

Systematic Theology

Reformed, Continuationist, Baptist, Complementarian, Presbyterian

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INTRODUCTION

What is “Systematic Theology”?

What exactly is “systematic theology”? In the pages ahead I will be presenting a “systematic theology.” But what even is that? Well, in this case the words themselves offer a good clue. The phrase points to an *organized (systematic) study of (-logy) God (theos-)*. And that is basically right. God is not the *only* object of study, but he is the source and center of every doctrine that is studied in systematic theology. As the Creator of everything and especially as the Author of the revelation contained in the Bible, God and the right practice of systematic theology are inseparable.

Herman Bavinck, an author I will quote often in this work, spoke of “dogmatics” and not typically “systematic theology,” but he gave an excellent definition of what systematic theology is:

More precisely and from a Christian viewpoint, dogmatics is the knowledge that God has revealed in his Word to the church concerning himself and all creatures as they stand in relation to him.
Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*¹

He goes on to say that since “dogmatics” understood this way is concerned *what God has revealed*, there will be a unity to it:

¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:38.

“God’s thoughts cannot be opposed to one another and thus necessarily form an organic unity,” and so, “the imperative task of the dogmatician is to think God’s thoughts after him and to trace their unity.”² “Thinking God’s thoughts after him”³ is a famous phrase to capture the work of theological study. Yet, note that our task is not merely to parrot what the Bible says but is a reflective work that seeks “to rationally reproduce the content of revelation that relates to the knowledge of God.”⁴ For Bavinck it was also (rightly) essential to think of God’s revelation “to the church,” since God’s supernatural revelation is not ultimately understood by an unconverted or natural man (1 Cor 2:14). Only the interpreter who believes can grasp the unity, inspiration, and authority of God’s Word and thus, true (orthodox) systematic theology. The work of systematic theology, then, is ultimately a Christian endeavor where we take our place “both historically and contemporarily in the full communion of the saints.”⁵

Understood this way, systematic theology will also have an apologetical and even evangelistic pursuit, since rightly understanding God’s Word will make an automatic appeal to unbelievers and instantly rebuke the false gods and man-made religions of our day. When we rightly define and organize the content of God’s Word, we are dealing with something that is objectively true and unchangeable. Man’s ability to *reject* this truth does not change the truthfulness of it. But when he does reject God’s truth he becomes like a man standing next to Niagara Falls but denying their existence. No matter how long or forcefully the man screams out that the falls do not exist, hundreds of thousands of

² Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, 1:44.

³ It was originally coined by the astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) but serves well as a purpose statement for systematic theology.

⁴ Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, 1:45.

⁵ Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, 1:46.

gallons of water per second continue to pour over the falls to a deafening roar.

Systematic, Biblical, and Historical Theology

“Systematic theology” organizes its study by topics presented in a logical order rather than by order-of-appearance in the Bible. Order-of-appearance in the Bible would always start with Genesis and then finish with Revelation. Systematic theology instead uses a logical order and looks at what the whole Bible says about each of its topics.

Another approach to studying the Bible’s contents is called Biblical Theology. While it sounds like it means “biblical” versus an “unbiblical” theology, this approach takes a topic and then approaches that topic by seeing how it is revealed from Genesis to Revelation (or from creation to new creation). Often the goal is to determine what each biblical author or book (or set of books) reveals about the topic. A recent work by Andreas Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell illustrates this approach well. It’s appropriately called *Biblical Theology*, and it goes through each section of the Bible and each book of the Bible, tracing themes and summarizing key ideas and ethical instructions.⁶ At the end of the book they summarize what they believe the whole Bible teaches on these themes and ethical ideas. In a book like this you can turn to the table of contents and look up what is taught in the book of Romans.⁷

A third approach is called “historical theology.” Historical theology organizes its material according to the history of the

⁶ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023).

⁷ An older but invaluable work by Geerhardus Vos is also called *Biblical Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1948). He organized his work more by the stages of God’s unfolding revelation in salvation history than by specific books of the Bible. Vos is a giant of theological insight, but not many practitioners have followed his methodological approach.

Church. A topic is explored according to individuals and movements in the Church, and often the goal is to see how the Church’s understanding of the topic changed over time. If you open up Alister McGrath’s *Historical Theology* and look at the table of contents, you will see that he moves chronologically through his topics.⁸ He starts with “the Patristic period” in AD 100–451 and then moves to the Middle Ages in AD 500–1500 and then to the Reformation era in 1500–1750. In each of these eras he details the key people and ideas in theology that get the most development.

None of these approaches can be separated from exegesis of (interpretation of) the Bible itself, which is the work of getting the right meaning out of the specific words and passages of the Bible. Good exegesis must be the foundation for all good theological study. Any faithful Christian theologian will keep his hand continually on the Bible and its contents so as not to lose his way as he “rationally reproduces the content of revelation that relates to the knowledge of God.”⁹

In the end, systematic, biblical, and historical theology, as well as biblical exegesis, are different ways of approaching the same thing, *what the Bible teaches*.¹⁰ They approach this from different angles, but in the end, they do so as friends and not as enemies. They need each other. We cannot do any of these disciplines well without some sense of the contributions of the others. Thus, good exegesis of the Bible will always include the work of voices from the past; and there is no good systematic or biblical theology that is not tethered to God’s very Word.

⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Hoboken: Blackwell, 2022).

⁹ Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, 1:45.

¹⁰ There are other kinds of theology, too, like “pastoral theology” or “practical theology,” etc. Such terms mean you are looking at the first term (“pastoral,” “practical”) through the tools of systematic, biblical, and historical theology.

Our focus is on *systematic theology*. We will organize our material by looking at an ordered set of topics to better understand *what the Bible teaches*.

“I Don’t Need Theology!”

Now, you might argue, “I don’t need theology, only Jesus.” Well, you are right, that *you do need Jesus*. But, who is Jesus? Once you ask and attempt to answer that question, you are doing theology. Without a basic understanding of theology, you could never understand a simple gospel passage like John 3:16, much less some of the more complex ideas in our Bibles like God’s sovereignty in our salvation (Eph 1:3–14; Rom 9:6–24) or the character and being of God (1 Tim 1:17). Look at John 3:16:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

You cannot make sense of this verse, as familiar as it is, unless you know who “God” is, what “loved the world” means,” how he “gave his only Son,” who his “only Son” is, what “believes” requires, why we do not want to “perish” and what is promised with the idea of “eternal life.” These are all deeply *theological* topics. To preach this verse—or be saved by this verse—you do not need a PhD in theology, but you do need at least a basic and right theology. Remember, Mormons and Muslims claim to “believe” in Jesus, too, and billions in the world today would claim to know who “God” is and even “believe” in him even while they reject the claims of Christianity.

The truth is, you cannot avoid doing theology if you are going to take the Bible seriously. The late R.C. Sproul famously quipped,

Every Christian is a theologian....No Christian can avoid theology. Every Christian has a theology....The real issue is, do we have a *sound* theology? Do we embrace true or false doctrine?
 R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*¹¹

Our Posture

Since the work of systematic theology is the work of rightly understanding and organizing the teaching of the Bible, there is a posture we must take. On one hand, we need to be unwaveringly confident with things like the reality of God, the person of Christ, the salvation faith brings, our future in the new heavens and new earth. But on the other hand, we study these topics aware we are finite but both God and his Word are infinite. There will be times when we cannot fully discern the “organic unity” (Bavinck) within God’s Word. “Modesty” and humility must therefore mark our approach, and we must accept that our work of systematic theology is always “fallible” and subject to change and revision and development.¹² “The secret things belong to the LORD our God” (Deut 29:29). Honest theologians must accept that “mystery” and God go together for us, but the key is not to place the label of “mystery” on something too early. At times God’s Word provides an answer to our mystery and what we thought was a “secret thing” is actually a truth he has revealed.

Further, there are two truths commonly taught in Protestant Reformed confessions that relate to our posture in systematic theology. First, “the infallible rule for the interpretation of Scripture

¹¹ R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Tyndale Elevate, 1998), x.

¹² Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, 1:45.

is Scripture itself” (*TCOF* 1.9).¹³ As we seek to organize and interpret the Bible’s teaching, we do so letting the Bible itself guide us in our approach and conclusions. The Bible tells us God is one (Deut 6:4), but we must understand this by other claims the Bible makes, like the fact God is three persons in this one “name” (Matt 28:19). Second, “the final judge for the examination and judgment of all religious controversies, decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits can be no other than Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit. Our faith must rest when Scripture speaks” (*TCOF* 1.10). In systematic theology, there are times when we desire more understanding than what the Bible gives. At such times “our faith must rest” with what God has given us, and we accept that an infinite God can never be fully grasped. Further, the conviction about the Bible being the final arbiter means that our own logic is not the final guide and neither is our own church tradition. At times we will have to accept a doctrinal truth even if it does not satisfy the demands of our very finite logic or what we previously understood. Even as we seek to articulate the Bible’s doctrine, we do so knowing that our articulation must itself be judged by the Bible.

The Bible’s Example and Imperative

The task of systematic theology has roots in the Bible itself, places where a set of truths is communicated that are presented as part of the sound doctrine all Christians must believe. Notice Paul’s words to the Corinthians:

¹³ *TCOF* refers to the *Trinity Confession of Faith* (2022), which was derived from the 1689 London Baptist Confession with various amendments made. As in *TCOF* 1.9 and 1.10 quoted in this paragraph, the indebtedness to the 1647 *Westminster Confession of Faith* is evident throughout the 1689 LBCF and the *TCOF*.

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (1 Cor 15:1–5)

He says he is the recipient of God’s truth (“what I also received”) and then he is a teacher of that truth (“the word I preached to you”). He is faithful as a teacher because he accurately taught what was taught to him. Unique theological insight certainly marks all of Paul’s writings, but at the core he sees his task as faithfully passing along what was entrusted to him. So, too, in our work of systematic theology we simply want to be faithful to give what is first given to us.

But there is also specific content he articulates, here a summary of “the gospel I preached,” which is about the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, all of which were “in accordance with the Scriptures” and affirmed by eyewitnesses of the risen Christ (v. 5). Though he taught as much as he could to any given church (day and night for three years to the Ephesians, Acts 20:31), there was also a clear sense that certain truths had priority status. These truths were “the gospel” that needed to be believed for salvation to be received. Likewise, our work here will prioritize key truths and not attempt to be fully exhaustive and encyclopedic.

Another way to identify the systematic theology reflex in the Bible is by looking at Paul’s letter we call Ephesians. Ephesians is generally believed to have been written to a broad audience and not a single city. This is why he has so few personal greetings at the beginning and end of it. It is a later work, written when Paul was

imprisoned in Rome for a two-year house arrest (Acts 28:30–31), and thus it reflects the mature apostle with time to organize his thoughts carefully. What is produced in Ephesians is the closest thing to a complete systematic theology in our Bible. It opens with a clear affirmation of God’s eternal work of election with its profound trinitarian elements (Eph 1:3–14). It unpacks the wretchedness of sin and God’s gracious love to make us alive in Christ (2:1–10). He develops the plan of salvation to bring Israel and the Gentiles into “one new man” (2:11–22; 3:1–21), both having access to the Father through the Son and being part of a spiritual temple. Then he transitions to ethics and how we must “walk” as Christians (4:1–6), teaching what a Spirit-filled church entails and the gifted leaders present in it (4:7–16). His ethical teaching continues as he covers what sins must be “put off” and what virtues must be “put on,” virtues that will be lived out in our marriages, parenting, and workplaces (4:17–6:9). The reality of our spiritual enemy and the warfare we are involved in finishes out the body of his letter (6:10–20). The logic Paul uses in this letter traces God’s plan of salvation from eternity past to eternity future, and there is also a progression from the theological (Eph 1–3) to the practical (Eph 4–6). The way he topically organizes his material in such a complete manner is a helpful guide for us.

Not only is the Bible a model for us in articulating a systematic theology, but there is also a *biblical imperative* in passages like the following:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:19–20)

“I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” (Acts 20:27)

But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. (Titus 2:1)

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thess 2:15)

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (1 Cor 15:3–5)

Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. (1 Cor 16:13)

The church is called in these passages to teach *all* of God’s Word, *all* the truths left to us in the Bible. To do that is the work of decades and not hours, of course. But it is also a work that requires some kind of structure and pattern. Otherwise, how will we know if we have taught “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) or “what accords with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1) or what is consistent with “the faith” (1 Cor 16:13).

From a “Rule of Faith” to Systematic Theology

Church history shows a development in the way that it taught this systematic understanding. An early example is Tertullian’s “Rule of Faith.” He was a second-century North African and wrote this “Rule” as a standard by which to measure heresy and Christian orthodoxy:

Now, with regard to this rule of faith—that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend—it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen “in diverse manners” by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh.

This rule, as it will be proved, was taught by Christ, and raises amongst ourselves no other questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics.

Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*¹⁴

Notice the logic of salvation he uses and the number of topics he includes. My work in the chapters that follow is really just expanding on what he has said. You see something similar in the

¹⁴ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, trans. Peter Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 3:249.

more famous Apostles Creed, a work that dates to the 3rd or 4th century (though the form we use comes from AD 700 or so¹⁵):

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth:

And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary: Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried: He descended to the dead:

The third day he rose again from the dead: He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty: From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead:

I believe in the Holy Ghost:

I believe in the holy catholic church: the communion of saints:

The forgiveness of sins:

The resurrection of the body:

And the life everlasting. Amen.

Tertullian's "Rule of Faith" and "The Apostles Creed" are examples of the Church rationally articulating God's thoughts after him. They also provide a good skeleton that the church later used to organize longer works of systematic theology. John Calvin's first editions of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* used the Apostles Creed as an organizational guide.

Over time the common order of topics in systematic theology evolved a bit more into the one used by authors such as Herman Bavinck in his *Reformed Dogmatics* or Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology*. These works more clearly divide the topics

¹⁵ Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 89.

than what you find in Calvin, but the essential doctrine they contain is very similar.

A systematic theology is different from a creed, of course. A creed is answering the question, “What must I believe in order to be saved and profess an orthodox Christianity?” A concise answer is needed for this question. A work of systematic theology is attempting to provide a survey of all the significant doctrines taught in the Bible. It is answering the question, “What does the Bible teach?”

Related to this, authors differ on whether issues of “ethics” (how we are to live as Christians) are included in a work of systematic theology. Typically, theology is divided from ethics, though Calvin’s *Institutes* and the great catechisms of the Reformed church all include ethical matters. I will include ethics at a high level in several chapters.

What We Will Cover

The order of topics I will use follows the one in works like the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) or Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* or Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*. Yet, the theological perspective of this work and my own convictions about what would be useful in a work of this type mean that a few differences will be evident.

In common with these other works, we will start with revelation and a look at key convictions we need to have about the Bible (chapter 1). After this, we will follow the traditional “history of redemption” approach adopted in most comprehensive theological works. Because God is the starting point for all things, and all things are “from him and through him and to him” (Rom 11:36), we continue in chapters 2–3 start with God’s being and attributes and triune nature.

The “history of redemption” then leads to God’s creation of all things (chapter 4) and his providence over all that he has made. “Providence” is God’s ordering of *all* things according to his own counsel and good pleasure. We will look separately at the creation of mankind in chapter 5, because so much of what could be taken for granted in past generations cannot be assumed today. The fact God created us “male and female” used to be a fairly straightforward idea. No more. Unpacking these ideas will take a little time.

The creation of mankind leads to the covenant God established with Adam, “the covenant of works,” which will be developed in chapter 6. In what we call “the fall of man,” Adam sinned and broke this covenant. All could have been lost right there in the Garden. And yet, God established a “covenant of grace” and promised a Redeemer to undo the work of the devil and create a people for himself to live in a new heaven and new earth. This covenant of grace was made after Adam’s sin, but it is connected to the eternal covenant of redemption which the persons in the Trinity made with themselves. We will look at these covenants and the other major covenants in the Bible in Chapter 7.

With the covenant of grace we begin to think more about God’s work of redemption and Jesus Christ, the Redeemer. He is the focus of chapter 8. Following a survey of what the Bible teaches about Christ the Redeemer we unpack various aspects of our salvation in chapter 9—a work that began in eternity past and will ripple into eternity to come. With only a few exceptions (like some specifics on the covenants), chapters 2–9 could be found in any traditional Reformed systematic theology.

Thinking about our salvation leads to a more thorough look at the Spirit’s work in our lives, the topic of chapter 10. Here we think about various aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian and the life we live by the Spirit. This includes what it means to be a Continuationist (including an argument for Spirit baptism that can happen subsequent to conversion).

Christians are not saved to walk alone, however, and so in chapter 11 we examine the nature of the church, that special community of God’s people. The Baptist element of this theology comes out here as we look at the sacraments, but also what I am calling the “presbyterian” conviction, the idea that churches are to be led and governed by elders (Grk. *presbuteros*) and that these elders can also express *some* authority over other churches.

Two ethical topics will follow in chapters 12–13, Christian obedience and civil government, respectively. Such topics are often covered in works of “ethics,” but they are present in Calvin’s *Institutes*, the great catechisms of the faith, and are two of the “doctrines” we want to think rightly about.

We end in chapter 14, as all Evangelical theologies do, with a look at personal and corporate (or individual and general) eschatology, the study of “the last things.” Personal eschatology means what lies ahead for each of us individually (death, the intermediate state, the resurrection, final judgment). Corporate eschatology means the great events of salvation history yet to occur (the revealing of the Antichrist, the return of Christ, the resurrection of all people, the great white throne judgment, hell and the new heavens and new earth).

Why Bother?

Given the sheer amount of work it takes to understand and organize what we call “systematic theology,” it is right to consider why we should go to all the trouble. The simple answer is that systematic theology has as its goal a right understanding of what the Bible teaches. The Bible is “breathed out by God” and equips us for every good work (2 Tim 3:16–17). It “revives the soul” and makes us “wise” (Ps 19:7). It is light in the darkest of places (Ps 119:105). It is the true bread that feeds our souls (Matt 4:4). Above all, God’s Word reveals God to us and points us to him. He is the Source and

Author of the Scriptures, but he is also its Goal and Glory. The Bible, like all things, is “from him and through him and to him” (Rom 11:36). How could we *not* pursue a thorough and right understanding of all it contains?

But there are other reasons to go through the trouble of studying systematic theology. It inspires worship as God and his ways are made clearer to us. It steadies us against unbelief as more of God and his providence are understood. It helps us to evangelize with greater confidence, as we see how all of God’s truths fit together in a beautiful tapestry. It also provides wisdom to help us live God-honoring lives in a fallen world at enmity with him. It helps us to live each day with an unbreakable hope in what is to come.

ONE

Revelation

Introduction

We said above that in systematic theology, our desire is to “think God’s thoughts after him.” But if that is true, the question becomes, *where do we find God’s thoughts?* Isaiah tells us, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD” (Isa 55:8). And the apostle Paul asks, “Who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Cor 2:11). Clearly it is no small thing to “think God’s thoughts.” But our God has condescended to help us—in the same way that we stoop down and speak to infants in a way adapted to their level of understanding and development. Our God has chosen to reveal himself—and his “thoughts”—to us. And that is what we are discussing in this chapter, God’s *revelation*, the doctrine that reflects on various aspects of God revealing himself to us.

We can see God taking the initiative to reveal himself all throughout the Bible. He creates Adam and then presents himself to him, giving him breath (Gen 2:7) but also speaking his word to him (Gen 2:16–17). He chooses Abraham but then reveals himself to the patriarch by speaking promises to him and calling him for a purpose (Gen 12:13). He appears to Moses and even speaks his Name to the

deliverer, commissioning him to a unique task (Exod 3). And then in a glorious pinnacle of his self-revelation he comes to us in Christ. These are but examples of the hidden and invisible God making himself known and visible to us. As the Francis Schaeffer title says, *He is There and He is Not Silent*.¹

“Revelation” can be talked about in different ways (“natural” and “supernatural,” for instance), but a useful way the Reformed tradition has divided it is between “general revelation” and “special revelation.” Here is how the Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof (1873–1957) defines these two types:

General revelation is rooted in creation, is addressed to man as man, and more particularly to human reason, and finds its purpose in the realization of the end of his creation, to know God and thus enjoy communion with Him. Special revelation is rooted in the redemptive plan of God, is addressed to man as sinner, can be properly understood and appropriated only by faith, and serves the purpose of securing the end for which man was created in spite of the disturbance wrought by sin. In view of the eternal plan of redemption it should be said that this special revelation did not come in as an after-thought, but was in the mind of God from the very beginning. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*²

This distinction helps us see that one of the main differences between these types of revelation is *what* is being communicated or the *content* of the revelation. General revelation speaks to us of God as Creator and what it means to be his creatures (what we are, what he asks of humanity). Special revelation speaks to us of God as

¹ Francis Schaeffer, *He is There and He is Not Silent* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1988).

² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939), 36.

Savior and our place as sinners in need of his salvation and to us as his redeemed people. General revelation is also general because it speaks to all humanity, where special revelation speaks to a special class of humanity, the redeemed.

But we need to remember the tragic impact of sin. The reality of sin means special revelation is required even to interpret general revelation correctly. Remember Paul's words to the Romans about the impact of rejecting God. He said that those who did reject him "became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom 1:21). A regenerated heart enables me to put on the lenses of the Bible and then to interpret the general revelation around me accurately. I cannot understand heaven and hell or lightning bugs and sunshine without the revelation provided in the Bible. There is a world of difference between seeing a lightning bug and its habitat as made by a Sovereign Creator or not.

General Revelation

Thinking further on general revelation, we can say the creation around us is bursting with the life of God and embedded with his very fingerprints. Though sin can blind us and keep us from seeing God's imprint on creation, the creation still speaks. The creation in which we live and of which we are a part is a masterpiece crafted by the Master Artist, an unmatched ediface of the Master Architect, an intricate system designed by the Master Engineer. And as God's work, *it speaks of him*.

The Bible reverberates with the truth that God speaking through the creation: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" (Ps 19:1). How often in the Old Testament does God ask his people to, "look at the heavens and see" (Job 35:5), or, "Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these?" (Isa 40:26). There is revelation in the creation itself that we

are meant to see and understand. It is a book to be read and understood.

Typically the Bible looks up when it basks in God’s creation—mountains, oceans, stars, constellations, and the largest animals on earth are the source of its worship. And yet, with our advances in what we know of the human body and the intricacies of cells, the glory of God’s general revelation works at the cellular and atomic level, too. As Philip Johnson has said, “Thanks to the work of biochemists and molecular biologists..., we know that the cell is so enormously complex that it makes a spaceship or a supercomputer look rather low-tech in comparison.”³ The human brain is a marvel that speaks of God’s handiwork. All of these scientific discoveries—which only reveal further mysteries yet to be discovered!—make us echo the words of Moses, “The LORD is God; there is no other besides him” (Deut 4:35).

General revelation also speaks within our hearts through our consciences: “He has put eternity into man’s heart” (Eccl 3:11). Paul says the same in discussing what is called the natural law: “When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (Rom 2:14–15). God’s work on consciences means that we often feel “bad” or “guilty” for doing things that are actually wrong. In our day the rise in anxiety and depression among those who lead immoral lifestyles is related to what we are talking about.

There are some differences in what one person or culture calls “wrong” and what another might, but these differences are relatively small. Two people or cultures might disagree on what

³ From an interview for *Nova* accessed at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/defense-intelligent-design/>.

constitutes “murder,” but all understand you cannot “murder” certain people. All societies have some understanding of lying, stealing, and marital norms. The fact we all have moral norms is a revelation of God himself, a testimony to his work in our hearts. The fact people and cultures often have *wrong* moral norms is a reminder that sin is real and distorts that same revelation.

Of course, the creation does not speak as fully as God’s Word. As J. I. Packer has written,

All history is, in one sense, God’s deed, but none of it reveals Him except in so far as He Himself talks to us about it. God’s revelation is not through deeds without words (a dumb charade!) any more than it is through words without deeds; but it is through deeds which He speaks to interpret, or, putting it more biblically, through words which His deeds confirm and fulfil (sic.). The fact we must face is that if there is no verbal revelation, there is no revelation at all, not even in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth....Thus the history of salvation (the acts of God) took place in the context of the history of revelation (the oracles of God).

J. I. Packer, *God has Spoken*⁴

As we have said, general revelation is limited because of human sinfulness. As the *Trinity Confession of Faith* affirms (here closely following the original wording of *WCF* 1.1), “The light of nature and the works of creation and providence demonstrate God’s goodness, wisdom, and power so clearly that they leave men without excuse.” Such words echo Romans 1:19–20, “What can be known about God is plain....For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever

⁴ J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 76, 82.

since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” The creation can reveal *something* of God and testifies that he is eternally powerful and divine, but more is required for a person to be saved. General revelation is thus *true* and even *undeniable*, but it is *not sufficient for salvation*.

General revelation is an important concept in our evangelism. In our evangelism we are always speaking to people who have heard and seen God’s general revelation. They have some sense of his power and divine nature and *God-ness*, you might say. They might be rejecting what we are telling them, but they are rejecting something they *know* at a deep level. Someone can tell us, “I don’t believe,” when we communicate God’s truth to them, but they cannot truly say, “I never knew.”

Special Revelation

We said above that “special revelation” concerns the history of redemption and speaks to us as sinners in need of a remedy for our sins. Much of what we will cover in the chapters ahead is the content of God’s special revelation. While God’s written Word is central to his “special revelation,” there are other ways he has spoken we need to remember.

Though rare, God reveals himself through *direct speech*. He spoke to Adam in the Garden (Gen 2:17) and Moses on the mountain (Exod 19–24).

God reveals through *miracles*. God’s miraculous intervention speaks through his acts instead of words. Here we can think of God’s appearance to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3) or the angel of death killing the firstborn of Egypt (Exod 11–12) or Jonah being swallowed by the “great fish” (Jonah 1:17–2:10). Even dreams could be included here (Gen 20:3–6; Matt 1:20–21), as well as the miracles of Christ and the apostles (Matt 14:25–27; John

11:4–44; Acts 3:1–10; 6:8; 19:11–12). These and other miracles throughout the Bible were revelations of God.

A pinnacle of God’s revelation is *Christ* himself. Christ is called “the word” in the gospel of John 1:1–14 and Revelation 19:13. This speaks to Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s Old Testament words (Matt 1:1, 22–23) but also as being himself the incarnation of God speaking to us. Jesus does not just speak truth, but he is “the truth” (John 14:6). He does not just speak God’s words, which he does, but his actions were also God’s word to us. His actions on the cross are a revelation to us (Rom 5:8) and not just his preached Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7).

And then there is God’s revelation in *the Scriptures*. This refers to God’s word written. “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim 3:16) and provides “examples” to teach (1 Cor 10:6) and infallible “instruction” (Rom 15:4). Throughout God’s Word we see that “what the Bible says is what God says.” You hear this in Hebrews 3:7–8, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice,⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness.’” What is fascinating about this passage is that the author is quoting Psalm 95:7–8, but he does not speak only of what the passage “said” or David “said.” Instead, he describes this passage as what “the Holy Spirit *says*.” It is present-tense, referring to what the Holy Spirit is now “saying” to his readers—to us! God’s Word is revelation spoken in the past, but it is also revelation speaking even now.

The Attributes of Scripture

We turn now to a focus on Scripture more specifically, since few things impact a Christian and the church more than its view of Scripture. A low view of Scripture will always lead to a low Christian life. A compromise on what the Bible is always leads to a compromise on who God is and what he asks of us. The history of

the church provides an almost continual reminder that a Christian's or church's decline can be dated to the time when it saw the Bible as something less than being "breathed out by God" (2 Tim 3:16) in its entirety. So, what are some key things to affirm about the Bible? I will mention six.

Inspiration

2 Timothy 3:16–17 captures the essential conviction we need to have about the Bible: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." You really say all you need to say about the Bible when you affirm that *the Bible is the very word of God*. It is the words of men, yes. But in these words of men is, most important of all, *the very word of God*. It is this idea that is captured with the word "inspiration." As Herman Bavinck said, "Divine inspiration is above all God speaking to us by the mouth of prophets and apostles, so that their word is the word of God."⁵

Jesus affirms the inspiration of Scripture in this reply to Pharisees on the topic of divorce: "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,⁵ and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?'" (Matt 19:4–5). Do you see how Jesus equates "he who created them" with the one who "said" Genesis 2:24? Jesus is saying this verse is not simply the word of *Moses* the author of Genesis but is the very word of *God* the Creator.

We saw above that Hebrews 3:7 affirms Psalm 95 as the Holy Spirit speaking *now* and is not just what David wrote centuries earlier (Heb 4:7). You can understand, then, why the author would

⁵ Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, 1:429.

go on to write a few verses later, “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

J.I. Packer referred to the Bible as “God preaching,” something true because of its inspiration.⁶ He captures something rich here. We often look at the words of our Bibles on the pages or screen and think of it as something “said”—said a long time ago by people we do not know in a culture very different from ours. But the Bible is “God preaching,” God speaking as if he were sitting across the table from us and speaking these words for the first time and directly to us.

Since the words of the Bible are the very words of God, we can know some things about these words and this book. What is true of this unique book in all the writings of the world?

Authority

Given that the words of the Bible are God’s very words, they come to us with the very authority of God himself. As our God, Creator, King, Lord, and Judge, his words are spoken with a supreme authority. We do not judge the Word, it judges us. We do not question the Word, it questions us. We do not use our observations about the universe, humanity, and history as a way to evaluate the Bible. Rather, the Bible evaluates our observations about the universe, humanity, and history. All of this is true because of the Bible’s absolute authority. As we saw above, the *Trinity Confession of Faith* says, “The final judge for the examination and judgment of all religious controversies, decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits can be no other than

⁶ J. I. Packer, *Engaging the Written Word* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 162.

Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit. Our faith must rest when Scripture speaks” (*TCOF* 1.10).⁷

Because of the Bible’s authority, we must obey its commands (John 14:15), believe its truths and promises (Eph 1:13), and believe what it says about history and science (e.g., creation in six days in Exod 20:11; the historical survey in Acts 7:2–50). The commandments, doctrines, and promises must grab hold of us and ground us in a life-defining manner. In the words of Kevin DeYoung, “Submission to the Scriptures is submission to God.”⁸ The Scriptures are not to be peripheral for us with other truths being central—but the very core of what guides our behaviors and thinking and conscience. To call God *God* is to call him the one who has the right to direct our behavior and is the one to whom we are fully accountable. And yet we call him “Savior” as well and find in the Bible myriad promises, encouragements, and blessings to strengthen fallen pilgrims like ourselves (Matt 11:28–30; Rom 8:31–39).

While the Bible is certainly a *religious* book, it is communicating religious truth within the context of history in a physical creation. We do not get a comprehensive geology from the Bible, but we do find geological affirmations we are to believe. Archaeology continues to reveal mysteries of the past, and as it does, the history of the Bible becomes increasingly credible to a skeptical world. The Scriptures are world’s away from the imaginary history we find in the Book of Mormon (e.g., its lost tribe of Israel coming to America) or other religious works that are truisms for life as in Buddhism. The Bible uniquely nestles its salvation theology in a salvation *history*.

⁷ Here closely following *WCF* 1.10 and 1689 1.10.

⁸ Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God At His Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 119.

Given the inspiration and authority of Scripture how much we should read it, memorize it, meditate on it, and love it, seeking to mirror in our lives and thinking what it says (Ps 1; 19:14; 119:9–16).

Inerrancy

A third conviction to have about the Bible concerns its “inerrancy.” The essence of “inerrancy” is that the Bible in its original manuscripts is “without error” in all that it affirms. This is really an extension of the character of God. Because God is true, impeccably holy, and perfectly omniscient, all that he says will be true and contain no trace of error. “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind” (Num 23:19).

Older theologians did not speak of “inerrancy” but rather “infallibility,” which means the Bible is *without error in all the truths it affirms*. They affirmed Scripture’s absolute truthfulness, but “inerrancy” was simply not part of common theological vocabulary. In the 1970s and 80s there came a new round of “battles for the Bible” where churches and denominations were once again being duped by a sub-biblical view of the Bible. The 1982 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy developed out of these controversies, a document written and signed by men like J. I. Packer, R. C. Sproul, John MacArthur, Francis Schaeffer, and many others. It spoke of both “infallibility” and “inerrancy” and distinguished these two terms in this way: “*Infallible* signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled and so safeguards in categorical terms the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters. Similarly, *inerrant* signifies the quality of being free from all falsehood or mistake and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and

trustworthy in all its assertions.”⁹ In some ways “infallible” is a broader term speaking of the total reliability of all the Bible’s assertions where “inerrancy” speaks to things at a more detailed level and says even here there are no “mistakes.”

The Bible bears witness to such convictions when it accents a tiny detail of Scripture as being true and part of its divine inspiration. Jesus discusses the use of a single word in Psalm 110:1 when he asks the Pharisees about the Messiah. He quotes the opening of the Psalm, “The Lord said to my Lord,” and then he asks, “If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?” (Matt 22:44, 45). He is not asking about a general idea of doctrine, but about a specific word in a specific Psalm that is speaking of him. Likewise, Paul makes a point about an Old Testament use of the word “offspring” that refers to an individual (“Christ”) instead of people (Gal 3:16). He seems to have in mind the promises to Abraham such as Genesis 22:17, where an individual “offspring” of Abraham will possess the gates of “his enemies.” Further, it mattered to Jesus that Jonah was “three days” in the belly of a whale, since he himself would be “three days” in the tomb (Matt 12:40).

But we need to remember here that the Bible is written according to normal practices regarding communication. It is God’s Word *through the words of men*. In normal communication we often use round numbers instead of exact ones, just like the Bible says “twenty-three thousand” Israelites were killed in a single day (1 Cor 10:8). This is equivalent to saying “half a million men died in the Civil War,” when we know the actual number was not at all so rounded. Further, in normal communication we talk according to how things appear and not how they are in a scientifically precise manner. Even 21st century sources like *The New York Times* tell us every day what time the sun will rise—even though science long

⁹ *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (Oakland, CA: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1982).

ago determined the earth revolves around the sun instead of the sun revolving around the earth. Is *The New York Times* giving us scientific falsehood or printing an error every single day? No, it is simply communicating in the very normal ways by which we all communicate. We need to read the Bible with the same kind of basic understanding of human interaction.

What about apparent mistakes where the Bible seems to contain a factual error. Several things can be said here. One is that many passages thought to be in error have proven to be correct. History and archaeological have vindicated the Bible countless times. Many of the leaders, dates, and governmental positions in Luke's gospel and Acts were thought to be errors but have been proven correct. Second, sometimes what at first reads like an error is sometimes altered when a passage is better understood. The genealogies of the Bible in places like Matthew 1:2–17 are an example. While there is good reason to trust the basic historicity of these, they also reveal a theological and authorial intentionality that needs to be understood. Such theological agendas impact how an author approaches the names he includes (or leaves out). Third, inerrancy importantly applies to “the original manuscripts,” what what first written by the Old and Testament authors in their original languages (Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic). When these original works were copied, sometimes the copyists made mistakes. We should not be too judgmental in this regard. Their work was generally outstanding and reflects a profound attention to detail. These mistakes are typically easily identified, and almost always the different Greek and Hebrew manuscripts we have can be examined to see which wording was original and which was the mistake.¹⁰ But, in the very few places

¹⁰ To look up specific textual issues in the Greek New Testament see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2002). Various textual issues are also covered in technical commentaries on the books of the Bible. For a more general look at NT manuscripts and the confidence we can have in our New Testament see Andreas

where a supposed mistake remains, it is important to remember where we place the label of “inerrancy.” Our English Bibles are impressive works of research, but we do not place the term “inerrant” on these. We recognize they are human efforts (involving fallible textual criticism and translation) working to get back to the original divine work (inspiration). Fourth, there are places where no satisfactory answer can be found. But these are so few and so inconsequential that we are on safe ground to hold to the Bible’s inerrancy and trust that if an answer is needed, God will provide it.

Necessity

A fourth conviction to have about the Bible concerns its “necessity,” the idea that *the Scriptures give “the knowledge of God and his will that is necessary for salvation”* (TCOF 1.1¹¹). We saw above under “general revelation” that the creation and our conscience can reveal something of God and his “invisible attributes” (Rom 1:20) and even his “glory” (Ps 19:1). But in our fallen state we need more than a general knowledge of God. We need a specific knowledge of what is required for us to be saved and to please the Lord with our lives. Apart from God’s Word, we have no access to such knowledge. This is what makes the Bible “necessary” in the fullest and deepest sense. It provides for us what nothing else can by providing what is absolutely necessary for salvation and obedience. How else could we know “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:5–6)? And in terms of living a life pleasing to the Lord, how else than by reading

J. Köstenberger, Darrell L. Bock, and Joshua D. Chatraw, *Truth Matters: Confident Faith in a Confusing World* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2014).

¹¹ Here following *WCF* 1.1 precisely in its theology, even if the wording is just slightly different.

God's Word would we know what was required of us in our marriages (Eph 5:22–33), parenting (Eph 6:1–4), workplaces (Eph 6:5–9), and societies (Rom 13:1–7)? How else would we know the kind of prayers that God desires (Matt 6:9–13)? The Bible is indeed necessary for a true knowledge of God and what he requires for salvation and godliness.

Sufficiency

Related to the Bible's necessity is the Bible's sufficiency: It provides *all* that is needed to know and obey God. It is not "the Bible *plus*" that is needed: "The Bible *plus* expert opinions," "the Bible *plus* psychology," "the Bible *plus* geologists," "the Bible *plus* church traditions." These other sources can be extremely valuable as we live life in this fallen world and seek greater understanding of all we read in the Bible. But if these other sources of information disappeared, the Bible would contain all that is necessary for us to know and obey God.

You can hear Paul speaking to the sufficiency of Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16–17: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Being "equipped for every good work" means we can know and obey God and please him with our lives. There is no greater need we have than for these things. And Paul tells us that the "Scripture" which is "breathed out by God" contains what is needed—and all that is needed—for just these things.

It could be easy to misunderstand what is meant by the Bible's "necessity" and "sufficiency" and assume that we should dismiss all the findings and benefits of psychology, astronomy, philosophy, medicine, archaeology, and various other disciplines. That is going too far. Such disciplines are fitting pursuits within a creation so complex and vast as the one God has made. We can hear something

of these pursuits in the very positive statement about Solomon: “He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish” (1 Kgs 4:33). Such knowledge was glorifying to God and a delight to the people of God.

Yet, what is important to keep in mind as we pursue such common grace and common good endeavors is that none of these areas of expertise possesses what is “necessary” and “sufficient” for human flourishing. They are wonderful supplements to a biblical framework, provided the Bible stands atop all of them and maintains its role of Judge over all. They cannot stand alone and will always crumble when held in opposition to the Bible. But provided they occupy the right place in our worldview and lives, they add profound richness and depth to our lives.

Clarity

Sixth and finally, we need to have a conviction about the Bible’s “clarity” or what is sometimes called its “perspicuity.” The basic idea here is that *what is essential for us to know in the Bible is clear enough to understand from the Bible*. This is why Jesus could rebuke Nicodemus for missing an essential teaching in Ezekiel 36, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:10).

Of course, this passage from John’s Gospel also reminds us that the “clarity” of Scripture does not mean all things are equally clear in the Bible. Apocalyptic symbols and certain prophecies can be profound riddles to stump even the greatest minds in the Church. Sometimes the best we can do is survey the alternatives and pick the one that seems most plausible to us. Paul speaking of baptism

for the dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29 is one such passage.¹² Then, too, “clarity” does not mean “study is not required.” Attentive study and specific expertise are often required to understand a passage. “Teachers” are one of the gifts given to the Church, after all (Rom 12:7; 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11).

Thus, the doctrine of the Bible’s clarity does not give us a false confidence in interpreting all passages, but it does give us confidence that what we need to understand in order to know and obey God is clear enough for the simplest mind to grasp. “Let the little children come to me” (Matt 19:14), said Jesus. It is “the fool” who says “there is no God” (Ps 53:1).

How Should We Respond?

Given the unique treasure that the Bible is, how should we respond? Read it, love it, delight in it, meditate on it, memorize it, preach it, hear it, listen to it taught, obey it, revere it, believe it. Amen.

¹² See the discussion on this passage in Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).