the arena of revelation as promoted by the biblical theology movement and the turn to the secular in Cox, including the assumption that secular social and political realities mediate theological concepts. Since the prominent attention of liberation theology early on was directed against the dehumanization caused by the economic injustice of capitalism in the West, Marxist analysis rather than existential insights became the hermeneutical aid to theology. Consequently, the plight of the socially oppressed rather than philosophical questions was the key “existential” issue and the goal of changing the world was more important than understanding it. Here is where this theology sometimes connects to Barth’s strong opposition to the idolatry involved in self-justifying ideology, especially also in the light of Barth’s turn to anthropology, viewing humanity as called to responsible covenant partnership with God. Liberation theology in Latin American contexts thus drew important attention to liberating praxis in support of the oppressed.

Of pivotal significance to Latin American liberation theology is the Second Episcopal Conference of Latin America in Medellin, Columbia in 1968. This conference consisted of Latin American Catholic bishops who gathered to consider the impact of the Second Vatican Council on the churches.[[216]](#footnote-216) The result was an urging by the bishops to proceed beyond the former emphasis on personal holiness through preaching and sacraments toward social liberation and change. The church was to become an agent of social change in service to the kingdom of God. The aim was not just surface change and improvement but rather radical structural and economic changes so as to create space for the poor to be humanized as full participants in the kingdom of God. There is henceforth to be a “preferential option for the poor” by the church in its universal appeal to humanity to participate in the transformative grace of God.

Gustavo Gutierréz (b. 1928), a Peruvian theologian, found in the bishops’ conference at Medellin a way forward for theology. In 1971, he published the first major theology of liberation, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*.[[217]](#footnote-217) The subtitle is significant. This was a theology that situated both sin and salvation in history, as historically and socially (especially economically) mediated realities in the secular realm. Since sin and its effect in oppression are historically and socially mediated in the secular realm, so is salvation. Salvation involves secular liberation from social and economic oppression. The church thus ties itself and its fulfillment to a larger liberating history among humankind.[[218]](#footnote-218) The kingdom of God as a secular force played an integrative role in this theology.

Theological method for Gutierréz is reflection on liberating praxis in the world.[[219]](#footnote-219) As a secular reality, that praxis involves awareness of both revelation and the situation of the oppressed. In reflection on liberating praxis, Gutierréz thus seeks a movement from the world to the church (enlightening the church as to the oppressive situation and ideology under which it lives) as well as from the church to the world (providing theological insights into praxis for liberation in the kingdom of God). In this two-way movement, theology learns “from the historical praxis of humankind in history as well as what its own reflection might mean for the transformation of the world.”[[220]](#footnote-220) The end result is that the church provides the theological rationale for social liberation, influencing how and why it is to be done. The church ties itself and its fulfillment to a larger liberating history among humankind.[[221]](#footnote-221) In its liberating praxis, the church is to transcend its existence as a ghetto or isolated church removed from the challenge of social liberation.[[222]](#footnote-222) The church is the church for others. The church itself is to undergo renewal and restructuring so as to facilitate full participation in its liberating praxis in the world.[[223]](#footnote-223)

Explicitly following Cox in celebrating Barth’s anthropological turn, Gutierrez notes that God calls humanity to covenant partnership in promoting the cause of the kingdom in the world.[[224]](#footnote-224) Faith in this context is fulfilled in charity and is thus oriented to the suffering and needs of the other: “love is the fulfillment and nourishment of faith, the gift of one’s self to the Other and invariably to others. This is the foundation of the praxis of Christians, of their active presence in history.”[[225]](#footnote-225) Drawing from biblical theology, Gutierrez also notes that God is involved in history to bring the divine kingdom to fulfillment, a divine activity that is involved in the liberating events of the Exodus and Jesus Christ. Creation itself initiates a history that is open to God’s salvific purposes that gains impetus at the Exodus and the words of the prophets. Christ as the perfect God-Man is the decisive cause of liberation and humanization of the oppressed in history, for he “takes on all dimensions of human existence” as the point of true human fulfillment. Christ’s death and resurrection will transform the universe and make it possible within the kingdom of God for people to be fulfilled as human beings in all aspects of life.[[226]](#footnote-226)

Though tempered by realism, faith in the transcendent kingdom of God also urges the church to reach for radical measures that do not tolerate dehumanization or merely accept the roots of oppression. Faith urges the church to reach for “a qualitatively different society in which it will be free from all servitude.”[[227]](#footnote-227) A developmentalism that accepts a more compassionate capitalism is not radical enough as a solution since the situation of dependency would remain, “a new dependence less evident but not less real.”[[228]](#footnote-228) In dependence on Moltmann and Cox, Gutierréz notes that the church’s historical mission at the interchange of church and world has a bold future orientation, highlighting the rediscovery of the eschatological dimension in theology. We are led through praxis to the “gift which gives history its transcendent meaning: the full and definitive encounter with the LORD and with other humans.”[[229]](#footnote-229) The goal of theology is to “penetrate the present reality, the movement of history, that which is driving history towards the future.”[[230]](#footnote-230)

As a historical reality, salvation is for Gutierrez not confined to the life of the church. It embraces broadly “the religious significance of human action in history.” A theology of liberation opens the realm of salvation to all who participate in God’s liberating activity in society, even if they are not aware that God is involved. The goal is not focused on the life beyond but this life: “One looks then to this world, and now sees in the world beyond not the ‘true life’ but rather the transformation and fulfillment of the present life.”[[231]](#footnote-231) History is not just a test that needs to be passed for entry into the world beyond. “The absolute value of salvation does not devalue this world but grants it authentic meaning, its own autonomy” because salvation is already latent in the world.[[232]](#footnote-232) This is a secular gospel. Evangelism therefore announces good news by awaking the oppressed to their role as agents of liberation in history. An awakening or “conscientizing” evangelism seeks to inspire all of the initiatives “that contribute to the formation of man” as agents in their own social liberation. The Christian message is not the opiate of the people but liberates people to become self-determining participants in the gift of the kingdom of God. “The whole climate of the gospel is the continual demand for the right of the poor to make themselves heard, to be considered preferentially by society, a demand to subordinate economic needs to those of the deprived.”[[233]](#footnote-233) Following Marx, Gutierréz is skeptical that the oppressors will freely give up power for the sake of the oppressed. Rather, liberation as a gift of the kingdom of God must be pursued by those who suffer oppression and those who come into solidarity with the liberating direction of the kingdom.

Liberation theology is more diverse than Gutierrez’s expression of it. The black theologian James Cone (1938-2018) of Union Theological Seminary in New York wrote his classic, *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969 before liberation theology took off as a movement.[[234]](#footnote-234) It was written as a constructive response to the black power movement of the 1960’s. Though not written technically as a liberation theology, it laid the groundwork for one, which Cone put to print in his *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970) and especially his *God of the Oppressed* (1975).[[235]](#footnote-235) Cone does not locate the context of oppression fundamentally in the situation of economic injustice but rather in his blackness and his experience of racial oppression in the US.[[236]](#footnote-236) He challenged the liberation theology movement early on to address issues of race. Cone replaced Tillich’s abstract “ultimate concern” which is tied to universal structures of human existence, with race as for him the defining existential issue. “Therefore, if a higher, Ultimate Reality, is to have meaning it must relate to the very essence of blackness.”[[237]](#footnote-237) Again, sociology replaces a philosophically-construed transcendental anthropology. The theological meaning of Cone’s experience of blackness, though secular in implication, was mediated to him through the black church: “The black church helped me to deal with the contradictions of life and provided a way to create meaning in a society not of my own making.”[[238]](#footnote-238) White theology conveniently overlooked black oppression. Even though Cone had an interest in Barth’s theology and wrote his PhD dissertation on Barth’s anthropology, he was frustrated by the fact that his Barthian professors in seminary under the sway of the biblical theology movement failed to speak to the racism inherent in white theology: “My mostly neo-orthodox professors talked incessantly about the ‘mighty acts of God’ in biblical history. But they objected to any effort to link God's righteousness with the political struggles of the poor today, especially among the black poor fighting for justice in the United States.”[[239]](#footnote-239) Focusing on race as well as poverty took Cone beyond Marx as a conversation partner. Cone’s *God of the Oppressed* converses supremely with the sociology of knowledge so as to deal adequately with cultural factors like race and how they shape human experience and thought. There is thus for Cone a broadly social a priori to all speaking and thinking theologically. Within such a framework, the impact of social ideology is perceived to be deeper and more universal than Marx had imagined.[[240]](#footnote-240) Cone was offering the beginnings of a multicontextual understanding of liberation theology even before he consciously joined the movement. The multicontextual nature of theology has come to full expression more recently by the pentecostal theologian Amos Yong, among others. Using the many tongues of Pentecost as his focus, Yong develops a pneumatology that embraces otherness across the spectrum of experiences of human marginalization.[[241]](#footnote-241)

The legacy of the black church occasioned Cone’s commitment to the primacy of biblical revelation in the task of liberation theology. “Black theology seeks to bear witness to the divine Word who transcends the subjective musings of black theologians.”[[242]](#footnote-242) Following Barth, Cone notes that there is a divine “No and Yes” facing black theology that keeps it from descending into idolatrous ideology.[[243]](#footnote-243) But also following Barth’s biblical realism, Cone maintains that such limitations do not lead to the conclusion “that there is no word to be said” in black theology.[[244]](#footnote-244) Scripture grants us a witness to what is genuinely analogous to God and God’s acts, for in Christ “the divine enters our social existence and discloses what is ‘wholly other’ and what is like God. If we take seriously the clue disclosed in God’s Incarnation, namely, the cross and resurrection of Jesus, then we know that we have a way of cutting through the maze of political and social confusions.”[[245]](#footnote-245) This is a secular version of Barthian theology, similar in nature to what Cox had attempted, idolatrous ideology (in Cone’s case, racism) is overthrown by the God of a liberating history who calls humanity to free and responsible covenant partnership. Cone builds a case that the God of the Exodus and the prophets is fully revealed in the ministry of Jesus who came to set at liberty those who were oppressed (Lk. 4:18).[[246]](#footnote-246) Following this liberation theme in the Bible, theology reflects on the struggles of the oppressed in the light of the biblical promise of God’s presence as liberator, as a source of hope in the world. And this includes for Cone all those who are socially oppressed. Cone’s emphasis on blackness is not meant to exclude other oppressed peoples, since blackness in his particular context is a *symbol* of oppression. Other experiences and symbols of oppression among others are possible too. Christ’s death and resurrection provides the ultimate liberation, one that is social but also eschatological. More recently, Cone wrote a striking treatise on the cross, describing it as an unjust “lynching,” which, in the light of the resurrection, offers decisive insight into both the despair experienced in black oppression and lynchings but also the hope that is possible in God for them and for those affected by it. The oppressors cannot win, even with the terror of death as their weapon.[[247]](#footnote-247)

No treatment of liberation theology would be complete without reference to womanist theology. A womanist theology is commonly referred to as liberation theology from the vantage point of the experiences of women of color.[[248]](#footnote-248) This is sometimes distinguished from “feminist” theology which came to be viewed as predominantly white. In womanist theology, not only gender but also race is a social experience that depicts one’s situatedness in history. Cone’s multi-contextual theology is expanded to include female voices. Delores Williams (b. 1937) held the Paul Tillich Chair of Theology and Culture at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Her *Sisters in the Wilderness* is another milestone in contemporary theology. Williams writes of how she came to realize in her doctoral program at Union Seminary (especially under Cone’s influence) that she had adopted a black theology from the lens of the black male experience assuming that black women were somehow included in that. But when researching and thinking more deeply about the matter she realized that the black church contained just as many testimonies from black women from their own unique experiences as from men. Yet, black theological scholarship had not at that point (the late 1970’s) involved that inclusivity, reflecting instead an androcentric bias. In fact, black women had a history of subordination in the black community, functioning as the “oppressed among the oppressed.” She needed a way to locate herself as the oppressed among the oppressed in the biblical canon and she found it among those who were excluded within Israel’s story of oppression and liberation. She thus turned her attention to Hagar as her focus of attention, for she was “a female slave of African descent who was forced to be a surrogate mother reproducing a child by her slave master because the slave master’s wife was barren.”[[249]](#footnote-249) Hagar was forced to flee with her child and find her own path with God without support just as many abandoned black women in history. Interestingly, Hagar had played a significant role in black culture among “sculptures, painters, writers, poets, and just plain black folk.”[[250]](#footnote-250) Hagar would be the biblical analogue of the experience of black women in American history.[[251]](#footnote-251) Though Paul had used Hagar as a symbol of those who are excluded from the household of faith (Gal. 4:21-31), Williams wished to vindicate her as a symbol of inclusion; Hagar for her is central to the realization of the promises of God for all of the oppressed.[[252]](#footnote-252)

Williams accepts that a believing community appropriates the Bible to their lives as that which explains and guides them. But she realized that the black church had done this with God and not human striving as the central point of concern. So, Williams asks a theological question. “What was God’s response to Hagar’s predicament?”[[253]](#footnote-253) God provided a way for her and her son Ishmael to survive back in the home of their slave masters. And, later, they would overcome their alienation in the wilderness with the help of the fact that Ishmael became an archer (granting protection and food) and was able to marry an Egyptian wife, which allowed them to perpetuate their own cultural heritage.[[254]](#footnote-254) Hagar taught Williams to pursue a womanist “survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation.”[[255]](#footnote-255)

Williams’ identification with Hagar caused her to turn critically to the Israelite exodus tradition used by Cone and other black male theologians as vital to their liberation hermeneutic. Williams notes that in the Bible Israel did not outlaw slavery in their midst and committed atrocities against the Canaanites. There is an underside to Israel’s story that Hagar symbolized, and Williams wishes to highlight. She finds in Jesus the fulfillment of this liberation story of “the oppressed among the oppressed” for he was abandoned by the leadership of his own people. However, unlike Cone (and in continuity with the liberal tradition), she does not grant the crucifixion of Jesus a significant role in her theology. It is rather in Jesus’ life that one finds the redemptive influence of the biblical story.

There is much that I can say in response to liberation theology. Liberation theology follows in the path of Cox’s secular theology, especially in the conviction that the secular social reality mediates theological concepts, except it is not the pragmatic humanity come of age that is the contextual challenge as in Cox’s book; it is rather the dehumanized and marginalized poor. This attention to suffering is indeed an important step forward in theology. Also significant is the fact that the theological challenge of liberation theology is not the theodicy question *per se*, as important as this is. It is not why is there so much unjust sin and suffering in our world if God is just and merciful. Suffering in liberation theology is rather a call to action. We are aligned with God’s creative action if we join with the oppressed in turning our faith outward in the direction of social liberation. The goal is not just to understand the situation but to transform it. The purpose is not to tackle a general existential crisis as with Tillich but rather the particularized dehumanization and oppression of economic, racist, and sexist oppression. Following the biblical theology movement, revelation is historical, meaning particular in all of its social uniqueness, except liberation theology presses further to view it as secular.

Liberation theology is quite right that salvation is not only personal but also social. But the New Testament seems clear that the social realization of salvation is to be realized first and decisively in the *church*. I do not wish to confine the Christian passion for justice to the church nor to advocate an ecclesiocentrism (church centeredness) that lacks love for the world. But I do wish to locate the attainment of social salvation primarily there. Referring to the bringing together of Jew and Gentile under faith in Christ, Paul writes of Christ’s work of redemptive justice in the church: “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14). But in liberation theology the social justice and healing of the cross occurs in a way that fails to adequately distinguish social justice in the church and in the world. Rather than posit an analogy between social salvation in the church and analogous or latent signs of justice in the world (that are also to be cherished), the strong tendency is to view social salvation as secular with the church’s example and insights as its instrument. Working within this framework, it becomes difficult to wed evangelism to social salvation, since the latter is thought to exist quite well without the former.

This matter must be dealt with carefully, since I do not wish to discount the needed witness of the church to the larger social implications of the gospel. I agree that sin and its consequences are not merely personal; they are not to be generalized in a way that ignores their particular social incarnations in the secular realm. Evil is incarnated in oppressive systems and the injustice and oppression that they cause. Cone therefore rightly criticizes liberal correlation theology for assuming to dialogue with “general” categories of human existence while ignoring the significant difference between privileged and oppressed social locations and experiences.[[256]](#footnote-256) I also agree that the grace of God is experienced wherever people are liberated from such dehumanization and are freed to take steps in the direction of liberation, freedom, and hope. But I would regard this secular experience of grace as *analogous* to the salvific grace realized in the mercy and justice that should shape the fellowship of the church and its witness to the world of the kingdom of God. These secular analogues of salvific grace in secular social liberation reach implicitly for the gospel but they are not the gospel. The church is to thank God for these analogues of grace in the world for they are signs of God’s care for creation. Christians can view them as a context for pointing folks who do not know Christ to the faith, hope, and love that comes through Christ and is lived out in the Spirit within the life of the church. The problem that I have with liberation theology is that such a careful distinction between church and world is blurred and the gospel becomes the good news of secular social liberation. Secular liberation is indeed good news. But by itself it is not *the* good news. It is indeed true that the kingdom of God is active in the world beyond the walls of the church and that there are salvific elements and implications to the justice that occurs in the Spirit outside of the church. Such realities point to the gospel, especially its eschatological realization in the new heavens and new earth. But secular liberation is not currently in itself the gospel. One needs the witness and reality of the church for this.

It is important to note here that both classic expressions of liberation theology, Gutierrez and Cone, do not simply reduce salvation to social liberation in history. They recognize that the gospel also brings eternal life. Neither do they remove from significance the incarnation, victorious death, and resurrection of Jesus as some within liberation theology do today, such as Williams. But they do not grant these towering doctrines adequate emphasis in their work. As noted above, Cone has recently written a moving book on the cross as the place of hope for people terrorized by racism, lynching, and other forms of social oppression. But one looks in vain in this book for an atonement doctrine, the cross as the place of divine reconciliation with sinners. Cone has taken a valuable implication of the cross (comfort for the oppressed) and turned it into the entire meaning. Such is the result of Cone’s secularization of the gospel. The cross only functions to grant courage and hope for the socially oppressed. *It is that* *but it is not only that*. In both Gutierrez and Cone, the events of incarnation, cross, and resurrection push forward God work begun at creation of bringing into being a just and liberated society. And they locate the church within that project as its instrument. This is an instrumentalist ecclesiology that does not grant the church its full significance in the mystery of salvation. Part of the reason for this secularization of the gospel is the failure of an all too worldly and socially-isolated church, a reason I fully understand. Gutierrez turned away from a socially isolated church that merely preached and distributed sacraments for an eternal bliss completely out of touch with the suffering among the dehumanized of the world. He responded by advocating a massive shift of focus to the secular and the historical situation of the churches as the arena of God’s salvific work. One finds other liberation theologians following in this general trend. For example, Juan Luis Segundo’s significant ecclesiology entitled, *The Community Called Church*, distinguishes the grace of God experienced in the church from God’s salvific action in social liberation by claiming that the church in its proclamation and sacraments imparts a *knowledge* of what God is doing to save the poor from oppression in the world and how this secular salvation will be the chief distinguishing mark of the new humanity at the final judgment (Matt. 25:31-46). The church imparts this deeper knowledge of secular social salvation while being its chief instrument. “The Christian is he who already knows. This, undoubtedly, is what distinguishes and defines him.”[[257]](#footnote-257) In response to this secularization of the gospel, I need to point out that directing the attention of the churches to their social context is needful. But secularizing their gospel goes too far. The church that preaches and administers sacraments cannot now be wholly defined by its secular outcomes in the surrounding society. I am quick to add, however, that the kingdom of God will create a just society throughout the world at the conclusion of history, and, in addition to proclaiming the gospel, the church will yearn to foreshadow this society in its fellowship to bear witness of it before the world. They will *also* seek to inspire analogues of it *in* the world. Yes, they will labor for social justice too. They *must* or else they contradict their witness. The passion for eternal life does not eclipse the thirst for a liberated society. As Barth wrote, “Eternal life is the real secret of temporal life. We do not yet live eternal life here and now but we are here and now made free for eternal life.”[[258]](#footnote-258) We are being freed for eternal life! That freedom is holistic, personal and social, spiritual and embodied, in all ways showing that we were made for human respect and dignity, for just relations and the costly self-giving of divine love. The church is to model this and seek analogues of it in the world. The church must do this if they claim to believe what they believe about God’s will for the world. Here, with such qualifications, is how liberation theology in my view speaks to us.

The need is to develop a more robust role for the church as the *primary* arena of social salvation, a church for the world to be sure, but as the sign and instrument of the just society of the kingdom of God. Helpfully, Cone wrote a provocative essay on sanctification in the black church where he shows how the church can model the liberated society before the world.[[259]](#footnote-259) More expansively, Moltmann writes of a “liberated church” that becomes the “church of liberation.” He notes that the church that is liberated by the gospel and lordship of Christ to be a just and merciful society seeks to be a force for liberation in the larger society.[[260]](#footnote-260) I believe that the work of Cone and Moltmann can be further developed by using the concept of analogy to more clearly distinguish the salvific work of liberation in the church and its secular analogues in the world. It is not just that the church knows that social liberation in the world is salvific and celebrates that. Social salvation itself occurs in the church in a way that is unique in significance. There may indeed be people in the world who are in touch with salvific grace in ways deeper than we know. I would not limit social salvation to the walls of the church. But neither would I regard social liberation in the world as being salvific in the same way that it is in the church. Secular social liberation points to the ecclesial expression of social salvation and implicitly reaches for it. But these secular analogues are not generally in and of themselves salvific as life in and through the church is.

Influenced by Cone, Williams also shows an appreciation for the black church in her vision of the liberated society, though she also follows in the path of the secular gospel. I do find though that her focus on the underside of the Exodus tradition holds potential for a careful reading of the canon on the issue of God’s care for the downtrodden. Williams’ challenge to traditional biblical theology has a point to make. Academic theology cannot ignore it. Other womanist and feminist theologians have wondered whether the Bible has a liberating message for women, not only because of how women are sometimes treated in the Bible, but also because of the patriarchal images of God that dominate the biblical narrative.[[261]](#footnote-261) A book that offers a wonderfully positive response to this question that highlights the liberating message of the gospel in the scriptures and tradition (the Nicene Creed), even using Hagar as an example, is Elizabeth Geitz’s, *Gender and the Nicene Creed*.[[262]](#footnote-262) As we noted earlier, there are ways of talking about biblical interpretation that prioritizes its “general scope,” its Christological center, or its liberating trajectory that implicitly pushes beyond its historical limitations as an ancient text. Williams challenges us to think about the “underside” of the biblical canon involving those like Hagar who were seemingly marginalized in the story of Israel but not forgotten by God. Grace in the Old Testament is not limited to the household of Israel, a point that God makes in criticism of Israel (Amos 9:7). Williams could have done more to show how the Exodus tradition reaches implicitly for the liberation ethic that she espouses. I did not find much exegesis or imaginative theological interpretation of this tradition. And she could have also wrestled theologically more deeply with the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Given their importance to scripture and the witness of the church from the beginning, they require much more attention. I found myself drawing the same conclusion in chapter 2 of the entire liberal trajectory begun by Schleiermacher.

In criticizing liberation theology, I am aware of how my words might be taken to justify white privilege and complacency. I am in no position to stand in judgment over those who have struggled with dehumanization more deeply than have my Italian immigrant forebears. I too am struggling to make sense of the gospel from within my own history. And I do not wish to be blind to the shortcomings and blind spots within my own cultural heritage. From the beginning of my quest, I wish to learn from voices that speak from suffering and repent of my shortsightedness as I seek to support the cause for justice within my own realm of influence. But I am also bound to respond in a way that seems to me to grant ecclesiology its unique place within the liberating work of Christ and the Spirit throughout the world. My criticism is not meant to imply that the church’s involvement in social justice in the world is unimportant. One has to sympathize with the criticism of the church that motivates liberation theology, *feel* the disappointment that motivates their secular turn, and live as though that disappointment matters. One does not have to look far to take note of the failure of the churches to show love and support justice for those who have suffered in the world due to social injustice and oppression. The responses of the white church in America to slavery and later to the civil rights campaign in the 1960’s were generally dismal. Their response since then has not been much better. Wrapping oneself in the American flag will not cover such moral callousness. Patriotism can easily turn towards whitewashing a nation and closing one’s ears to its blemished, even horrific, past. C. S. Lewis’ words bear repeating here: “the Heavenly society is also an earthly society. Our (merely natural) patriotism towards the latter can very easily borrow the transcendent claims of the former and use them to justify the most abominable actions.”[[263]](#footnote-263)

In responding, one needs to feel the sadness in the words of Martin Luther King Jr. found in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, “I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?” He concludes:

**[EXT]**Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.”[[264]](#footnote-264) **[/EXT]**

So I understand the desire of liberation theologians to connect the churches to signs of the mercy and justice of the kingdom of God in the world. How can those of us committed to Christ do otherwise? Christ proclaimed the good news to those who were oppressed in every sense of that word (Lk. 4:18)!

There is no question but that the church’s role as the sign of the mercy and justice of the kingdom is called into question if, as is too often the case, it turns its back on those who suffer oppression in the world. In preaching and embodying reconciliation with God and one another, the church is to call out sin and oppression wherever they find it embodied in social systems. The church as the society that signifies the kingdom must subvert oppression in the world as it bears witness to Christ. They are to side with those who struggle to be free. If they don’t, they contradict what they are redeemed and renewed as a people to signify before the world. After all, how can the redeemed and sanctified people be the sign of the mercy and justice of the kingdom of God in the world while siding with injustice in the secular sphere or implicitly supporting it through silence? How can we love those who suffer oppression without seeking to subvert the causes of their suffering? There are children dying or living horrible lives because of poverty, racism, and human trafficking. How can we look the other way?

Given our role as the church in living out a community life liberated by the mercy and righteousness of Christ, we have all the reason to welcome analogues to God’s mercy and justice in society. The church should rejoice at the sight of them and join them in their cause, though in a way that is consistent with the example of the crucified Christ, including love for all others, for all of us are weak and in need of redemption. But love involves resistance to evil as well as a call to repentance. The church can thus be a transformative influence in society, all the while bearing witness to Christ and extending to all who repentthe fellowship of faith. The church as the sign of the mercy and justice of the kingdom of God before the world is the link between evangelism and social justice. We are indeed the church for others, but as both sign and instrument, and not as instrument alone. Miroslav Volf noted that the church’s social and global witness must aid in the resistance of evil and its dehumanizing effects in the world, not only for the sake of those who suffer as victims of such evil but even also for the perpetrators (or those who benefit most from it) since their liberation too is part of the halting of the evil that they perpetrate. Volf rightly adds in line with liberation theology that there is to be a “preferential option for the poor” and the marginalized in resisting evil and its effects in the world. The church pays prior and closest attention to their liberation and healing.[[265]](#footnote-265) Indeed, being the sign of social salvation requires constant renewal. The failure of the evangelical social witness, especially in the US, especially now, should grieve us. There is far too much infiltration of racist and sexist social attitudes and behaviors within the church. Who benefits from the denial of systemic racism in the world? Who benefits from the subjugation of women or the protection of those who abuse them? White male leadership should take heed. The light of God will eventually shine on deeds done in secret and judgment begins with the house of God. We trade the strange new world within the Bible for the familiar old world of oppressive cultural identities if we attempt to sweep the sins and neglect of the church under the carpet. How can a rich man enter the kingdom of God? Jesus answered, all things are possible with God (Lk 18:24-27). God help us!

**[A]The Contextual Theology of Koyama:**

There is a fine line between liberation and contextual theologies, since liberation theologians often use the term “contextual” to describe their work and contextual theologians sometimes have a liberation theme. Still, not all contextual theology is liberationist. My use of the term “contextual” here refers to a theological expression that is contextualized within a culture and a people outside the West. The collapse of colonialism has given rise to these theologies, enriching and diversifying the theological landscape considerably. Kosuke Koyama (1929-2009) of Union Theological Seminary in New York wrote *Waterbuffalo Theology*, a widely read classic in Asian theology. He was a Japanese theologian who had spent time among indigenous peoples in Thailand as a missionary before coming to Union. Koyama accepts the results of the biblical theology movement that the biblical narrative is centrally about the God who acts in history, especially in the person of Jesus Christ. The problem is that the “strongly linear view of history in the biblical tradition, based on the faith that God is the governor of history, is not indigenous to the life and thought of the peoples of Asia.”[[266]](#footnote-266) There is a tension between text and context here. Koyama contrasts the biblical understanding of salvation history with the cycles of nature respected by indigenous Southeast Asian cultures. This latter view is different from biblical history. Within the cycles of nature, there is “a quality of ‘many-time-ness’.”[[267]](#footnote-267) The cycles traverse many mundane occurrences and different seasons with no single part attaining once and for all meaning. In Thailand, “nature circles emphatically.” One season follows another “with distinctive accent.” The monsoon goes from May to October. Nature comes alive “into green youthfulness.” “Hope and salvation come with the monsoon rain!” Farmers plough the paddy fields. “The waterbuffalo plodding before the plough again becomes the most familiar and essential part of the rural scene.” The dried well is replenished. But the overall impression is one of dependability and faithfulness. Every year the monsoon returns convincing people that mother nature has not forgotten them, for nature is “dependable and benevolent.”[[268]](#footnote-268) This is the context of waterbuffalo theology, many mundane events that leave an overall impression of dependability.

By contrast, the once-and-for-all-ness of linear history creates a crisis, a tension, a sense of urgency. But cyclical time “is the image of many chances, hence tranquility.”[[269]](#footnote-269) Historical once-and-for-all-ness” seems “against the spirit of mother nature.” In this difference, [n]ature has appointed her spokesman to announce her objection to the confidence-stealing once-and-for-all view of life.”[[270]](#footnote-270) The frogs are the spokespersons! Everything is wet, nourishing water is everywhere. The farmers hear the frogs and are comforted. The only ones who don’t feel comforted are the Asian theologians![[271]](#footnote-271) “The God in the Bible is anti-monsoon in orientation. He is not cyclical. He is linear. He is not many times. He is once-for-all.”[[272]](#footnote-272)

Of course, there is evil in nature. But the cycles of nature seem to indigenous people of Thailand to form no arguments against it. There are no arguments that the people are accustomed to building against it, only acceptance of the cycles of nature and what they bring. There is no grand purpose other than what the cycles of nature bring. But theologians working within the biblical narrative’s linear salvation history are accustomed to building arguments in relation to evil. They are accustomed to reasoning or building an argument against evil based on the promises of the once-and-for-all redemptive events of this history that point beyond nature. They look upon burning bamboo fields not with tranquil acceptance but with an argument. “When the black smoke fades away in the groves of bamboos and among the tops of coconut trees non-argumentatively, faith in God makes man look up to that same smoke argumentatively. He will meditate on the life just ended in the light of the reign of God who does not circle but moves purposefully towards his own goal.”[[273]](#footnote-273)

The challenge for Koyama is to integrate the cycles of nature into biblical salvation history. One in Thailand must be able to pray, “I listen to the marvelous music of the monsoon frogs. From whence does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made the monsoon frogs.” [[274]](#footnote-274) This for Koyama seems like a strange idea, merging the monsoon frogs (or waterbuffalo!) into the prayer for help from the God of mighty salvific acts in history! Indeed, the biblical narrative does link the cycles of nature to the God of history. Note Genesis 8:22: “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” This cyclical regularity is even secured by the promise of God in history! In the context of Genesis 8, the cosmic regularity that began at creation is promised anew by the Creator who has preserved it through the flood as the LORD of history. Within the context of the biblical narrative, the concept of regularity is severed from the mere acceptance of what nature brings, the tranquil acceptance of the black smoke or of the frogs croaking. In salvation history, nature’s regularity is granted a deeper dimension in the promises of God for history. “When Israel’s God, the Creator, confronts the monsoon orientation, he deepens man’s relationship with nature and builds his new appreciation of nature.”[[275]](#footnote-275) Koyama realizes that his theological merging may sound strange to some in Asia. “Creator? Isn’t this a disturbing thought? Why should man have Someone who disturbs nature’s natural arrangement?” Nature is there “of itself.” It requires no otherworldly explanation, no theological arguments about eschatological purposes.[[276]](#footnote-276) Within this acceptance of nature as is, as self-explanatory, Genesis 8:22 loses its prophetic meaning. In this text, the LORD of history rules nature! “The voice of the LORD is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, upon many waters” (Ps 29:3). This is not the realm of the familiar, the monsoons, the waterbuffalo and the frogs alone. This familiar is framed by the unfamiliar, the natural by the prophetic.[[277]](#footnote-277)

So, is history within nature or is nature within history? It is the latter, for nature is not to have the final word in biblical revelation. “Nature must not be understood only naturally. It must be theologically appropriated, since ‘in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1).” Creation occurs as the beginning of a redemptive history. It is the LORD of history that defines nature and its cycles and not the other way around.[[278]](#footnote-278) The cycles of nature are not circular in the sense that they are going nowhere. Each cycle remains open to moving forward towards an eschatological purpose, an “ascending spiral” of “history-and-nature.”[[279]](#footnote-279) In Koyama’s indigenous theology, one’s “cultural orbit” is thus not left undisturbed but is brought into conversation with the biblical narrative and its fulfillment in Christ. This grants that theology discernment of that which is just and good in the flow of nature in time. Cultural relevance is important but conformity to scripture is needed more, for without this “our theology will be ghettoized.”[[280]](#footnote-280)

Christ is the center of this cultural re-interpretation, for he is the Lamb slain who became Victor forever. Salvation history as the overarching meaning of nature raises the moral question about where history is headed. A view of history that centers on Christ leads to the demise of evil and the victory of redemptive love. Christ compels theology to interpret a people’s history with a “crucified mind not with a crusading mind” that seeks to conquer and to dominate. “A linear sense of history when appropriated by the man of *hybris*, can produce *impatience* with history.”[[281]](#footnote-281) But the biblical God experiences history and acts in it differently, with forbearance and on God’s own terms and not ours, acting in ways that seem strange to us. Grace for sinners! A grace that requires and enables repentance and Christlikeness! Everyone is surprised, the religious and the outcasts. God journeyed with Israel bearing with their sin without abandoning them entirely. In Christ, the story is fulfilled. Christ did not come down from the cross. By not doing so “he refused to disengage himself from the sinful history of man.” “He will speak to man through this miserable crucified prisoner!” Against humanity’s hubris and sense of self-sufficiency God speaks through the crucified one to grant wisdom for repentance and healing. God “spends his love profusely for man, and he refuses to give up, no matter how profoundly his project is frustrated, no matter how ‘inefficient’ his work becomes.” Christ is thus the key to humanity’s renewal in history. His path of seemingly “inefficient love” is the only way to redemption.[[282]](#footnote-282)

But God also has wrath against sin. Wrath disturbs the indigenous culture of cyclical tranquility and indicates how passionately God is involved in history for its redemption. Koyama quotes from the earlier Japanese theological classic written by Kazoh Kitamori in post-War Japan, *Theology of the Pain of God* to promote Kitamori’s idea that God’s eternal love for sinners makes pain an eternal element in God. God is a God of justice who must turn in wrath against evil. Yet, *God loves the sinner*. This tension causes God to be torn. At the cross, God resolves the tension in favor of grace, overcoming divine wrath so as to save the sinner. Divine love overcomes our sinful selves too, freeing us from the wrath of suffering due to our sin and opening us to serve the redemptive pain of God in the world by being a redemptive presence to others. Wrath overcome by love becomes the redemptive path laid out by Christ. The tranquility of cycles of nature and of Buddhist “no-pathos” is challenged and recontextualized by the biblical narrative that is fulfilled by the once and for all significance of the Crucified Christ.[[283]](#footnote-283) In this light, one can indeed raise an argument against the evil in nature and groan for the new heavens and the new earth.

As noted above, contextual theology sometimes takes on a social liberation theme, but not always.[[284]](#footnote-284) The overall accent is elsewhere, on the authentically contextual nature of theology in terms of theology’s relevance to its cultural roots. For example, though Jung Young Lee writes from a social location of marginalization and includes a liberation theme as an undercurrent, he criticizes liberation theology for its secular gospel that he regards as not adequately defined by the scriptures at the heart of the church’s faith.[[285]](#footnote-285) More often than not, the strange new world within the Bible takes precedence in contextual theology. For example, African (Ghanaian) theologian Esther Acolatse explicitly uses Barth’s biblical realism to defend the African belief in demonic spirits as well as the biblical promise of deliverance in Christ but then uses that same realism to revise and reduce the hyper significance of spirits in a number of African cultures.[[286]](#footnote-286) Kwame Bediako does much the same thing with the African veneration of ancestors and also fear of departed spirits. He advocates the view that Jesus ascended to God victorious over the spirits and thus over our lives as well. All ancestors are now to be re-evaluated and relativized in the light of his salvation and wisdom and they are no longer feared because of Christ’s lordship.[[287]](#footnote-287) The contextual challenges are certainly taken seriously and addressed in these theologies but in ways that do not leave them as they were found. I find Koyama’s wrestling with the view of nature shared in Southeast Asia fascinating. This is contextual theology at its best.

**[A]The Postliberal Theology of Lindbeck**

Postliberalism may be viewed as an effort to push back against the more secular theologies of recent decades so as to return to the strange new world within the Bible and the core practices of the church that serve to interpret it. The leading proponents, George Lindbeck (1923-2018) and Hans Frei (1922-1988), were both at Yale Divinity School, causing some to refer to postliberalism as a “Yale school” of hermeneutics. Hans Frei engaged in a frontal attack on the idea that history is the medium of revelation in the biblical theology movement. His brilliant *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* criticizes the effort of historical criticism to locate revelation in history and then to use the Bible as a set of clues that guide the exegetical reconstruction of this history. In the process of that attempt at historical reconstruction the narrative itself as the medium of revelation gets eclipsed. It’s the narrative that provides the framework in which the church interprets their identity and their world and not the history behind it.[[288]](#footnote-288)

To save space, I will concentrate for the remainder of my discussion of postliberalism on Lindback. Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine* is the basic defense of postliberal method. Lindbeck starts by discussing two approaches to religion that are inadequate for fruitful ecumenical dialogue and understanding. The first is the *cognitive* approach to religion, which regards doctrine as factual propositions. This approach “stresses the ways in which church doctrine functions as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities.”[[289]](#footnote-289) This approach to religion is advocated among, for example, evangelicals in the United States. Though doctrine contains propositions for Lindbeck, it is not reducible to propositions. The second is the *experiential-expressive* understanding of religion in which doctrines are viewed as temporal expressions of a deeper or transcendental experience of God that is thought to be shared by everyone in some way across the boundaries of the religions (and even outside formal religion). This approach assumes, for example, that all religious experience is the same but is variously symbolized and interpreted in different religions. This approach views religion as “noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations.”[[290]](#footnote-290) This theological method is found for example in liberal or correlation theology.

Against both of the above approaches to theology, Lindbeck advocated the *cultural-linguistic* approach that regards religion as a set of communicative practices that give rise to experiences. Rather than believing in a general experience of God that is differently expressed and understood, Lindbeck holds that the different expressions about God in scripture and the church actually shape the experiences of God that people have. The foundation of a religion is its language and other communicative practices; a religion will experience God according to how it talks about God or otherwise expresses the meaning of faith. Indeed, in this approach, “religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life that are similar to cultures.”[[291]](#footnote-291) Against the experiential-expressive approach, Linbeck would disagree with Schleiermacher that there is an immediate experience of God in the soul that everyone shares which must be ignited and fulfilled by faith in Christ. Lindbeck rejects the notion that prelinguistic, preconceptual, transcendental experiences of God can even exist; it is rather the case that the act of expressing religious language gives rise to the experience of God suggested by this communication. The language of faith, including various communicative practices that make up the life of the church, give rise to and shape our experience of ourselves, our world, and God. With regard to Christianity, “just as an individual becomes human by learning a language, so he or she becomes a new creature through hearing and interiorizing the language that speaks of Christ.”[[292]](#footnote-292) Lindbeck adds that becoming a Christian “involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one’s world in its terms.”[[293]](#footnote-293) The communication that shapes our experiences is broader than spoken language for Lindbeck. The scripture proclaimed is fundamental but this “gains power and meaning insofar as it is embodied in the total gestalt of community life and action.”[[294]](#footnote-294) We are fundamentally shaped by the communication of the word of God through the proclamation and practices of the church. Religion “is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities.”[[295]](#footnote-295) Religion moves from the objective to the subjective rather than the other way around. “First come the objectivities of the religion, it’s language, doctrines, liturgies, and modes of action and it is through these that passions are shaped into various kinds of what is called religious experience.”[[296]](#footnote-296) There is no generic commonly held religious experience; “the experiences that religions evoke and mold are as varied as the interpretive schemes they embody.”[[297]](#footnote-297)

Is there no sense in which our communicative practices seek to express our experiences, and cannot experiences carried into the church influence its life? Indeed, the external media that make up the life witness of the church do “express” experience for Lindbeck. But he holds that the experience is born from, and shaped by, this expression. There is no pre-linguistic experience to speak of, for the capacity for experience is given in the capacity for language. That’s how fundamental language is to our experience. Lindbeck’s conclusion: “In short, it is necessary to have the means for expressing an experience in order to have it, and the richer our expressive or linguistic system, the more subtle, varied, and differentiated can be our experience.”[[298]](#footnote-298) Lindbeck depends on the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein who noted that language is how we make sense of the world. The meaning of language is thus in its practical use. More importantly, Lindbeck also looks to Avram Noam Chomsky and Clifford Geertz who granted language and other forms of communicative behavior formative anthropological significance. We ourselves are fundamentally shaped by language and other communicative media. Chomsky and Geertz maintained that we are so thoroughly programed genetically for language that apart from it we cannot even properly develop physiologically but remain immature in sensory or physical competence.[[299]](#footnote-299) We are communicative down to the very marrow of our bones. Thus, modes of communication grant us the capacity to experience and shape that experience in uniquely specific ways.

Since salvific experience is fundamentally shaped by a Christianity’s communicative practices and beliefs, there is for Lindbeck no saving experience of God among non-Christian religions.[[300]](#footnote-300) The people of Christian faith shaped by the scripture and its faith practices are the only path to experiencing the God of Jesus Christ, the only path that participates in salvation. Yet, Amos 9:7-8 indicates that other peoples and religions have a divinely elect purpose in the world outside of the strict boundaries of salvation. There is wisdom and virtue shared by these religions outside of the stream of salvation in the world. In addition to proclaiming the gospel to them, we should ask them to continue to cherish the best of their religions, under the implicit guidance of the norms of Christ.[[301]](#footnote-301) We can influence Buddhists to become better Buddhists (Marxists better Marxists). Their orientations do not bring salvation, but they can still serve a helpful purpose in society. But there is no common experience of God that makes people of other religions “anonymous Christians.”[[302]](#footnote-302) Yet people of all religions could still participate in the future of salvation even though they do not do so now. “The proposal is that dying itself be pictured as the point that every human being is ultimately and expressly confronted by the gospel, by the crucified and risen LORD.”[[303]](#footnote-303) It is only then that the final decision is made to accept or reject Christ as the ultimate path. And this is true of Christian and non-Christian alike. Everything leading up to that moment is preliminary. Hopefully all will be saved. Speaking to Christians, Lindbeck notes, “We have only begun to learn of Christ and his way. Only at the end will we truly learn to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves.” We Christians are mere infants just having been born into the kingdom. Indeed, there is no room for pride. “We speak the language of faith as toddlers.”[[304]](#footnote-304) This is perhaps what speaking in tongues indicates.

When it comes to the church, there is an interplay perhaps even a clash of worlds between the church as a discourse community and communicative practices that may infiltrate a church from beyond. Religious traditions therefore change because they develop “anomalies” in their exposure to “new contexts” from the outside. New conceptual patters are possible from outside influences that then give rise to new experiences.[[305]](#footnote-305) But it is still the sacred texts and other practices of a church that represent the fundamental and overwhelmingly major source of experience and it is doctrine that regulates this for a community of faith, including how far external experiences are allowed to exercise an influence. Doctrine though is not infallible. Doctrine is an “inevitably imperfect and often misleading guide to the fundamental interconnections within a religion.”[[306]](#footnote-306) It may be impossible to find rules that tell you why one formulation is beautiful, and another is not. But grammar is necessary to those learning the language or who have not mastered it well or are in danger of slipping into meaninglessness.[[307]](#footnote-307) Doctrine functions like the grammar of faith, regulating its varied modes of communication. Still, amidst the imperfections of Christian doctrine and the possibility of a revision that corresponds to the church’s communicative practices, “the story of passion and resurrection and the basic rules for its use remain the same.” [[308]](#footnote-308)

Likening churches to cultures or languages raises the challenge of how one defends the truth of Christianity or the finality of its gospel in relation to culture or interreligious dialogue. “One language or culture is not generally thought of as ‘truer’ than another, much less as unsurpassable.”[[309]](#footnote-309) Lindbeck insists that the possibility must exist for theological propositions that are vindicated as true. Christ is LORD is an example.[[310]](#footnote-310) This statement is more than a meaningful expressive category; it is propositionally true. The church will practice this truth so as to find eschatological vindication of its conformity to the divine reality, a vindication that is already found in the risen Christ.

I find postliberalism provocative. I like the foundational role that postliberalism grants the scriptures and ecclesial practices in socially (meaning, *ecclesially*) determining the meaning and mission of the gospel and our experiences of God. There is no reductionistic secularizing of the gospel here; nor is there an instrumentalization of the life of the church in the attainment of generally accessible or secular experiences and social ends. The social base of theology is rather the church. I also like the hermeneutical emphasis on praxis in postliberalism. The church is the church in significant measure by its living communicative practices; the scriptures are interpreted through praxis, which includes academic study and theology. Though language, especially in scripture, has pride of place, Lindbeck’s understanding of language involves many communicative practices. There is space here for liturgical theology, for allowing a way beyond the old impasse of proclamation versus sacramental ecclesiologies. It’s not that there aren’t experiences of God in the church that are involved in our understanding of the Word; it’s rather that we have them by way of involvement in practices. This is not just a “text-bound” method since the text is experienced and interpreted through a number of communicative practices. Even groans too deep for words can express and give rise to experiences that reach beyond rational communication without nullifying it.

Yet, there are a few limitations to this method that require adjustment in my view. First, Lindbeck’s strength is also his greatest weakness. He does anchor the experience of God in the living practices of the church, making those practices rather than the secular context most determinative of their meaning and experience. But his theory of language is itself wholly secular! It is not fundamentally scripturally or dogmatically grounded. Lindbeck admits that his accounting of the role of scripture in the communicative life of the church requires no supernatural explanation, “supernatural explanations are quite unnecessary.”[[311]](#footnote-311) He thus ends up with an anthropocentric and naturalistic understanding of the role of scripture and its communicative interpretation in Christian experience. Though Lindbeck notes towards the end of his book that the church’s living practice of scripture can be vindicated eschatologically as true, the role of the text is not rooted dogmatically in the self-communication of the Triune God. One can remove this added thought about possible eschatological verification without altering the essential argument of the book. As a result, rather than talking about communicative practices *mediating* the experience of God granted by the Spirit, these practices now fully account for what makes these experiences *possible*. A dogmatic account would insist that it is rather the self-communicating triune God makes experience of the divine possible. “It is effected not by creaturely acts but God’s self-utterance as Word.”[[312]](#footnote-312) Lindbeck undoubtedly means to say that the anthropological capacity for experience is made possible by expressive practices. But even that must be grounded dogmatically in creation and in the communicative self-giving of the Triune God. But no such dogmatic grounding is granted in his book. As a result, his method highlights the text but not the God who gave rise to it and speaks through it. As John Webster complains, a dogmatic portrayal of the canon “involves a good deal more than offering an ecclesial gloss to a sociology of texts and their uses.”[[313]](#footnote-313) Here is where Lindbeck parts from Barth. In a way, Lindbeck offers us broad and creative anthropological support for the Catholic belief that the scriptural word requires church tradition for its interpretation, except he does not ground this dogmatically in Christ and in the Spirit as does Catholicism.

Second, the assumption taken from Wittgenstein that the meaning of language is functional, determined by its use, if not qualified, can reduce the meaning of scripture to its modes of practical interpretation in the church. The line can be blurred between the biblical canon and the church practices that shape how it is understood and experienced. The role of the biblical narrative in interpreting the world of the believer seems to grant the Bible a determinative role in Christian experience. But if one adds that the narrative does this according to its use in the practices of the church, the world of interpretation shifts from the canon to the practices of the church. The meaning of the Bible depends on how it is used in the self-communicative life of the church, and the only criterion for the truth of it all is whether this process brings us closer to the “divine reality.” All of this begs the question, since our only access to the meaning of the “divine reality” is ecclesially shaped to begin with.

The solution to this problem comes from the recognition of the sovereignty of the divine Word (Christ) who speaks through the gospel in ways that exceed the church’s practice of scripture and call it into question. It is also important to grant the scripture unique authority in its use by the Spirit to upset or alter how it is used in the life of the church. Lindbeck later referred to a “mutually constitutive reciprocity” between the biblical canon and the communicative practices of the church.[[314]](#footnote-314) Does reciprocation capture the supremacy of scripture in relation to tradition? Both Catholic and Protestant voices have supported granting at most a subordinate and serving role to tradition.[[315]](#footnote-315) In line with this ecumenical consensus, Kevin Vanhoozer has written a challenging response to Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach to theology, which he called “canonical-linguistic” so as to more clearly distinguish the biblical canon from the ecclesial practices that interpret it so as to grant scripture the priority in the church’s interpretive practices. To do this, Vanhoozer uses a theatrical metaphor, referring to the biblical canon as the “script” and the interpretive practices as its “performance.” The church “performs” the “script” of the biblical canon, thus interpreting it before the world. Theology provides the church with the wisdom (expertise in the original meaning of the script and in the situation of the audience) to guide the church in creatively performing the script in a way that is both faithful to it and creatively responsive to the context of the audience.[[316]](#footnote-316) This “script” is living, of course, for it comes alive in the hands of the Spirit’s witness. Ecclesial performance serves the voice of God that comes through scripture. Theology enriches and guides the practices according to the standard of scripture.

We also need to explore the issue of secular context. As I pointed out, Lindbeck does not deny that people enter the church carrying with them “alien experiences” shaped by cultural contexts, creating “anomalies” that can influence the life of a church. But he does not explore that point with any depth. Are all experiences had outside of the church “alien” to those had from the gospel of scripture? There is a noble tradition in Christian theology that non-believers can participate in some sense in God’s self-communication in Christ and the Spirit through the “gospel” witnessed of implicitly in secular contexts. The Ethiopian Eunuch wanted to know who the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 was because of his own history of suffering in which he was not allowed any decedents (“Who can speak of his descendants?” Acts 8:33). God used his social oppression to draw him to Christ the suffering servant. Moreover, nature comes to take on transcendent meaning in its mediation of divine communicative acts that are clarified and brought to fullness in the canon of scripture. After all, Lindbeck expands communicative acts beyond the strictly linguistic. Acts 17:24-28 thus notes that God is involved in the communal life of migrating peoples providing for and guiding them, for in God “they live and move and have their being” (17:28). God is involved so that they will come to seek and find the divine source of their freedom and their blessings (17:24-28). Lindbeck states that we have our “being” in communicative language and practices. Our text from Acts 17 states that we all have our being in the self-communicative God through the self-communicative practice for which God created us so that we may bear the divine image. Our self-communicative practice is true when it aligns with God’s self-communication in Christ and the Spirit, and scripture provides the wisdom for discerning this witness. Our capacity both as individuals and as a church for self-communicating love is indeed connected to our capacity for God. “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8). And this is how God loves, on a cross (1 John 4:9).

Our self-communicating love is thus directed to God and others. It is self-giving love among those who are willing by the Spirit to die so as to live in and for God. In communicating divine love we are willing with God to bear the suffering of others so that they could participate in God’s gracious freedom and love. Lindbeck is right, we speak the tongues of the Spirit (the tongues of love for God and others) as toddlers. Yes, we speak stuttering and groaning with flaming tongues towards the horizon of the crucified and risen Christ, the horizon of the coming kingdom. At the point of glossolalic cries we reach the outer edges of our self-communicative love, the outer boundary of anthropology, of our capacity for God and the capacity of the world for God. “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Tongues of fire, tongues of holy love, ultimately define our capacity to experience God. Our Acts 17 text implies that all of humanity is caught up implicitly in this self-giving communication for which they were made. Connected implicitly with the flaming tongues of Acts 2, our Acts 17 text implies that people outside the sanctuary of faith possess more than a divinely ordained secular function with no salvific elements or goal. Lindbeck is right that the richer the language and practices are theologically, the richer the experience can be. Following that logic, can there not be degrees of involvement in the communicative life freed by the gospel? The experiences of God had by those outside the life of the church will undoubtedly be vague and open to idolatrous influence (as are Christian experiences to some extent) (Acts 17:29-30). The mission of the church is to bring clarity and fullness to their implicit experiences of God by socializing them into the fellowship and practices of the gospel. The Spirit’s witness to Jesus is based definitively in the life and mission of the church but it is not confined to it.

**[A]Final Word**

The more recent theological methods of liberation, contextual, and postliberal theologies allow us to accent with greater emphasis the challenge of secular context to theology. Liberation theology reacts to the church’s isolation from the secular context as well as its failure to be an agent of change in history. In the context of this failure, salvation is moved from history to the world beyond. This life is reduced to survival mode, merely overcoming trials in hopes of salvation in the beyond. Following the lead of various secularizing trends, liberation theology shifted the arena of salvation to the secular realm and the church takes up its challenge to be agents of a history being changed by the kingdom of God in the here and now. Salvation is overwhelmingly viewed as social liberation. Eternal life is not necessarily rejected, though it is reduced to functioning as the horizon of social change. Contextual theologies may or may not have a liberation theme but they do uniquely focus on doing theology in ways that are relevant to non-Western contexts. The Bible is read in ways that incorporate elements of a non-Western worldviews but in ways that transform them in the process. There is potential here for geneuinely engaging secular context without compromising the “strange new world within the Bible” in all of its uniqueness. The shift of postliberalism back to the Bible reacts against the idea that there is a universal experience of God had by all of humanity which finds symbolic expression in ancient texts like the Bible and today among different religions. Postliberalism is informed rather by the conviction that the expression (like the biblical text) shapes the experience rather than the experience shaping the expression. A normative text like the biblical narrative shapes our experiences of God. We are not beholden to a contextual experience of the ultimate (or of humanity facing the ultimate) because our experience of God is shaped by the Bible. It is not secular experiences that help us interpret the Bible but rather the communicative practices of church life, such as preaching, doctrine, sacraments, ministry, and mission. The challenge here is to grant the biblical text prime of place in our experience of God without denying that God acts through it.

1. No author, “Bible Salvation,” 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Welker, *God the Spirit*, 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yong, “Pneumatological Imagination,” 152-162. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Webber, *Divine Embrace*, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The term “face” with reference to God is anthropomorphic, which describes a depiction of God in human terms or human form. All texts are anthropomorphic in some sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Childs, *Book of Exodus,* 582-600. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mason, “Tennessee Evangelist,” 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Apologetics is the defense of the faith against heretics from within and challenges to the gospel from without. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See for example Montague, *Understanding the Bible*, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The best account of this movement and its eventual waning is Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Yong, “Pneumatological Imagination.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Pelikan, *Christian Tradition,* 1:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:59. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Seymour, “Apostolic Faith,” 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Author Unknown, *Apostolic Faith*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I refer here to Anselm’s classic, *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why the God-Man?). As I will explain under Christology, he understood the unity of the two natures, divine and human, in the one person of Christ heralded at Chalcedon by noting that the Redeemer who atones for us must be both divine (having the ability to pay humanity’s debt of honor to God) and human (having the obligation to do so). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Macchia, *Jesus the Spirit Baptizer*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Quoted in Ott, “Protestant Reflections,” 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The presumption that this text refers to Christ’s or the Spirit’s proclamation *through Noah* (at the time of Noah) does not fit the context, which is about the need for believers to emulate the *crucified Christ* by being willing to suffer for the sake of the ungodly. The willingness of the crucified Christ to offer grace to the worst generation featured in the narrative of the Jewish scriptures challenges believers. See Reiche, *Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, 109. Universalism is not the necessary conclusion of this interpretation, as I will explain in my final chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Webster, “Dogmatic Location,” 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Webber, *Divine Embrace*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Webber, *Divine Embrace*, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Wilken, *Early Christian Thought*, xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 52-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Reiche convincingly dates 2 Peter at around 90 CE. Reiche, *Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude,* 144-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Kruger, *Christianity*, 202-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ireneaus, *Against Heresies*, 4. 9. 1; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Kruger, *Christianity*, 202–26. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Webster, *Holy Scripture,* 61–62. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See Cullmann, *Unity through Diversity*. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. I served for most of the first decade of the 2000’s on the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Christian Churches (USA) and on two bilateral conversations. The term “ecumenical” has to do with the effort to seek through dialogue and better understanding the spiritual and visible unity of the churches. There are different understandings of how that can be eventuated. See the section on the unity of the church in the chapter on ecclesiology. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:55. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Existentialism was a movement of thought that became popular in the middle of the twentieth century and that focused on challenges to the discovery of meaningful human existence at a time of dislocation and confusion. Meaning in the midst of absurdity was key to this quest. Key authors to read were Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, Martin Heidegger, and Jean Paul Sartre. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (NY: Charles Scribner’s and Son, 1958), 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid, 68-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Yong, *Renewing the Church*, 100-109, 126-132. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Jaspers, *Kleine Schule*. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See, for example, Habets, ed. *Third Article Theology*. See also, Habets, *The Anointed Son*; Sanchez, *Spirit Christology*; and Stephenson, *Dismantling the Dualisms*. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit*; *Justified in the Spirit*; *Jesus the Spirit Baptizer*; and, *Spirit-Baptized Church*. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. This story is told ably by Zachhuber, *Theology as Science*. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline*, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. The letter quoted was written in 1802 after his father’s death. Quoted in Waring’s “Introduction,” Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, x. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid, 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Ibid, 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ibid, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, §171, 738. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Ibid, § 97, 398. Helpful here is Hector, “Actualism and Incarnation,” esp. 311-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, §94.2, 388. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid, § 94, 385-89**.** [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Ibid, § 73, 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Ibid, §93.3, 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid, §93.5, 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Ibid, §101, 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid, §99.1, 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Ibid, §361.88, 361. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Ibid, §101.4, 436. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid, §100.2, 426. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Ibid, §101.3, 434. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ibid, §104.3, 455. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Ibid, §101.3, 434-435; §104.4, 460. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Ibid, §104.3, 456-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Emphasis his. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ibid, §104.4, 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Ibid, §123.3, 473. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Ibid, §94.2, 388. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Barth, “Unscientific Postscript,” 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Barth, *CD*, III/3, 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Sonderegger, “Must Christ Suffer?” 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. B. A. Gerrish, *Prince,* 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Schleiermacher, *Speeche*s, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Barth, “Evangelical Theology,” 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Barth, “Strange New World,” 28-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Ibid, 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Ibid, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Ibid, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Ibid, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Ibid, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Ibid, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Ibid, 49. Italics original. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Ibid, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Ibid, 33-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Ibid, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Barth, *Epistle*, 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Barth, “Preface,” 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Barth, *Epistle*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Ibid, 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Ibid, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Ibid, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. See Barth, “Past and Future,” 35-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Barth, *Epistle*, 42-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Ibid, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Ibid, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Ibid, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Barth, “Nein!” [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Harnack develops his thesis in his classic, *What Is Christianity?* [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Given in Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Ibid, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Ibid, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Ibid, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Barth, “Humanity of God,” 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Ibid, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Ibid, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Ibid, 37-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Ibid, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Ibid, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Ibid, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Ibid, italics original. Barth poses this as a question but he implies that it was the implication of what he did. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Ibid, 46, italics original. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Ibid, 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Karl Barth, *Credo*, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Karl Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Barth, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” 278 (see 261-279). [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. See Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Dabney, “Otherwise Engaged,” 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Ralph Del Colle qualifies Schleiermacher’s modalism by describing it as a “functional instantiation of the persons” distinguished from each other by their involvement in creation and yet not present as relations within the immanent life of God. Del Colle, “Schleiermacher,” 304. On Barth, see *CD*, I/1, 384-489. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Barth, *CD* I/1, 348-490. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Barth, *CD,* II/2, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Ibid, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Torrance, *Doctrine of God*, 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Barth, *CD,* II/2, 410-411. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Ibid, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Barth, *CD,* IV/2, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith,* 8, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Ibid, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Ibid, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Ibid, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Ibid, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Ibid, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Ibid, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Ibid, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Worth reading here is his other little classic, *Courage to Be*. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 45-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Ibid, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Ibid, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Ibid, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Ibid, 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Ibid, 7 (see 6-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Ibid, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Ibid, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:285. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2:142-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:49. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Ibid, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:226. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Ibid, 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:60. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:300-420. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:60. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. See McCormack, “Why?” 43-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:249. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Ibid, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Kelsey, *Fabric*, 82-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:250. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2:157; 1:136. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Ibid, 2:119. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Ibid, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Tillich, “Riddle,” 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Ibid, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Williams, *Era*, 95-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2:95. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:251-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Ibid, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Tillich’s early work (for example, *The Socialist Decision*) does examine the human situation through the lens of a particular, social situation. But that kind of concrete and socially determined analysis wanes later in his American years. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Cox, *Secular City*, 79, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Barth, *Romans*, 500. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Ibid, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Ibid, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. From the United Nations website, https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/decolonization. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. At the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), Catholic bishops and theologians met to reconsider major topics related to theology and church life. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. References will come from the 15th anniversary edition: Gutierréz, *Theology of Liberation.* [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Ibid, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Ibid, 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Ibid, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Ibid, 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Ibid, 58-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Ibid, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Ibid, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Ibid, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Ibid, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Ibid, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. Ibid, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Ibid, 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Ibid, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Cone, *Risks of Faith*, XVI. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Yong’s work is voluminous. A good place to start is Stephenson, *An Amos Yong Reader.* [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. Ibid, 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. Ibid, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. Ibid, 108-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Cone, *Cross*. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. See for example, Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Williams, *Sisters*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. Ibid, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Ibid, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Ibid, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. Ibid, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. In his response to Schubert Ogden: Cone, “A Critical Response,” 54-55 (51-55). [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Segundo, *Community*, 11 (see 3-11). [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. Barth, *CD*, II/2, 773-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Cone, “Sanctification and Liberation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Moltmann, *Church*, 104-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. See for example the striking essay by Schneiders, “Postmodern Message?”, 56-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. Geitz, *Gender*. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. Lewis, *Four Loves*, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. King, *Letter*. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. ## Volf, “War in Ukraine.”

     [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Ibid, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Ibid, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Ibid, 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. Ibid, 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Ibid, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. Ibid, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. Ibid, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. Ibid, 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Ibid, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Ibid, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. Ibid, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Ibid, 52, emphasis original. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. Ibid, 66-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. Ibid, 95-99. See Kitamori, *Pain of God*. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. For example, Bediako uses a liberation theme in his, *Jesus and the Gospel,* 49ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Jung Young Lee, *Marginality*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Acolatse, *Powers*. [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. Bediako, *Jesus*, 25-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. Frei, *Eclipse.* [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Ibid, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Ibid, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Ibid, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. Ibid, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. Ibid, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. Ibid, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. Ibid, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Ibid, 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Ibid, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Ibid, 54-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Ibid, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Ibid, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Ibid, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Ibid, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. Ibid, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Ibid, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Ibid, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Ibid, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. Ibid, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Ibid, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. Webster, “Dogmatic Location,” 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Ibid, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Lindbeck, “Scripture,” 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. See *Dei Verbum*, #10: The teaching office “is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit.” [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)