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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ANF</i>	Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., <i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> (1885; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994)
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
KJV	King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
NPNF	Philip Schaff, ed., <i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I</i> (1888; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
OPC	Orthodox Presbyterian Church
<i>PG</i>	J.-P. Migne et al., eds., <i>Patrologia Graeca</i> (Paris, 1857–66)
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
<i>PRJ</i>	<i>Puritan Reformed Journal</i>
RTS	Reformed Theological Seminary
<i>SBJT</i>	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
TNIV	Today's New International Version
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM R. EDWARDS

Pastors need theology for ministry because the substance of ministry is speaking for God. Pastors serve as ambassadors for Christ. A ministry of reconciliation is entrusted to them. God makes his appeal through them. The substance of their message is “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:18–20). In fact, we may say that theology is *for* ministry, explicating the fullness of this message and equipping pastors for its faithful proclamation both in public and in private, for both the gathering and the perfecting of the saints. As Christ clearly states to his disciples, this labor will entail many difficulties, and thus pastors need the personal encouragement that comes from “the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God” (Rom. 11:33), the confidence that comes from “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and ever-deeper insight into “the mystery of Christ” made known by revelation (Eph. 3:3–4).

A temptation in practical theology is to focus on technique and skill without relating theological substance to pastoral practice. The literature, at times, is experience-based and pragmatic rather than clearly grounded in coherent biblical and theological reflection. Systematic theological works, on the other hand, may fail to connect the substance with practice, neglecting to explore and express the relevance or implications of doctrines beyond the clear statement of truth.

The purpose of this collaborative effort is to demonstrate the relationship between theology and practice from authors experienced in both. We believe that the church thrives when pastors comprehend how God’s whole counsel shapes and impacts their entire ministry, and when practices are not baptized by a few biblical texts but are instead rooted in thoughtful biblical exegesis. Thus, each chapter in this volume builds on the rich biblical-theological reflection that a

vibrant ministry demands. The aim, however, is not merely expositional and theological but devotional and practical, concrete rather than abstract. Each contributor is currently or has at one time been a pastor and draws from his own experience as well as the experience of other pastors, past and present. At the same time, each contributes out of the gifts uniquely bestowed on him, shaped and sharpened by his own experience and practice in various ministry settings.

Each contributor has also been impacted by a particular pastor-theologian who, for us, exemplifies what we seek to bring together in this volume: biblical and theological reflection in service to the church, for the encouragement of gospel ministers, as well as the good of those they serve in ministry. Sinclair B. Ferguson is a model pastor-theologian in our day. Now in his fiftieth year of service to Christ and his church, Sinclair continues to cultivate a theologically rich and personally winsome ministry among his colleagues, students, and readers, which has been demonstrated in his own years of pastoral ministry. These essays are written in his honor by a few from among the many who have been greatly influenced by his life and work, as is evident in various ways through the following chapters.

As we explore theology for ministry through these essays honoring a teacher and a friend, we are reminded that theology is important in its own right—the queen of the sciences, as it has been called—because God himself is the one true and glorious King over all. Theology matters because “from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom. 11:36). And for this very reason, theological reflection is absolutely essential for ministry. While much of this book will focus on how doctrine ought to impact ministry, we are also concerned to show that doctrine ought to impact ministers, especially in view of the many personal struggles as well as external difficulties pastors face.

At the time of writing this introduction, the general consensus is that over the past thirty to fifty years, much has changed in ministry, with the result that “pastoral leadership does not seem to offer the promise of a life well lived.”¹ This appears evident from

1. L. Gregory Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 24. Various studies conclude that social changes over the past two generations have greatly altered ministry experience. See Dean R. Hoge

the large numbers of those leaving the ministry within the first five years, with some statistics indicating a fourfold increase since the 1970s.² The mainstream media has taken note, too, with an article in the *New York Times* concluding: “Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen.”³ Studies indicate that many in ministry are unhappy and would leave for some other line of work if they could.⁴

In response, at the start of the twenty-first century, the Lilly Foundation funded a ten-year project, “Sustaining Pastoral Excellence,” distributing grants totaling in the millions of dollars to many different organizations, with the aim of conducting research to better understand the negative conditions of pastoral ministry and develop strategies for positive change.⁵ Although operating with diverse theological commitments, these various studies are tied together by the use of the social sciences. The studies explore the habits and practices of pastors in their various traditions with the guiding question of what defines and sustains excellence in ministry, utilizing qualitative research methods in the analysis of data to develop their descriptions and reach their conclusions.⁶ These studies prove helpful in many

and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 3; Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us about Surviving and Thriving* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 12; Bob Wells, “Which Way to Clergy Health?” accessed October 15, 2020, <https://faithandleadership.com/programs/spe/resources/dukediv-clergyhealth.html>.

2. Jones and Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, 24; Paul Vitello, “Taking a Break from the Lord’s Work,” *New York Times*, August 1, 2010, accessed December 14, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/02/nyregion/02burnout.html?page_wanted=all&_r=0.

3. Vitello, “Taking a Break from the Lord’s Work.”

4. Jackson W. Carroll, *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 160.

5. Holly G. Miller, “Sustaining Pastoral Excellence: A Progress Report on a Lilly Endowment Initiative” (Durham, NC: Leadership Education at Duke Divinity, 2011), 3–7, accessed April 22, 2014, http://pastoralexcellence.com/pdfs/Final_SPE_Report2011.pdf.

6. Miller, “Sustaining Pastoral Excellence,” 7–11. For an example describing the methodology used, see Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 265–69.

ways, noting commonalities in experience that coalesce into themes that frame life in ministry. The hopeful expectation through all of this work is that “a new narrative about ministry is coming into being,” one that replaces the discouraging narrative of irrelevance, ineffectiveness, and mediocrity.⁷

The various studies inevitably include some measure of biblical and theological reflection. The primary focus, however, is on the immediate causes that make pastoral ministry uniquely difficult in our current setting. So while biblical notions of excellence in ministry are considered, the data gathered on contemporary experience is at the heart of the analyses. While valuable in bringing to light particular difficulties that our current ministry culture may create, this approach potentially overshadows deeper biblical-theological commitments essential to meeting the challenges that ministers face in every age.⁸

This book aims to encourage a thriving ministry through examining the biblical-theological framework that must inform our ministry in a way that addresses both the pastor and his work. This book presents a theology for ministry—and ministers. The premise in what follows is that the current need is not so much to develop a new narrative for pastoral ministry, but to recover the rich biblical-theological framework for ministry found in Scripture that is grounded in the triune God and his decrees, the person and work of Christ, and the application of all the benefits and blessings that come to us through the Spirit in our union with Christ, together with the various associated doctrines traditionally included in the theological encyclopedia.⁹ Thus, the hope is to see beyond immediate difficulties to the larger setting of all ministry throughout these last days, stretching from Christ’s resurrection until his return, so that those

7. Craig Dykstra, “On Our Way: The Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Initiative,” plenary address, Lilly Endowment Annual Report, Indianapolis, May 11, 2011, accessed April 22, 2014, <http://pastoralexcellence.com/pdfs/DykstraPlenaryAddress.pdf>.

8. For further reflection on these matters, see William R. Edwards, “Participants in What We Proclaim: Recovering Paul’s Narrative of Pastoral Ministry,” *Themelios* 39, no. 3 (2014): 455–69.

9. The chapters of this volume generally follow the chapters of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

laboring in ministry will do so with the vital theological framework required for faithful service.

In various places, the apostle Paul presents what appears to be a rather grandiose view of his ministry, such as when he describes his “insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations,” a mystery that, he says, was “made known to me by revelation” (Eph. 3:3–5). He boldly envisions his labors in relation to great Old Testament prophets, going so far as to compare himself to Moses, leaving the clear impression that his is the greater and more glorious work (2 Cor. 3:11–13). These portrayals, on first read, may seem to imply an exaggerated sense of self-importance.¹⁰ It is not, however, Paul’s self-perception that leads to this exalted view of his ministry. Instead, Paul understands that the greatness of the age ushered in by Christ’s death and resurrection exalts his work. It is not his contribution that brings distinction. This grand and decisive epoch of redemption—the fullness of time and the finality of revelation—attributes greatness to Paul’s own labors in ministry.¹¹

Paul concludes his first letter to the Corinthians with a reminder of what he refers to as the matter “of first importance” in the gospel he preaches: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3–4). The death and resurrection of Christ together constitute the focal point of the gospel he proclaims. Yet this climactic moment of redemption is not simply the summary of Paul’s message. Jesus’ death and resurrection are of first importance as the events that inaugurate a new era of redemption, which then shapes his entire conception of ministry. Through it, Paul proclaims the coming of an age within which his ministry takes place, a redemptive epoch of which his ministry is truly a vibrant

10. John Calvin notes this, describing how Paul “boasts that he ‘begat’ the Corinthians ‘through the gospel’ [1 Cor. 9:2],” and that “in many passages he not only makes himself a co-worker of God but also assigns to himself the function of imparting salvation [1 Cor. 3:9 ff.]” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.1.6.

11. Geerhardus Vos describes Paul as “arguing from the glory of the message to the distinction of the bearer.” Geerhardus Vos, “The More Excellent Ministry,” in *Grace and Glory* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 85.

part. Paul understood, as Geerhardus Vos observes, that “the servant is, as it were, made part of the wonder-world of salvation itself.”¹² Ministers of this gospel do not tell the story of salvation as if standing at a distance, but instead are made participants in the unfolding drama of the last days inaugurated by Christ’s death and resurrection. According to Herman Ridderbos, “Paul’s preaching itself is taken up into the great eschatological event.”¹³ His ministry is also a part of God’s redemptive provision, inseparable from this age of fulfillment.

The point is that Paul thinks theologically about his ministry. These themes are integral to the framework of ministry, and thus essential to faithful endurance in the work of ministry. Narrowly viewed, eschatology may be approached as an area of study concerned with distant events and consequently largely fruitless for practical ministry. As considered above, however, its concern is not with obscure matters but with the great mystery revealed in Christ’s death and resurrection. The great end has now truly begun. Jesus himself is “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18). All gospel ministry must maintain this outlook. To quote Vos again, “The joy of working in the dawn of the world to come quickens the pulse of all New Testament servants of Christ.”¹⁴ Or at least it should, and it will only when these “last things” are maintained as the “first thing” in ministry. The end begun with Christ’s death and resurrection is always of first importance, and must be as we consider the work of ministry.

Here we are illustrating the general thesis of our book. But the larger point is this: when a rich theological perspective is lost, so is the larger story for our ministry. Bereft of such a vision, we are left simply with the things immediately before us, our work defined primarily by our current activity rather than the age of consummation that has now come. Apart from this vibrant biblical vision, the pastor’s attention will be limited to his own labors while missing the

12. Vos, “The More Excellent Ministry,” 87.

13. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 47.

14. Vos, “The More Excellent Ministry,” 90. Elsewhere, Vos states, “All eschatological interpretation of history, when united to a strong religious mentality cannot but produce the finest practical theological fruitage.” Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 61.

grand narrative that gives them true significance. When this occurs, the tasks of ministry become wearying in their repetition: sermons to prepare and worship to order with the approach of each Sunday; more counsel to offer, possibly with little hope of change if experience proves true; meetings with elders that focus primarily on pressing needs. David Hansen laments how, in the work of the pastor, “theology’s venerable ‘already and not yet’ has become ‘what needs to be done today and what can be left until tomorrow.’”¹⁵ The immediate pressures and demands of pastoral ministry may cause us to lose sight of this final epoch of redemption in which we serve. And without this larger story, the burdens of ministry may quickly become unbearable and the source of great discouragement. Ministry needs theology.

Much more could be said about the manner in which Paul understands ministry—and much will be said in the following chapters. And yet while biblical-theological realities inform each of the essays, the structure of this book follows a fairly traditional systematic arrangement. Carlton Wynne, Robert Letham, and Douglas Kelly treat the foundational topics: Scripture, God, and the divine decrees. Ian Hamilton and Michael McClenahan tackle the outworking of the divine decrees in chapters on creation and providence—including hard providence.

The book then pivots to address realities after the fall through the doctrine of humanity, treated by John McClean, and outlines the rubric through which redemption is proffered, in David McWilliams’s chapter, focusing especially on the covenant of grace. What follows, naturally, are Lane Tipton’s and David Gibson’s chapters on Christ and his work, and Philip Ryken’s and Dennis Johnson’s chapters on union with Christ and the Holy Spirit. The appropriation and application of that redemption are discussed in the next six chapters, roughly following the pattern found in the Westminster Confession of Faith and other Reformation and post-Reformation confessions: John Ferguson addresses the doctrine of justification, Ligon Duncan adoption, and Rob Edwards sanctification. Cornelis Venema then considers the twin graces of faith and repentance, Paul Wolfe perseverance, and Joel Beeke assurance.

15. David Hansen, *The Art of Pastoring: Ministry without All the Answers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 20.

Other subjects, critical for pastoral ministry, include the law and liberty, respectively authored by Philip Ross and David Strain. Bob Godfrey then provides a biblically grounded vision for worship. The doctrine of the church and the communion of the saints are addressed by Mark Garcia and Craig Troxel. And Chad Van Dixhoorn writes pastorally on the sacraments. Daniel Strange provides a theologically rich perspective on missions. Michael Horton closes the theologically constructive section with a chapter on eschatology—understanding that biblical eschatology not only ushers in the day of salvation but also serves as the pattern for ministry with a redemptive purpose.

In the final chapter, Chad Van Dixhoorn talks about the life and ministry of the one whom we seek to honor with these essays, Sinclair B. Ferguson, including his lifelong labors as a teacher and writer, set within the context of a wide pastoral ministry, including service to particular churches but also extending out to the broader church, and as a result pastoring, nurturing, and encouraging many other pastors as well. Concluding the volume is a rich reflection on friendship by Bill Edgar, comparing and contrasting cultural expressions of friendship with its truest revelation in Christ and in the relationships had in him.

Additional features are provided at the end of each chapter. These include key terms for the essay that correspond to glossary entries at the end of the volume. Also provided are discussion questions and recommendations for further reading. We hope these elements will help extend both comprehension and application of each doctrine addressed.

It should also be noted that the authors have produced these essays in the context of many and varied pastoral duties. As Sinclair says of his own writing, it is often “squeezed into, or out of, an occasional hiatus in the sheer busy-ness of ministry.”¹⁶ And yet each has embraced Sinclair’s encouragement to be “stretched a little beyond their normal pulpit or lectern preparation.”¹⁷ We, as editors, express our gratitude for their contributions. Our hope is that this has led to growth in us all and that the Lord will use these labors to enrich others.

16. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Some Pastors and Teachers: Reflecting a Biblical Vision of What Every Minister Is Called to Be* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2017), xii.

17. Ferguson, *Some Pastors and Teachers*, xii.

Recent studies into the decline of pastoral ministry may provide accurate descriptions along with immediate reasons for the demise of many who become discouraged in the work. Such conditions should be addressed. Yet to be truly understood, these experiences must be placed into a theological framework in which Christ and his ministry for us remain central.

In his work *The Resurrection of Our Lord*, William Milligan reminds us: “The Living Lord is with us, who once knew every such disappointment as we experience, and every such cause of despondency as weakens us; who once sighed over the stubbornness of men more deeply than we can sigh, and shed more tears for those who refused to listen than we can weep. Yet he triumphed; and he comes to us now that he may communicate to us his joy of victory.”¹⁸ Such is the vision of Scripture, and the same must be shared by all whose ministry is built on this foundation once laid, that we might rejoice even as we long for his return. And so we offer to you this *Theology for Ministry*.

18. William Milligan, *The Resurrection of Our Lord* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 222.

1

SCRIPTURE

*Foundational for Life and Ministry*¹

R. CARLTON WYNNE

How should a right doctrine of Scripture, rooted in the Bible's self-testimony,² shape the life and ministry of a pastor? What is it about Scripture that makes it central, even indispensable, to pastoral ministry? How does the Bible guarantee its sufficiency for preaching, teaching, and defending the faith? How should a right grasp of Scripture buoy a pastor's soul as he drives to the home of grieving parents? How can Scripture fortify him to preach unpopular truths or to begin a difficult conversation with a church member? How does the Bible lead

1. This essay is offered with abiding admiration for Sinclair Ferguson, a trophy in life and ministry of the personal Christ speaking in the Scriptures.

2. In the traditionally Reformed view, Scripture's role as the principle of knowing or cognitive foundation (*principium cognoscendi*) of theology accounts for the priority of Scripture's self-witness when discovering what Scripture is. For systematic treatments of this topic, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 151–61; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–97), 1:89 (2.6.11); Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 210–14; John Murray, "The Attestation of Scripture," in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 1–54.

a pastor to finish his race with joy in this fallen world? The answers to these questions reveal the many-sided “wisdom of God” (Eph. 3:10) that radiates from the Bible he has given us. Within the scope of this discussion, three key elements of the doctrine of Scripture deserve attention: (1) the inspiration of Scripture; (2) the accommodated character of Scripture; and (3) the redemptive-historical design of Scripture. Under these three headings we will explore other attributes of Scripture (authority, sufficiency, clarity, necessity, finality, and efficacy) and see how they, too, bear on the pastor’s life and ministry.

The Inspiration of Scripture

No aspect of the doctrine of Scripture is more basic for understanding what the Bible is than its inspiration. Though he does not treat the point exhaustively,³ Paul provides a key entry point in 2 Timothy 3:16 (“All Scripture [πᾶσα γραφή] is breathed out by God [θεόπνευστος] and profitable [ὠφέλιμος] for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness”). As B. B. Warfield masterfully demonstrates in his discussion of this text, the verbal adjective *theopneustos*, which appears only here in the whole Bible, indicates that Scripture—indeed, “all Scripture” (*pasa graphē*), i.e., not just the Old Testament, but also the New Testament⁴—finds its origin in God and is the product of his creative breath.⁵ The whole

3. As Ferguson notes, though the doctrine of inspiration is central to the Scripture’s testimony to itself, the way in which the Spirit providentially generated the Scriptures “must be discovered exegetically, not dogmatically, in an *a posteriori* manner, by the examination of the whole of Scripture, with special attention to its reflection on the mode of the production of its various parts.” Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Some Pastors and Teachers: Reflecting a Biblical Vision of What Every Minister Is Called to Be* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2017), 360.

4. Though the Old Testament was in view at the time of Paul’s writing, the scope of his statement is extensive, including all that can be counted as “Scripture.” So George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 447–48; Ceslas Spicq, *Saint Paul: Les Épîtres Pastorales* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1947), 787–88; Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth: Some Thoughts on the Biblical Doctrine of Inspiration* (1957; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2008), 21.

5. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel Craig (1894; repr., Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 283. Warfield

of Scripture is “breathed out” by God with the same purity and power as the words he thundered from Mount Sinai.

Inspiration does not entail that the Bible on our desks is divine, but it does mean that its human words are also God’s words, a verbal reflection of his divine character (e.g., personal, trustworthy, and true; see Rev. 3:14; 21:5; cf. Isa. 65:16). In fact, the Bible so closely identifies God’s Word with God himself that at one point the two appear as coordinate subjects in adjoining texts: “For 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. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:12–13). As the written Word of God, the Bible lays bare the thoughts and attitudes of its hearers because God, its author, searches all hearts and human plans (1 Chron. 28:9; Jer. 17:10). Similarly, just as God exercises absolute authority (Ex. 3:14; Acts 17:24–26) over all creation, so the Bible does not derive its authority from logical inferences or human proofs, but possesses that authority inherently in the writings themselves from the moment of their origin.⁶ That is, Scripture is as “self-authenticating” (*autopistos*) as is God himself, though one will acknowledge this from the heart only when persuaded by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:12–16).⁷

shows from patristic literature that *theopneustos* bears “a uniformly passive significance” (275); cf. 245–96, esp. the conclusion that “Scripture is called θεόπνευστος in order to designate it as ‘God-breathed,’ the product of Divine spiration, the creation of that Spirit who is in all spheres of the Divine activity the executive of the God-head” (296). For arguments that the conjunction “and” (*kai*) between the adjectives (“inspired *and* useful”) supports a predicative (“All Scripture is inspired”) rather than an attributive (“All inspired Scripture . . .”) interpretation, see Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 589; Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 447.

6. Ned B. Stonehouse, “The Authority of the New Testament,” in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 93.

7. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 1.9.2, 1.7.5; cf. 3.1.1–3; 3.2.15, 33–36. Summarizing these thoughts, Calvin writes: “For even if it [i.e., Scripture] wins reverence for itself

To say that the biblical text is “inspired,” then, is to affirm that the written text is nothing less than divine speech, the “Word of God inscribed in letters,” as Ursinus put it.⁸ Confident of this, Jesus appealed repeatedly to the Old Testament as a faithful expression of God’s authority, will, and purpose (e.g., Matt. 19:18–19; Mark 10:6–8; 14:49) and as the end of all argument (Matt. 4:1–11; 19:18–19; 22:31–32, 43–44)—even commenting at one point, in a confident aside, that “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Moreover, Jesus, the promised Messiah, presented himself as the central redemptive subject matter and consummative goal of Old Testament revelation (Luke 24:44–49; John 5:39).⁹ This point, in turn, bears directly on the writings of the New Testament as inspired Scripture. The apostles embraced the Old Testament as a testimony to Christ (see, e.g., Acts 2:14–41; cf. 4:24–25) and were commissioned by him to add to the Old Testament canon their own authoritative witness to his saving work.¹⁰ As a result, the apostles recognized their own preaching and writing, including that which was recorded in the New Testament, as God’s

by its own majesty, it seriously affects us only when it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit. Therefore, illumined by his power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else’s judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men” (1.7.5).

8. Zacharius Ursinus, *Loci Theologici*, col. 434, quoted in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:193.

9. Lane G. Tipton, “Christocentrism and Christotelism: The Spirit, Redemptive History, and the Gospel,” in *Redeeming the Life of the Mind: Essays in Honor of Vern Poythress*, ed. John M. Frame, Wayne Grudem, and John J. Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 129–45.

10. Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 2nd rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1988), 17–18; Herman N. Ridderbos, “The Canon of the New Testament,” in *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 193–94. For an account of the New Testament as “an organic development of the Messiah’s redemptive work, fully consistent with, and in fact authorized by, the OT expectation,” see C. E. Hill, “God’s Speech in These Last Days: The New Testament Canon as an Eschatological Phenomenon,” in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 203–54; the quote is from Hill, 207.

authoritative speech.¹¹ For example, Paul rejoiced that when the Thesalonians received the message he delivered to them, they “accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess. 2:13). Similarly, Peter enjoined his readers to remember not only “the predictions of the holy prophets,” but also, and with equal reverence, “the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles” (2 Peter 3:2). Again and again, the New Testament writers indicate that their written witness to the glorified Christ is the very Word of God (Mark 1:1; 1 Cor. 14:37–38; 2 Cor. 13:3; 2 Thess. 2:15; 2 Peter 3:16; Rev. 1:1–3), “words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:13).

Scripture’s Authority and Sufficiency for Ministry

The Bible ought to be believed and obeyed because its authority depends “wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God” (WCF 1.4). This believing and obeying begins for a pastor in yielding his whole being to what Scripture says. He must consume the Bible and be consumed by it, so that its words become the joy and delight of his heart (Jer. 15:16; cf. Rev. 10:9) and a fire and hammer in his soul (Jer. 23:29). In a brief article encouraging ministers to use the Greek New Testament, J. Gresham Machen declared that “whatever else the preacher need not know, he must know the Bible; he must know it at first hand, and be able to interpret and defend it.”¹² Not only will heeding Machen’s words make a pastor’s performance of his duties more thrilling, it will increase his trust that, through this Word, Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit still abides with and cares for his church, including the pastor himself.

In particular, by reflecting on what Scripture is and says, the pastor will grow in confidence that the Word is made for the work to

11. On the New Testament authors’ view of their own divine authority, see Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 119–54.

12. J. Gresham Machen, “The Minister and His Greek New Testament,” in *Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D. G. Hart (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 212; originally published in *The Presbyterian* 88 (February 7, 1918): 8–9.

which he is called. Even more, as he enters the pulpit, the pastor will know that insofar as he faithfully expounds the Scriptures, what he speaks carries divine authority. From that perspective, Heinrich Bullinger's maxim is true: "The preaching of the word of God is the word of God" (*Praedicato verbi Dei est verbum Dei*).¹³ This is not to suggest that the Bible is anything less than the Word of God or that the preached Word becomes anything more than a by-product of Scripture, properly interpreted and expounded. Nevertheless, the Bible itself commissions the preaching of Scripture as uniquely communicating God's Word to sinners (see Rom. 10:14–17). As John Calvin writes, God "deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them."¹⁴ It is no wonder, then, that the reading and preaching of Scripture have been central to church worship for centuries.¹⁵

Receiving and heralding the Bible as God's Word demand that faithful pastors lovingly press its truth even in those areas so rapidly degenerating in our late-modern age, such as sexual ethics, gender determination, and biblical justice. "Let God be true," writes the apostle, "though every one were a liar" (Rom. 3:4). Nothing engenders a pastor's otherworldly commitment to speak the truth in love (Eph.

13. Though commonly attributed to the Second Helvetic Confession (written by Bullinger in 1561), this statement is actually a marginal heading that, according to Edward Dowey, reflects "an authentic lifelong preoccupation of Bullinger with the *viva vox*." Edward A. Dowey Jr., "The Word of God as Scripture and Preaching," in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies 22 (Kirksville, MO: Northeast Missouri State University, 1994), 9. Bullinger expands on this statement, writing, "Wherefore when this Word of God [i.e., Scripture] is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is preached, and received of the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be feigned, nor to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; who, although he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God abides true and good." Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds, with Translations*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 832.

14. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.5; cf. Pierre C. Marcel, *The Relevance of Preaching*, ed. William Childs Robinson, trans. Rob Roy McGregor (New York: Westminster, 2000), 21.

15. See Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998–2010).

4:15) than a Spirit-wrought conviction that Scripture is God's Word. By contrast, too many pastors shade their commitment to Scripture by qualifying the "is" in the statement, "The Bible is God's Word," as though the Bible were merely a human record of religious experiences designed to facilitate new encounters with God today, or simply an instrument of God's self-revelation, but not his verbal revelation itself. Such conceptions are the bitter fruit of theological modernists such as Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930) and the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968).¹⁶ If they are to love well, to hate evil, and to pursue righteousness in their ministries (Amos 5:15; Rom. 12:9), pastors must eschew such verbal and theological maneuvers and hold fast to the Scriptures as God's written revelation.

This approach does not dismiss contemporary intellectual and cultural challenges to what Scripture says. Instead, it recognizes that standing on the Scriptures as God's inspired Word is the very key to preaching, teaching, and counseling with power and persuasion. Paul teaches that God's general revelation through nature, including the law written on the heart that conscience apprehends, indelibly stamps a true knowledge of God upon every human being (Rom. 1:19–21, 32). Yet the apostle adds that without the regenerating work of the Spirit, all unbelievers willfully "suppress the truth" that they know (including the truth of their moral obligation to God), and that this leads them into all manner of intellectual and moral futility (Rom. 1:18, 21; Eph. 4:18). Scripture's inspired authority should therefore lead pastors to use the Scriptures to expose the tragic consequences and contradictions of unbelief en route to extolling the mysteries of biblical revelation and the person of Christ as the only safe refuge for sin-sick souls.¹⁷

16. In a manner consistent with his broader theological project, Barth decried the orthodox doctrine of inspiration as "deplorable," since it implied that the text of Scripture, in its entirety, abides as the Word of God written. See Karl Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:217. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–75), I/1, 118.

17. For an excellent example of this apologetic approach, see Cornelius Van Til, *Why I Believe in God* (Philadelphia: Committee on Christian Education, Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1948); Cornelius Van Til and Eric H. Sigward, "A Letter to Francis Schaeffer," in *Unpublished Manuscripts of Cornelius Van Til*, electronic ed.

The imperative of grounding all preaching and apologetics in the authority of Scripture as the very Word of God closely relates to its sufficiency for all of ministry. God intends that through the Scriptures his people would be made “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).¹⁸ Beyond this evangelistic purpose, Paul adds that Scripture is useful “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (v. 16), with the more ultimate purpose (*hina*, v. 17) that “the man of God”—any believer, but especially, in context, any new covenant minister—might be “complete [ἄρτιος], equipped for every good work” (v. 17).¹⁹ Taken together, these texts teach that Scripture is thoroughly sufficient for the central aim of a pastor’s ministry, namely, that he “may present every-one mature [τέλειον] in Christ” (Col. 1:28). Though Christians will be perfect or fully grown, in body and soul, only at Christ’s return (cf. 1 Thess. 2:19–20; 5:23), the Spirit uses the preaching of Scripture to bring about the firstfruits of this transformation in the hearts of God’s people. The minister who expends his energy (cf. “For this I toil” [κοπιῶ], Col. 1:29) in the Spirit in this way brings joy to heaven and health to his church. For the risen Christ imparts his resurrection life to the saints through a pastor’s labors (Eph. 1:19–20; James 1:17). Even more, the pastor’s Word-ministry to others will become a ministry of inner transformation to his own soul, ever conforming him to the image and glory of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:10).²⁰

Scripture is also sufficient for all the ways in which a believer’s fellowship with Christ reverberates from the heart and beyond the pew into every area of life. The Bible does not provide Christians with detailed instructions for things such as paying parking tickets. But it does contain all the divine words we need to live for God in every context (including when paying parking tickets!).²¹ Cornelius Van Til

(New York: Labels Army Co., 1997).

18. Ferguson, *Some Pastors and Teachers*, 364.

19. The TNIV’s gender-neutral language (“so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped”) obscures Paul’s primary intent to equip and encourage Timothy, as well as those who would follow him, for the work of pastoral ministry.

20. Geerhardus Vos, *Grace and Glory: Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Press, 1922), 128.

21. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 221.

captures the wide scope of Scripture's authority and sufficiency when he writes:

The Bible is thought of as authoritative on everything of which it speaks. Moreover, it speaks of everything. We do not mean that it speaks of football games, of atoms, etc., directly, but we do mean that it speaks of everything either directly or by implication. It tells us not only of the Christ and his work, but it also tells us who God is and where the universe about us has come from. It tells us about theism as well as about Christianity. It gives us a philosophy of history as well as history. Moreover, the information on these subjects is woven into an inextricable whole.²²

The wise pastor will strive to disciple his flock into an understanding of the ways in which Scripture speaks, "either directly or by implication," into every area of life.

Because God's Word gives us "all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life" (WCF 1.6), it ought to shape how a pastor plans and leads a worship service. It should frame and pervade every prayer, song, sermon, and sacrament. The Bible should guide the counsel he gives to a depressed teenager, drive the loving rebuke he issues to an unrepentant adulterer in his church, suffuse the comfort he extends to a new widow, and fuel the hope he carries for the lost in his neighborhood. While others shelve the Scriptures to become entertainers of goats rather than feeders of sheep, we must declare with William Still, "Let goats entertain goats, and let them do it out in goatland!"²³ A pastor must feed his flock with "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) as one who knows that the Bible, as is the Christ it reveals, is true food and drink (cf. John 6:55), both for his people and also for himself. Show me a pastor for whom the Bible is the song of his heart and the source of his deepest convictions, and I will show you a pastor who speaks with the power of heaven behind his words, yet who walks in a spirit of humility and in utter dependence on God.

22. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 19–20.

23. William Still, *The Work of the Pastor*, rev. ed. (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 23.

The Accommodation of Scripture

As the inspired Word of God, the Bible is accommodated to our finite and fallen condition. Even apart from sin, our creatureliness demands that we receive God's self-disclosure gradually, according to the various relations that he wills to establish with us out of the exhaustive fullness of his unchangeable existence.²⁴ Compared to him, all believers, even the most elderly, remain "little children" (1 John 5:21), utterly dependent on him for any true knowledge of his majesty and goodness. Before the final resurrection, neither our minds nor our bodies can bear the glory (or "weight") of God's self-disclosure in heaven (1 Cor. 15:50), from which even the angels shield their eyes (cf. Isa. 6:2). Thankfully, in the Bible, the God whose exhaustive self-knowledge no one can fathom speaks to us in ways that we can understand. As Calvin writes, God is pleased to "accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity."²⁵ Mysteriously, and without altering his transcendent deity, the triune God communicates to us in a book that uses our bodily capacities of sight and sense to bring his truth and wisdom home to our hearts (cf. Ps. 51:6). God is not at all hampered by our limited channels of creaturely reception, since "the hearing ear and the seeing eye, the LORD has made them both" (Prov. 20:12). As God's created image-bearers inhabiting the world he has made, we are fit receptacles of his special revelation.

24. See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 2, *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 106: "Just as a child cannot picture the worth of a coin of great value but only gains some sense of it when it is counted out in a number of smaller coins, so we too cannot possibly form a picture of the infinite fullness of God's essence unless it is displayed to us now in one relationship, then in another, and now from one angle, then from another."

25. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.1. It is sometimes missed that, in context, Calvin is refuting the "Anthropomorphites," who mistakenly "imagined a corporeal God" given the way Scripture occasionally attributes human characteristics or behavior to God. Yet the principle of divine "accommodation" through revelation is multifaceted in Calvin's thought and pervades his understanding of God's dealings with the world. See, e.g., Arnold Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin's Theology: Analysis and Assessment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011). Hanson argues that the exegetical principle of accommodation goes back at least to Origen. See R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 225–28.

Sadly, the intrusion of sin has crippled our spiritual ability to acknowledge the truth of what God has plainly revealed, both in creation and in Scripture (Rom. 1:18–23; 1 Cor. 2:14). Without the renewing power of the Spirit, we are all, deep down, “hostile to God” (Rom. 8:7) and lie under his wrath and curse. In this condition, were God to confront us with his flaming majesty as it blazes before the angels, we could not help but condemn ourselves as Isaiah did, crying out: “Woe is me! For I am lost” (Isa. 6:5)—literally, cut off, undone, and doomed to die.²⁶ Were it not for God’s forbearance, even the glory revealed in Scripture would destroy us (cf. Ps. 130:3–4; Jer. 23:29; Rev. 2:16). Yet it is precisely here that the brightest rays of divine grace shine forth in the accommodated Scriptures. For God has met our deepest need by giving us the redemptive revelation of Jesus Christ in permanent, written form.²⁷ In the Bible, God approaches fallen and forgetful men and women in the fullness of his justice and grace and introduces us to a world of salvation and fellowship with himself through Jesus Christ. The accommodated character of Scripture, therefore, means not only that God speaks in it intelligibly to his creatures, but that the words he has given are just what we as sinners need.

This aspect of the doctrine of Scripture is the antidote to pastors’ perennial temptation to avoid reading and preaching on hard passages. I well remember being assigned as a young minister to preach on the defiling of Dinah in Genesis 34 at my home church. Another time I was called on as a first-time guest preacher to read Ezekiel 23 (go ahead, I’ll wait as you look it up) to a congregation. Both occasions made me sweat! But they were lessons in divine providence and in the truth that God gave us every chapter of his Word for the building up of his church. While every sermon should take into account the makeup of its hearers, pastors magnify God’s wisdom in giving us the Scriptures when they do not shy away from preaching any portion of his Holy Word.

Thankfully, the books of Scripture exhibit a variety of genres and styles, attractive elements of artistic form, concrete expressions,

26. Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–18*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 247n28.

27. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2007), 20–21.

and an unembellished simplicity that appreciates the complexity of human life.²⁸ All of it together reflects the richness of the triune God, the supreme Artist and Architect of the universe and the source of our salvation (cf. Ps. 104:24; Prov. 8:22–31; Rom. 11:33; 1 Cor. 1:30).²⁹ But as the revelation of the transcendent God, the Bible also contains some things that are “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16)—unfamiliar historical references and literary figures, ancient idioms, elaborate arguments, and layered narratives originally laid down in Hebrew and Greek (and Aramaic). Though we can overcome some of these challenges by careful study and Bible translations, Scripture is filled with profound mysteries that defy full comprehension. In fact, every text in Scripture carries an infinite depth of meaning, since its language (indeed, all language) is rooted in the communicative fellowship of the Trinity, which no creature can plumb.³⁰

Nevertheless, the Bible so plainly reveals those things that are necessary for salvation that any reverent, serious inquirer can grasp them sufficiently without interpretations handed down by priest, pope, or prosperity preacher streamed online.³¹ In the Bible, the eternal God opens his hand to satisfy the desires of needy sinners (cf. Ps. 145:16). Though many turn away in unbelief, the true believer who opens his Bible or hears it faithfully preached will say with Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

Scripture’s Clarity and Necessity for Ministry

That Scripture so wonderfully accommodates our creatureliness and fallenness speaks directly to the challenges of pastoral ministry. What pastor has pondered the plight of the lost, the needs of his family and flock, and the gravity of his calling, and not felt his own

28. See Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

29. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:206.

30. For more on the infinite depth of divine communication within the Trinity and, consequently, in Scripture, see Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 19–25; Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), esp. 17–41, 85–90, 163–69.

31. Cf. WCF 1.6.

finitude crashing upon him like a tidal wave? If he looks for help from pastoral networks on social media, he is deluged with an endless stream of digital articles, blog posts, and videos, many by megastar ministers who seem to hover effortlessly above the challenges of church life. If he shuts off such channels and contemplates his own soul, he may sense a toxic blend of guilt, resentment, anger, and anxiety bubbling up within him as he remembers his own sins or the sins of others against him. If, at last, he suppresses his emotions and musters the grit to carry on, he may well face the emptiness of heart that awaits a man who proclaims God's saving mercy to others while neglecting it himself. Where is he to turn for refuge and relief?

Thankfully, God is pleased to save pastors (1 Cor. 9:25–27) and to make his power perfect in their weakness (2 Cor. 12:9) by giving to them, and working in them, divine words that are sufficiently clear to all. The essential clarity of Scripture reminds pastors that God calls them not to perform supernatural feats of spiritual strength, but simply to live within the limits of their creatureliness in utter dependence on him. God graciously enables them to do this by cultivating in them a love and an appetite for the Bible itself. As they preach and teach the Bible's clear message without hindrance, the church experiences Scripture's power for human living. The Bible is a mirror that exposes the heart (James 1:23–25), a hammer that shatters pride (Jer. 23:29), a lamp that yields knowledge and lights the way (Ps. 119:105), and a seed that imparts new life (1 Peter 1:23). Thomas Watson describes the Bible as “the compass by which the rudder of our will is to be steered; it is the field in which Christ, the Pearl of price, is hid; it is a rock of diamonds.”³² Charles Spurgeon speaks of it as his living companion, declaring:

No other writing has within it a heavenly life whereby it works miracles, and even imparts life to its reader. . . . Why, the Book has wrestled with me; the Book has smitten me; the Book has comforted me; the Book has smiled on me; the Book has frowned on me; the Book has clasped my hand; the Book has warmed my heart.

32. Thomas Watson, “Sermon VIII: How We May Read the Scriptures with Most Spiritual Profit,” in *Puritan Sermons 1659–1689*, ed. James Nichols, 6 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1981), 2:63.

The Book weeps with me, and sings with me; it whispers to me, and it preaches to me; it maps my way, and holds up my goings; it was to me the Young Man's Best Companion, and it is still my Morning and Evening Chaplain.³³

What one Reformed divine writes about Christians, therefore, goes double for pastors: those who love the Bible will exhibit in return an “earnest and indefatigable effort to procure for ourselves an abundant supply of the divine Word, and to use it and enjoy it, as a thing on which the life and salvation of our soul hinges.”³⁴ What could be more necessary to pastoral ministry than for the Bible to be the pastor's refuge, his refreshment, and his feast?

Our gratitude for the Bible increases when we realize that God was not compelled to give it to us. In that specific sense, Scripture is not absolutely necessary. But Scripture is necessary if any are to be saved, sanctified, and brought home to glory.³⁵ For Scripture alone reveals the redemptive plan of God, commanding all to lay hold on Christ through faith and, in him, to receive all his saving benefits.³⁶ While creation resounds that God is the eternal, righteous, and good Creator (cf. Rom. 1:20, 32), Christians can know that Jesus loves them, “for the Bible tells me so.” In this way, Scripture is necessary to the pastor who longs to see saving faith and joy flourish among his flock.

Paul draws out the God-ordained link between Christ, faith, and preaching when he writes, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? . . . So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:14, 17). Underlying Paul's argument is the fact that because Scripture alone reveals the Christ who must be

33. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “The Word a Sword,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, 63 vols. (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1888), 34:112.

34. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 185.

35. As Turretin puts it, “God indeed was not bound to the Scriptures, but he has bound us to them.” Turretin, *Elenctic Theology*, 1:57 (1.2.2).

36. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1, 3.2.2.

believed, it is Scripture that must be heard, and therefore it is Scripture that must be preached.

God promises that as the Word goes out, the Spirit will grant faith to those to whom he will (John 3:8) and, in turn, that those sealed in the body of Christ will offer worship that is well pleasing to God (cf. Ex. 29:18, 41; 1 Peter 2:5; Rev. 8:4). Here, too, Scripture is necessary to pastoral ministry. For the church exists to worship God, and God accepts only that worship that conforms to the standards and directions laid down for us in his Word (Heb. 12:28; cf. Lev. 10:1–3). By neglecting Scripture, some have displaced worship with all sorts of agendas for human flourishing (e.g., social initiatives, producing art, building community). Others long for something more transcendent but, still hampered by a this-world focus, subtly redefine worship as an experience to be received from God (“How was your worship today?”) or from the musicians up front (i.e., “the worship team”). To be sure, God must work the desire to worship into the heart, and in that sense it originates with him; and music is a divine gift meant to move our affections and prompt in us genuine zeal.³⁷ But true worship entails giving to God the honor due his name according to the instructions he has revealed. In these ways and more, Scripture is necessary to sustain a pastor’s soul, to save his flock, and to satisfy God’s people with his steadfast love.

The Redemptive-Historical Design of Scripture

A third feature of Scripture—and one that reflects its divine inspiration and human accommodation—is its redemptive-historical design. The Bible has not come to us as a textbook of abstract theological truths. Rather, it records and exhibits God’s practical care for his people through a long history of his redemptive words and deeds. Why is this the case? The answer rests on two precious realities: (1) true religion consists of a human being’s fellowship with God in covenant and (2) God, who desires to be known in this way,

37. R. B. Kuiper, “The Glory of the Christian Church,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 20, no. 12 (1951): 230; Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards with a Memoir by Sereno E. Dwight*, ed. Edward Hickman, 2 vols. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 1:242.

has opened the door to covenant fellowship with himself by acting and speaking in history, preeminently through his incarnate Son (see Heb. 1:1–2). To be precise, then, the ultimate reason why God’s verbal revelation in Scripture covers ages and spans epochs is not human finitude or sin, but that (after the fall) his word-revelation marched in step with the great redeeming work by which God was leading generations of his people into the riches of heavenly glory in fellowship with himself. “Revelation is the interpretation of redemption,” Geerhardus Vos writes; “it must, therefore, unfold itself in installments as redemption does.”³⁸

But there is something more. Intriguingly, Vos adds that the redemptive process, as Scripture reveals it, developed over millennia because it advanced according to the natural development of the human race.³⁹ In other words, after the fall, the God who “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26) did not leave his people as orphans, but attuned his redemptive work to their specific needs as creatures bound to space and time. God condescended to covenant with real individuals in history—first with Adam and his offspring and then, after the fall, with his people in Jesus Christ—all with a view to revealing the depths of his eternal glory through a new creation of righteousness and peace. At the most basic level, therefore, it is because human beings are historical creatures, and because God desires to redeem his people in the reality of their settings, that he wove his word- and deed-revelation into the course of history, culminating in the formation of the Scriptures.

In light of its development, Scripture’s redemptive-historical design reminds us that the whole Bible is a testimony to God’s wise and loving care for his covenant people. It explains why the Old

38. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 6.

39. “As soon as we realize that revelation is at almost every point interwoven with and conditioned by the redeeming activity of God in its wider sense, and together with the latter connected with the natural development of the present world, its historic character becomes perfectly intelligible and ceases to cause surprise.” Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 8.

Testament lays the creational foundation for the entire movement of history (Gen. 1–2) before tracing the organic growth of the one gospel of Christ, first adumbrated through promissory types and symbols (see Rom. 1:1–3; 16:26; 1 Cor. 15:1–5) and then in the work of Jesus Christ and in the witness of the apostles (Luke 24:45–47; Acts 1:8; 3:18). The Old Testament types and symbols were special instances of God’s love for his “church under age,” just as the open disclosure of the gospel in the New Testament increases the blessing (WCF 19.3). As Calvin explains:

The Lord of old willed that his people direct and elevate their minds to the heavenly heritage; yet, *to nourish them better in this hope*, he displayed it for them to see and, so to speak, taste, under earthly benefits. But now that the gospel has more plainly and clearly revealed the grace of the future life, the Lord leads our minds to meditate upon it directly, laying aside *the lower mode of training* that he used with the Israelites.⁴⁰

Scripture is the product of God’s covenantal concern for his people, centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is written evidence of the Father’s steadfast love for us as our Creator and Lord (Mal. 2:10; Heb. 12:9), of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ toward us as our Shepherd and King (John 10:11; cf. Ezek. 34:23; 37:24), and of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit with us as our Helper and Teacher (John 14:26; 1 John 2:27).

Scripture’s Finality and Efficacy in Ministry

Scripture’s redemptive-historical and Christ-centered design is of great benefit to pastors. One of the primary benefits is the firm and certain knowledge that Scripture is God’s final redemptive revelation to the world before the return of Christ. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, now that Christ has come, the “former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people” are “now ceased” (WCF 1.1). Expanding that point, once we recognize that the central subject

40. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.11.1 (emphasis added); cf. 2.11.5.

matter of all postfall special revelation is God's objective redemptive work in history, and that it climaxed initially in the humiliation and exaltation of Christ, it is plain that no further redemptive revelation is necessary, nor will it be forthcoming. God has "in these last days" (Heb. 1:2) spoken to us by his Son and has poured out the power of his Spirit to the church at Pentecost. By that Spirit, Christ gave unique and unrepeatable authority to his apostles, as his plenipotentiaries, to proclaim, and eventually to inscribe, divinely sanctioned testimony for the church age regarding the fact and meaning of his finished work.⁴¹ That is to say, Christ's finished redemptive work correlates to a final revelatory word from God concerning it. Or, as Richard Gaffin aptly states, "Their [i.e., the apostles'] witness is the foundational witness to the foundational work of Christ; to the once-for-all work of Christ is joined a once-for-all witness to that work (Eph. 2:20)."⁴²

Because Scripture's focus is Christ and his finished work, together with its many implications, pastors should not treat the Bible as if it were designed to deliver specific directions for dealing with the ad hoc circumstances and contingent choices of twenty-first-century Westerners (e.g., whom to marry, which job to accept, where to live). Certainly, Scripture offers a Christ-centered worldview in terms of how we can and should approach these questions (see above on Scripture's sufficiency for ministry). But the Bible is neither a fortune cookie nor a self-help manual. Rather, from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible unfolds "the gospel of God . . . concerning his Son" (Rom. 1:1, 3) and anticipates the glorious eschatological consummation to come. For this reason, pastors should preach a biblical text with a view to lifting their congregations' eyes of faith to the ascended Christ, who works repentance, renews faith in the promises of God, and orders all of life under the benevolent reign of our Father in heaven. This is done only when the pastor explains

41. See Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 12–24, 36–38.

42. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "The New Testament as Canon," in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 176. Cf. Oscar Cullmann, "Scripture and Tradition," trans. Joseph E. Cunneen, *Cross Currents* 3, no. 3 (1953): 264; Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 25.

every text of Scripture within the larger horizon of the redemptive accomplishment of Jesus Christ. Such was Jesus' practice when he explained to his disciples that "everything written about me [περὶ ἐμοῦ] in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms [ἐν τῷ νόμῳ Μωϋσέως καὶ προφήταις καὶ ψαλμοῖς] must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). Luke's ensuing note that Jesus "opened their [i.e., the disciples'] minds to understand *the Scriptures* [τὰς γραφάς]" (v. 45)—i.e., the Scriptures in their entirety—confirms that a redemptive-historical interpretation of the Scriptures is no optional hermeneutical approach for ministers today. It is what the Scriptures, in all their Christ-centered glory, require.

Another benefit of recognizing the redemptive-historical design of Scripture is that it leads to increased confidence that, by the power of the Spirit, the Bible is effectual to accomplish all of God's saving purposes (cf. Isa. 55:10). This is the case because Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament includes that the Scriptures be proclaimed for the sake of "other sheep" who will believe in him (John 10:16, 27). "Thus it is written," he announced, "that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, *and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem*" (Luke 24:46–47).⁴³

What a privilege belongs to the pastor who holds and heralds the Word of God. He does it with the heavenly promise that in the Lord his labor, while dismissed by a world lost in sin, is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). Just as the apostle John wrote his Gospel "so that you may believe [ἵνα πιστεύητε] that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing [ἵνα πιστεύοντες] you may have life in his name" (John 20:31), so the pastor who handles the Bible in accord with its design as God's historically wrought, Christ-centered revelation can carry on, knowing that by God's grace, his efforts will introduce those with ears to hear into eternal fellowship with their Savior through faith. But even if many turn away, he will restore to preaching and teaching a proper emphasis on God's objective work of redemption in Christ, together with all the entailments of that work for the church's life, and it will please his Father in heaven. And on the last day, his

43. Cf. Hill, "God's Speech in These Last Days," 208.

efforts by the Spirit will be met with the words that will make all his trials pale by comparison: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:23).

Conclusion

In Jesus’ longest recorded prayer (John 17:1–26), commonly known as his High Priestly Prayer, our Lord said, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (v. 17). These words reveal the depth of the Savior’s love for his disciples and his desire for their safekeeping in the name of his Father after his departure (cf. v. 11). Just as the Father consecrated his Son and sent him into the world (10:36), so Jesus prays that the Father would set apart, or “sanctify” (ἁγιάζω), his disciples as his holy witnesses in the world (cf. 17:18–19).⁴⁴ Significantly, Jesus says that the means and context of this work of sanctification would be nothing less than “the truth,” that is, the truth of God’s redemptive self-disclosure, which Jesus embodied in climactic form and which is now enshrined in Scripture.⁴⁵ From this perspective, it

44. Though the same verb (ἁγιάζω) is used in John 17:17 (“sanctify them”; ἁγιάσον αὐτοὺς) and 19 (“I consecrate myself”; ἐγὼ ἁγιάζω ἑμαυτόν) to denote the setting apart for service to God, Morris observes that in the case of the disciples, such service necessarily includes an inward renewal unto holiness. See Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 647–48.

45. Some have thought that Jesus was referring to himself, the eternal Word, when he declared that “your word [λόγος] is truth” (John 17:17). E.g., Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel according to S. John*, vol. 2 (London: Walter Smith, 1885), 529–30; Augustine of Hippo, “Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John,” in *St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb and James Innes, Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 7, 1st ser. (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 405. Yet a close look at the prayer and its context suggests that in John 17:17 Jesus was thinking of God’s oral or even written revelation, particularly the way in which the Old Testament speaks about itself (see, e.g., 2 Sam. 22:31; Ps. 119:14, 151, 160). E. J. Young adduces three reasons for this interpretation. First, Jesus “identifies the Word of God as something distinct from himself” in John 17:6 (“they have kept your word”) and 14 (“I have given them your word”). Second, the fact that Jesus lived on earth “in the very atmosphere of the Old Testament Scriptures” suggests

is fair to say that just before he experienced the most excruciating moments of his earthly ministry, Jesus turned his attention to the character of Scripture (“your word is truth”) and to its practical purpose (“Sanctify them in the truth”) in the lives of his people.⁴⁶

The Father answers Jesus’ prayer wherever a right doctrine of Scripture shapes the ministry and life of a pastor. As we have seen, the inspired, accommodated, and redemptive-historically designed Scripture pours forth countless blessings for the pastor and his work. The Bible is authoritative in its content, sufficient in its scope, clear in its message, necessary for salvation, final in history, and effective for redeeming sinners and building up the saints. When a pastor faithfully studies, preaches, and teaches this Bible to the flock under his care, especially when he is borne by the power of heaven and the prayers of the saints, he participates, as God’s chosen spokesman, in the historical unfolding of “the mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:4; cf. Col. 4:2), the cosmic plan of redemption conceived in God’s eternal counsel and centered on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Lord and heir of all things (Matt. 28:18). And in this way, a proper doctrine of Scripture renders its highest service to the church of Jesus Christ, which he purchased with his own blood (Acts 20:28).

that he was “giving expression to the thought of the Old Testament, and most likely was basing the form of His expression upon the longest of the Psalms.” Third, a reference to God’s verbal revelation fits the historical context of Jesus’ imminent departure, after which his disciples would be “constrained to depend upon His Word.” Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, 261–62. Chrysostom, who also sees John 17:17 as referring to God’s written Word, notes that Paul teaches that it is by this Word that God sanctifies his church (Eph. 5:26). John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. John,” in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of St. John and Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. G. T. Stupart, Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 14, 1st ser. (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 303.

46. Strictly speaking, the third-person plural pronoun in John 17:17 (αὐτοῦς) and the demonstrative pronoun in John 17:20 (τούτων) share the same referent—namely, the apostles—though Jesus’ petition in verse 20 (“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word”) widens the scope to include “all the disciples of the Gospel, so long as there shall be any of them to the end of the world.” John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), 181.

Key Terms

inspiration
redemptive history

Recommendations for Further Reading

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Discussion Questions

1. According to the Bible, what does it mean to say that Scripture is inspired? How does inspiration relate to each of Scripture's attributes (authority, sufficiency, clarity, necessity, finality, efficacy)?
2. What are some ways in which Scripture is accommodated to our finite and fallen condition?
3. What is the deepest reason why God gave the text of the Bible over long ages of time?

Scripture

4. How does the Christ-centered character of Scripture account for the finished canon of Scripture?
5. How does the preaching of Scripture fit within the redemptive-historical purposes of God?
6. How should the efficacy of Scripture inform the pastor's ministry? His expectations? His efforts?