

# REFORMED DOGMATICS

**ABRIDGED IN ONE VOLUME**

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JOHN BOLT, EDITOR



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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* is a classic. Taking on the project of preparing a one-volume "outline" of a four-volume magisterial work like Bavinck's is not something to be done lightly. Nearly three decades of close involvement with Bavinck's theology has given me a great respect for the man and his achievement, and this volume is intended to honor that respect fully. I accepted the publisher's request because Baker Academic had not only been a major and enthusiastic supporter of publishing *Reformed Dogmatics* in English but also demonstrated the utmost respect to the Bavinck legacy by producing a first-rate publication, an achievement for the ages. Confidence in my ability to do the job was enhanced by many who told me that the précis I prepared for each chapter of the English translation of *Reformed Dogmatics* were very helpful. Professor Roger Nicole kindly suggested that taken together, they would make a nice one-volume summary of Bavinck's theology.

So here it is. Although I have made generous use of the aforementioned précis, this volume is something different. In my abridgment I worked hard to preserve Bavinck's own voice, even his own words, keeping my transitions and paraphrases to a minimum. Careful readers should be able to recognize whole sentences and sections taken straight from *Reformed Dogmatics*, and it is my hope that even the most attentive readers will hear only Bavinck's voice throughout. At the same time, it is well to think of this volume via the metaphor of a large symphony orchestra; the composer and conductor is Bavinck. My own role here—I truly hope unnoticeable!—is to have served as Bavinck's editorial assistant, helping to select where *his* score could be shortened and reconfigured for the sake of this one performance. The score is his and he will conduct the orchestra, not me. Where my own part is noticeable, it is a part that will be heard by a discriminating listener but always with the same tune. On occasion, in places where I have self-consciously

“intruded” into the text, I will indicate this with an appropriate footnote.<sup>1</sup> Most of the “ed. notes” consist of additional historical comments when reductions in the text make them necessary, illustrative references to contemporary thinkers and issues under discussion in the text, and updated bibliographic material. I have not amended the text by removing elements that might be bothersome to ecumenical spirits (e.g., some of his comments on Roman Catholicism) or where I might disagree with his judgments (e.g., on the cessation of the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit after the apostolic age; the office of evangelist). In other words, I have worked hard to remove my own subjectivity from decisions about what to throw onto the cutting room floor. On the few occasions that I dissent from one or more of Bavinck’s judgments, I do so on the basis of more objective, historical developments (e.g., Vatican II), or more recent scholarship (e.g., on infant baptism in the early church), and clearly indicate so in my note.<sup>2</sup> What continues to amaze me, even after all these years, is how rarely such correction is needed. Footnotes not so marked are either consistent with Bavinck’s own notes or instances of my putting into footnotes material originally in the body of the text.

Here are the guidelines I have followed in preparing this volume. I have significantly reduced the amount of detail, especially on historical theology, for which Bavinck is rightly famous. I have been selective in what exposition and critique of particular thinkers are included and in the supporting literature that is cited in the notes, with regular reference only to classic works—Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, major ecclesiastical documents, and so forth. My goal here was to reduce the amount of detail without sacrificing the important concreteness of Bavinck’s discussion. In reducing fifty-eight chapters to twenty-five, I have obviously combined many chapters and tried to reduce as much redundancy as possible. The major structural change involved moving the chapter on providence (vol. 2, chap. 14, ##301–6) from its placement as a separate chapter following the material on anthropology to the concluding section in chapter 10, “Creator of Heaven and Earth.” In this way, the two loci of theology proper and anthropology are kept whole and distinct and maintained in the classic order of Protestant Orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> A minor change involved removing the first three sections of *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, chapter 3 (##178–80) from the fuller discussion of God’s names (chap. 8) and adding them to chapter 7. They were enfolded into the broader discussion of “Knowing God,” leaving a single chapter for the more systematic discussion, “The Living, Acting God,” which classifies God’s attributes. The other noticeable structural difference between this abridgment and the original four volumes of *Reformed Dogmatics* is the clear division of the book into seven sections—prolegomena plus the six classic loci—which highlights the traditional order present in the full work but, because of the division within the loci of soteriology at the

1. Such as in chapter 16, note 1.

2. Such as in chapter 22, notes 46, 51, 91.

3. See chapter 10, note 104.

break between vols. 3 and 4, was not as immediately transparent. The greatest reductions occurred in volume 1 (chaps. 1–6), the least in the eschatology section (chaps. 23–25). The eschatology section in volume 4 was the shortest and most compact of Bavinck's treatment of each loci and consequently much more difficult to reduce.

The language of this volume, down to specific phrasing and key citations, was directly taken from the full work. Occasionally I have taken whole sentences and even paragraphs directly from the larger work but rearranged them to fit a new, abridged, narrative structure. At the same time, some repetition of key ideas remains. Especially in matters of prolegomena, Bavinck's case for a Reformed understanding of revelation, religion, and the task of theology in the church is cumulative, and I have tried to preserve that feature in the first part as well. To facilitate easy reference to *Reformed Dogmatics*—especially for those dedicated souls who desire more—this volume retains the section numbers in square brackets [ ] that go back to the original Dutch second edition. Finally, in preparing this volume I have not written a new and distinct biographical and theological introduction; readers are encouraged to attend to the introductions in any one of the four full volumes.

The labor on this volume took place from July 2008 through September 2009. I want to express my gratitude here to the administration and Board of Trustees of Calvin Theological Seminary for the partial sabbatical granted to me during the school year 2008–9, which liberated me from all faculty responsibilities save teaching one course per quarter. My thanks also to my faculty colleagues who went through a lengthy year of fine-tuning a wholly revised and reshaped curriculum without any assistance or hindrance from me. My colleagues have also been uniformly supportive of my preoccupation with Bavinck, for which I am grateful. In the fall quarter of 2008, I was privileged to lead a group of a dozen or so CTS students in a seminar focusing on the first volume of *Reformed Dogmatics*. Half the members of this class continued to meet weekly over the course of the second and third quarters on an informal basis to discuss volume 2. Since I was in the midst of my abridgment work on precisely those two volumes during those months, I was not only encouraged by their high level of interest but also learned from their responses where they saw the key points of each chapter; both were significant contributions to my progress. CTS students David Salverda (vols. 1 and 2) and Gayle Doornbos (vols. 3 and 4) provided both savvy computer support (especially for entering Hebrew and Greek words) and prudential editorial advice. During the summer months of 2009 and into September, as I was bringing the work to a conclusion, I relied heavily on Gayle's solid theological and editorial judgments and exemplary work ethic. I could not have completed my work when I did without her assistance, for which I am profoundly grateful.

As from the very beginning of my editorial work on *Reformed Dogmatics*, I remain gratefully indebted to my friends and colleagues on the Board of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society who consented to and supported the preparation

of this volume. And finally to the Baker Academic editorial staff: Thank you for your professional, courteous, and warmly encouraging support. Thank you, Jim Kinney, for coming up with the idea for this volume and shepherding it to its publication; to Wells Turner: you are an editor extraordinaire in text and people skills; you improve my work, remain unfailingly patient with my foibles and flaws, and never intrude yourself into the process. It is a privilege to be part of the team that brought this project to its completion. Thank you all.

Canadian Thanksgiving 2009

PART I



# PROLEGOMENA

INTRODUCTION TO  
DOGMATIC THEOLOGY

# 1

## DOGMATIC THEOLOGY AS A SCIENCE

### TERMINOLOGY

[1] Throughout the history of the church, theologians have used different terms to describe the orderly study of the Christian faith and the summary of its truth content.<sup>1</sup> Many Protestant theologians of the immediate post-Reformation period began to follow the Lutheran Philipp Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* ("Common Places") in designating the various topics of theology as *loci*.<sup>2</sup> This term, a translation of the Greek τοποι, comes from classical writers such as Cicero who used the term for the general rules or places where a rhetorician could find the arguments needed when treating any given topic. *Loci*, in other words, were the data bases, the proof-text barrels used by debaters as sources of material to bolster their arguments. For theologians seeking to serve the church, the *loci* were the places one could look for Scripture's own statements about a particular topic.

1. A sample: *On First Principles* (Origen); *The Divine Institutes* (Lactantius); *Enchiridion* or *Little Handbook* (Augustine); *Sentences* (Peter Lombard); *Summa Theologiae* (Thomas Aquinas); *Loci Communes* or *Common Places* (Philipp Melanchthon); *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (John Calvin).

2. Ed. note: Thus a traditional Reformed work of theology such as Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, new one-volume edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996 [1932; 1938]), 74, divides the material into six loci: doctrine of God (theology), doctrine of humanity (anthropology), doctrine of Christ (Christology), doctrine of applied salvation (soteriology), doctrine of the church (ecclesiology), and doctrine of the last things (eschatology).

When Melancthon wrote his *Loci Communes*, the first major work in Reformation evangelical theology, he was commenting on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard and Paul's Epistle to the Romans. The end result was an outline of the principal truths of the Christian faith as taught in Scripture, treated under a number of basic rubrics or categories such as God, creation, sin, law, grace, faith, hope, love, and predestination. The purpose was to instruct the faithful in the teachings of the Bible.

Over time, as subsequent generations of theologians desired a more systematic treatment of the truths of the faith, the looser term *loci* passed into disfavor and a preference grew for the word *theologia*. However, *theologia* by itself did not do justice to the different kinds of literature that served the church, and qualifiers such as "didactic," "systematic," "theoretical," or "positive" were added to distinguish these *summary* overviews of biblical teaching from biblical ethics or "moral" theology as well as from "practical" or pastoral theology. Eventually, the term "dogmatics" was added to describe this specific kind of *theologia*.<sup>3</sup> "Dogmatics" has the advantage of anchoring such study in the normative teachings or dogmas of the church. Dogmas are truths properly set forth in Scripture as things to be believed. Although a truth confessed by the church is not a dogma *because* the church recognizes it but solely because it rests on God's authority, religious dogma is always a combination of divine authority and churchly confession. Dogmas are truths *acknowledged* by a particular group, though church teaching must never be identified with divine truth itself.

[2] The word *dogma*, from the Greek *dokein* ("to be of the opinion"), denotes that which is definite—that which has been decided—and is therefore fixed. Thus the church fathers speak of the Christian religion or doctrine as the *divine dogma*, of Christ's incarnation as the *dogma of theology*, of the truths of the faith that are authoritative in and for the church as the *dogmata of the church*, and so forth. Included are doctrinal truths and rules for Christian living that are established and not subject to doubt. There are varieties of *dogma* based on different authorities. Political dogma rests on the authority of the civil government, while philosophical dogmas derive their power from self-evidence or argumentation. By contrast, religious or theological dogmas owe their authority solely to a divine testimony, whether this is perceived, as among pagans, from an oracle, or, among Protestant Christians, from Scripture or, among Roman Catholics, from the magisterium of the church. The Reformation tradition recognizes no truth other than that which is given on the authority of vGod in Holy Scripture. "The Word of God grounds the articles of faith and beyond that no one, not even an angel."<sup>4</sup> Dogmas, articles of faith, are only those truths "which are properly set forth in Scripture

3. One of the first was L. Reinhart, *Synopsis theologiae dogmaticae* (1659).

4. *The Smalcald Articles*, II.2, in vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff and rev. David S. Schaff, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper & Row: 1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1990).

as things to be believed.”<sup>5</sup> Among Reformed theologians, therefore, the principle into which all theological dogmas are distilled is: *Deus dixit*—God has said it.

The concept of dogma also contains a social element. Truth always seeks to be honored as truth, and the authority of dogma depends on its ability to command recognition and thus to maintain itself. Though a given proposition is true in and of itself if it rests on the authority of God quite apart from any human recognition, it is intended, and has an inherent tendency, to be recognized by us as such. Dogma can never be at peace with error and deception. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance for every believer, and particularly for theologians, to know which scriptural truths, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, have been brought to universal recognition in the church of Christ. By this process, after all, the church is kept from immediately mistaking a private opinion for the truth of God.

The church of Christ therefore has a responsibility with respect to dogma. To preserve, explain, understand, and defend the truth of God entrusted to her, the church is called to appropriate it mentally, to assimilate it internally, and to profess it in the midst of the world as the truth of God. The power of the church to lay down dogmas is not sovereign and legislative; it is a power of service to and for the Word of God. Still, this authority has been granted by God to his church; it enables and authorizes her to confess the truth of God and to formulate it in speech and writing. The dogmatic theologian’s task is to examine how the church’s dogma arose genetically from Scripture and how, in accordance with that same Scripture, it ought to be expanded and enriched. The dogmatic theologian searches for the inner coherence of Scripture’s teaching and its full expression. In this the theologian is guided by the confessions of the church but is not restricted to their historical and particular limitations.

A tension thus is apparent in that religious or theological dogma combines divine authority and churchly confession, presenting the dogmatic theologian with the challenge of determining the relation between divine truth and the church’s confession. Church dogma is never identical with the absolute truth of God itself since the guidance of the Holy Spirit promised to the church does not exclude the possibility of human error. At the same time, it is a mistake to devalue dogma itself as a temporary aberration from the pure essence of a non-dogmatic gospel as many modern theologians do.<sup>6</sup> Opposition to dogma is not a general objection to dogma as such but a rejection of *specific* dogmas judged unacceptable *by some*. Adolf von Harnack in his *History of Dogma*, for example, developed the thought that Christian dogma was a product of the

5. A. Hyperius, *Methodi theologiae, sive praecipuorum Christianae religionis* (Basel: Oporiniana, 1574), 34–35.

6. Ed. note: To this should also be added “postmodern theologians” who substitute Christian discipleship for firm doctrinal content in attacks on “propositional truth” which they regard as a form of cultural imperialism; see, e.g., Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); for critique see, *inter alia*, Andreas Köstenberger, ed., *Whatever Happened to Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).

Greek spirit working on the substratum of the gospel<sup>7</sup> and, with many others, sought the *essence* of Christianity in a general moral conviction wrought in the human soul that God is our Father, that we are all brothers and sisters, and that this kingdom of God exists in an individual's soul.<sup>8</sup> Harnack did not repudiate all dogma but simply substituted a new dogma for the old dogmas of historic Christianity. Dogma cannot be avoided in religion; one who clings to the truth of religion cannot do without dogma and will always recognize unchanging and permanent elements in it. A religion without dogma, however vague and general it may be, does not exist, and a non-dogmatic Christianity, in the strict sense of the word, is an illusion and devoid of meaning. Without faith in the existence, the revelation, and the knowability of God, no religion is possible. Those who claim to be non-dogmatic simply indicate their disagreement with *specific* dogmas; rejection of orthodox Christian dogma is itself most dogmatic. The disagreement, then, is not about *whether* religion requires dogma; it is about *which* dogmas one affirms and rejects.

Finally, the word "dogma" is sometimes employed in a broader, and then again in a more restricted, sense. Sometimes it denotes the Christian religion as a whole, including the articles of faith drawn from Scripture and the rites and ceremonies of the church. As a rule, however, the word is used in a more restricted sense for the *doctrines* of the church, for the articles of faith that are based on the Word of God and therefore obligate everyone to faith. Dogmatic theology, then, is the system of the articles of faith.

[4] This formal understanding of dogmatics, however, is limited. We need to move on to the material content of dogmas. Is dogmatic theology about "doctrine of God, primarily, and of creatures according to the respect in which they are related to God as to their source and end," as Thomas Aquinas, for example, defined it?<sup>9</sup> Concerned about the "practical" application of theology, some are inclined to shift the emphasis to the human person in need of salvation or to the Christian life of discipleship as a focal point.

The move toward a more subjective, practical notion of theology received a great boost by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Denying that we could *know* anything about God, since he defined "knowledge" strictly in terms of sensory experience of phenomena in this world, Kant sought to rescue faith by positing as *moral* truths the existence of God, the soul and its immortality. Dogma thus has the status of personal conviction of faith grounded in moral motives. Nineteenth-century theologians who followed Kant shared his basic metaphysical

7. Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. N. Buchanan, J. Millar, E. B. Speirs, and W. McGilchrist, and ed. A. B. Bruce, 7 vols. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1896–99), I, 17.

8. A. von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (New York: Harper, 1957); ed. note: for a more complete summary and critique of this position, see H. Bavinck, "The Essence of Christianity," in *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 33–47.

9. T. Aquinas, *Summa Theol.*, I, Q.1 art. 3, 7.

conviction that God cannot be *known* but only *believed*.<sup>10</sup> For Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), the content of the Christian faith is nothing more than the piety and faith of Christian believers at a given time. In his own words: “Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech,” and “Dogmatic Theology is the science which systematizes the doctrine prevalent in a Christian Church at a given time.”<sup>11</sup> Others, such as Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89), followed Kant more directly in construing the content of the Christian faith in strictly moral-ethical terms, while Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) made the historical, psychological, and comparative scientific study of religions the object of theological inquiry and summary. When dogmatic theology becomes nothing more than a description of the historical phenomenon that is called the Christian faith, it ceases to be theology and simply becomes the study of religion.<sup>12</sup>

The historical, social, and psychological study of concrete religion, including the Christian religion, is a valid and appropriate discipline. What is problematic is the claim that such study is *all* that can legitimately be done; that we cannot *know* what we *believe*. Whether the reasons are philosophical or apologetic, to turn theology into religious studies is to evade the question of truth. The strain that this places on theological practitioners is intolerable; the human soul rebels at ignoring or denying in the academy what one confesses in church. The human mind is not amenable to such double-entry bookkeeping, to a dual conception of truth. What in effect often happens is that the Christian confession yields to a science of religion that claims to be without bias. The academy arrogates unto itself the mantle of knowledge and science by studying religion *scientifically*, and relegates dogmatic theology to a church seminary concerned about faith-experience and the practice of ministry. To the degree that a study of the Christian religion is “scientific,” it can only be descriptive.

[5] But science aims at *truth* and if dogmatic theology aims to be real science, it cannot be satisfied with description of what *is* but must demonstrate what *necessarily* has to be considered truth. Christian theology must resist those who turn their backs on all metaphysics, dogma, and dogmatic theology and think of religion in terms of subjective moods of the mind. Religion is then reduced to a matter of feeling and mood and not one of ideas that are true or false. It is a mistake to oppose dry intellectualism in theology with a radical turn to feeling. The Christian religion stands or falls on the truth of our *knowledge* of God; if God cannot be known, if God is not known, then religion itself collapses. Thus, Christian theology depends for its very existence on the assured conviction that God *can* be known, that he *has* revealed himself to humanity and that we *can*

10. Ed. note: See Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, 1985).

11. F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. and trans. H. R. McIntosh and J. S. Steward (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), §§15, 19.

12. Ed. note: For further discussion of this point, see H. Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, chaps. 1, 3.

*speak* about that knowledge in an orderly manner. Dogmatic theology is, and can only exist as, the scientific system of the knowledge of God. More precisely and from a Christian viewpoint, dogmatic theology 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.

[6] Not everyone is happy with such an understanding of theology. Objections are raised against the idea that God can be *known* as well as to the claim that a systematic, scientific examination of this knowledge is possible or should be attempted. The objectors insist that the Christian faith is not about head knowledge but about a *personal* relationship to God in Christ resulting in a godly life. If we must speak of knowledge, so they insist, it is of a quite different sort; call it *faith-knowledge*.<sup>13</sup> The objection to a speculative and rationalistic theology that loses sight of faith and the place of the heart is understandable and right. However, to *substitute* feeling or moral conduct for knowledge confuses categories and creates grave difficulties of its own. When we speak of “faith knowledge” we must ask: Is there a real object to our faith? If we say we *believe* in God, does God truly, i.e., objectively, exist or is God only a matter of our *subjective* consciousness? As much as we should appreciate the concerns of those who insist that the *way* we come to the knowledge of God is different from the means by which we gain knowledge of this world and its objects, we cannot avoid the question of truth. It is true that we do not believe that God exists, in the first place, *because* someone has marshaled an abundance of data and evidence that convinces our reason. We come to know through faith and not through external sense perception of things. But we cannot bracket our intellect from our faith-knowledge; faith is the faculty by which we come to know, it is not the *source* of faith. It is quite true that God cannot, like the phenomena of nature and the facts of history, be made the object of empirical investigation. For God to be knowable he must have revealed himself not only in deeds but also in words. The objective knowledge we need for dogmatic theology comes from divine revelation. To say that dogmatic theology is the system of the knowledge of God serves to cut off all autonomous speculation; it is to say that God cannot be known by us apart from his revelation and that the knowledge of God we aim at in theology can only be a transcript of the knowledge God has revealed concerning himself in his Word.

## THEOLOGY AS THE SCIENCE OF GOD

[7] Our task today is to frame the whole of Christian knowledge in accordance with the manner in which it develops out of the evangelical faith. The knowledge of God we examine and summarize must always remain the knowledge of faith.

13. E.g., Julius Kaftan, *The Truth of the Christian Religion*, trans. George Ferries, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1894).

At the same time, we insist that God has revealed himself in such a way that from this revelation we can learn to *know* him by faith. Furthermore, if God's revelation contains real *knowledge* of God, it can also be thought through scientifically and gathered up in a system. Theologians are bound to God's revelation from beginning to end and cannot bring forth new truth; they can only as thinkers reproduce the truth God has granted. Since revelation is of such a nature that it can only be truly accepted and appropriated by a saving faith, it is absolutely imperative that a dogmatic theologian be active as believer at the beginning, the continuation, and the conclusion of the work. A Christian theologian can never arrive at knowledge that is higher than the Christian faith. Precisely because a true faith-knowledge of God exists, dogmatic theology has the knowledge of God as part of its content and can rightly claim to be a science.

This seems strange to many Christians today because by "science" they have in mind the *natural* sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology, and geology. It is exactly here that we have our problem—a tyranny of empiricism and naturalism.<sup>14</sup> It is a mistake to concede to the materialism of either of these philosophical positions since it is becoming increasingly clear that even the "hardest" of the physical sciences such as physics incorporate, as sciences, some measure of subjectivity. What one accepts as "facts" is often determined by a priori religious and philosophical commitments. What we believe we see and how we interpret what we think we have seen are, of course, not subject to arbitrary whim; skepticism is as unwarranted as credulity. At the same time, fully detached scientific objectivity is a myth. It is totally futile to silence all subjectivity in a scientist, to deny to faith, religious and moral convictions, metaphysics and philosophy their influence on scientific study. One may attempt it but will never succeed because the scholar can never be separated from the human being.

[8] With this in mind, we can speak with complete justice of dogmatic theology as a science about God, and there is no objection whatever to gathering this knowledge of God in a system.<sup>15</sup> We understand by "system" nothing more than the ordinary scientific project of gathering a particular discipline's body of knowledge into an intelligible, coherent, meaningful, ordered whole. Objections arise to the idea of "system" from a number of quarters, notably from poets and literary critics who resist the abstraction needed to do systematic or dogmatic theology. A typical comment: "The Bible wasn't written as systematic theology . . . [but as a narrative] . . . in images and stories."<sup>16</sup>

14. Ed. note: "Empiricism" combined with "naturalism" (or "materialism") is the conviction that natural, material reality is all that can be known and that it is knowable only through the senses.

15. Ed. note: At a very simple level, the scientific character of dogmatic theology can be defended by noting that "theologians use footnotes too." "Scientific," like the also much-maligned term "Scholasticism," refers to a *formal* method of proceeding with the content of a discipline; it does not determine the content. See note 19 below.

16. Ed note: Luci Shaw, "Reversing Entropy," *Image: A Journal of the Arts* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2003–4): 96.

We must acknowledge that the complaint sometimes is valid; theology can be poorly presented and appear abstract, lifeless, intellectually arid. At the same time, misuse or abuse does not invalidate all use. There is no room in dogmatic theology for a system that attempts to deduce the truths of faith from an a priori principle, say, from the essence of religion, from the essence of Christianity, from the fact of regeneration, or from the experience of the devout. This is speculation and must be resisted. Dogmatic theology is a positive science that gathers its material from revelation and does not have the right to modify or expand that content by speculation apart from that revelation. When because of limitations or weakness a theologian is faced with the choice either of simply letting the truths of faith stand alongside each other or, in the interest of maintaining the systematic form, fail to do justice to one of them, we must let the system go.<sup>17</sup> Theologians must resist the temptation to let a system rule. But such dilemmas occur because we theologians are finite and limited. There is no conflict in God; God's thoughts cannot be opposed to one another; they are necessarily an organic unity. The imperative task of the theologian is to think God's thoughts after him, to trace their unity, mentally absorb it, and set it forth in a work of theology. The theologian's sole responsibility is to think God's thoughts after him and to reproduce the unity that is objectively present in the thoughts of God and has been recorded for the eye of faith in Scripture.

The theologian's task is that of a servant and, as is the case for all scientific work, calls for modesty. A theologian's confidence comes from the conviction: God has spoken. Thus, a theologian takes his or her place within the community of faith and acknowledges what a rich privilege and honor it is to work with God's revelation *in submission* to Holy Scripture. The knowledge of God, laid down in his Word, *is given to the church*. It is the church's task to proclaim it to the world and, for that reason too, it is a part of the calling of every believer to learn to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge, to deepen faith through knowledge, in order that the final end of theology, as of all things, may be that the name of the Lord is glorified. Theology exists for the Lord's sake.

[11–12] The truth of theology needs to be defended against the opponents of the faith (apologetics) as well as applied to the life of Christian discipleship (ethics). Theological ethics may not be separated from dogmatic theology; who we are as human beings restored in Christ must govern our conduct. Utterly dependent on God for life and for salvation, we remain responsible agents. While dogmatic theology describes the deeds of God done for us and in us, theological ethics spells out what those for whom and in whom God has acted, in love and grace, must now do. Dogmatic theology thus relates closely to the creed—confessing

17. Ed. note: Dutch Reformed theologian Hendrikus Berkhof captures the limits of "system" nicely when he includes as an epigraph to his *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), the following lines from Alfred Tennyson: "Our little systems have their day; / They have their day and cease to be: / They are but broken lights of Thee, / And Thou, O Lord, art more than they."

what God has done; theological ethics deals with God's precepts and commandments. Dogmatic theology is the system of the knowledge of God; ethics is that of the service of God.

[13] The material for constructing a dogmatic theology comes from Holy Scripture, church teaching, and Christian experience. From the beginning, Scripture served as the rule of faith and the foundation of all theology. Both the Old Testament and the apostolic writings held authority in the churches of Christ and were viewed as sources of knowledge. Dogma was that which Christ and the apostles had taught; Scripture was the rule of faith (*regula fidei*) to which the church's confession and dogma were subordinate. From ancient times on, the most important proof for the church's dogma was the proof from Scripture. The apostles' witness and teaching, orally and in writing, were the standard by which the truth about Jesus Christ was measured; it shaped and became the *canon* of the Christian church.

As subsequent generations developed baptismal liturgies, statements of faith, and pastoral guidance for conduct, a growing body of post-apostolic writings became an important part of the church's rule of faith.<sup>18</sup> As the church spread into and engaged the broader world, it became necessary to clarify and firm up the rule of faith against false teaching. The church needed strong leadership over against a wide range of sects and heresies, and by necessity bishops increasingly took on a role as the defenders of apostolic teaching. With this, the idea surfaced that the bishops were the lawful successors of the apostles and the bearers of Christian truth who, in virtue of the "grace of truth" given them, were entitled to decide what was the pure, apostolic Christian truth. Through this process, the teaching of the bishops became the "rule of truth," and the authority of Scripture receded into the shadows.

[14] Protests against the devaluation of Scripture in the church rose in the Middle Ages and flowered during the time of the Reformation. Protestantism repeatedly resists attempts to elevate tradition above Scripture and tries to renew the church's moorings in Scripture. Many times in the history of Christian theology appeals are made for a simple, practical, biblical Christianity that avoids so-called "Scholastic" theology.<sup>19</sup> While such efforts are to be praised for their intention, we also cannot overlook the fact that in the post-Reformation period, under the influence of pietism and rationalism, this passion for "biblical theology" was also a

18. Including texts such as the *Didache*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Letter to Diognetus*, and the writings of apostolic fathers such as Ignatius (ca. AD 35–107), Justin Martyr (AD 110–165), and Irenaeus (AD 120–202).

19. Ed. note: "Scholasticism" is often used as a term of reproach; it is said to signal an arid intellectualism and a "dead orthodoxy"; for a summary and critique of this view, see Richard A. Muller, "Scholasticism and Orthodoxy in the Reformed Tradition: An Attempt at Definition," Inaugural Address, Calvin Theological Seminary, September 7, 1995. Published by Calvin Theological Seminary. Properly understood, "Scholasticism" refers to a *method*; the method of the schools. Cf. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 34–37.

rallying cry against the church's confession. It is an error to elevate tradition above Scripture; it is also an error to use Scripture to denigrate or dismiss the church's tradition. Good church tradition is nothing other than the church's understanding of Scripture, the basis of its self-understanding as the body of Christ created by the Holy Spirit and the apostolic witness and teaching. To set Scripture over against church teaching is as wrong as separating heart and mind, feeling and knowing. The sole aim of dogmatic theology is to set forth the thoughts of God that he has laid down in Holy Scripture

[15–17] Not everything that describes itself as “biblical” is necessarily faithful to the apostolic tradition and theologically helpful. A pietism that turns to Christian subjective experience as a replacement for a concern about Christian truth in dogma paves the way for a modern philosophical turn to the subject and away from objective reality. For philosophers such as René Descartes (1596–1650), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), and theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89), subjective experience replaced knowledge as the foundation of theology, which was itself separated from science and metaphysics. Taking the starting point in Christian consciousness, attempts were made to ground theology in morality (Kant and Ritschl), in the feeling of absolute dependence (Schleiermacher), or in the unfolding of the universal Spirit (Hegel). In order to maintain objectivity in the theological disciplines, a shift in orientation led to an emphasis on the scientific study of religion, its history, and psychology. Christianity was to be examined historically and critically, just as one studies the other religions of the world.<sup>20</sup> If one comes to a conclusion that Christianity, let us say, is superior to other religions, the reasons must be empirical and historical; no appeal to divine revelation is permitted.

[18] This approach is not without its serious difficulties. There should be no objection as such to empirical studies of religious traditions, including Christianity. There is much to be gained by looking at the historical, social, and psychological dimensions of the faith, even for a Christian dogmatic theology. It is fascinating, not to mention fruitful, to look at religious phenomena such as conversion, faith, prayer, devotion, ecstasy, contemplation, and so forth from a psychological angle.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, it is a mistake to overlook or deny the importance of confessional and cultural factors in dogmatic treatises. No one is free from the biases of church

20. A key figure here is the German theologian and philosopher Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923). Ed. note: For a fuller discussion of the issues see Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, especially chaps. 1 and 3.

21. Ed. note: See Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1909; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1979), 209. Here Bavinck suggests that Christian dogmatic theology, “especially in the doctrine of the *ordo salutis*, must become more psychological.” He follows through on his own suggestion with a remarkable analysis of conversion in relation to the psychosexual development of adolescents in H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8), III, 556–64 (##426–27a).

upbringing and particular environmental contexts. We are always products of our background, including our ecclesiastical upbringing. Yet, it is also a significant error to exaggerate these factors and to reduce theology to a descriptive work using scientific methods (“history of religions” or “psychology of religion”) as *the* proper method for dogmatic theology.

Pure objectivity, a science without any presuppositions, is impossible for all research, even in the physical or natural sciences. It is especially true for studies that deal with the deepest longings and expressions of the human soul. A researcher who personally lacks religious sensibilities and conviction is as handicapped in studying religion as someone who is tone-deaf is in being a music critic. These personal convictions will intrude. How does one determine the standard for “true” or “good” religion? It is frankly impossible for human beings to do so on their own; to do it responsibly requires divine revelation. No one approaches the world’s religions without some idea what religion is, what a good religion looks like, and what is a deformation of religion. No one can adopt an attitude of complete neutrality to the study of religion and treat all religions equivocally. At some point, the investigator’s own religious commitments will become obvious.

It is time for those who attempt to create an authoritative theology from the empirical data of the Christian religion alone to acknowledge the impossibility of their task. It is a laudable goal in science to strive to be empirical, to try to arrive at a dogmatic theology that flows from the concreteness of the Christian community as it is experienced and lived, as it is based not on abstract ideas but on facts. Well and good. But the path chosen by the scientific historical and psychological study of religion does not and cannot lead to this goal. Suppose that scholars could show historically and psychologically how religion originates, grows, develops, and falls into decay—something they are not now and probably will never be able to do. Let them also, if need be, prove statistically that religion is a cultural power of the first rank and will probably remain so in the future. How can they ever deduce from all this that religion is based on *truth*, that an invisible reality underlies it? In other words, let them show that a belief in God is universal; that atheism is rare and counterintuitive. But, then, the question is unavoidable: Is God real? Or is belief in God like belief in the tooth fairy—useful mythology for children that one ought to and usually does outgrow? The answer to that question cannot be obtained from empirical study alone. Anyone who has not acquired this conviction by another route will certainly not get it by way of the history-of-religions and psychological methods. One arrives at metaphysics, at a philosophy of religion, only if from another source one has gained the certainty that religion is not just an interesting phenomenon—comparable to belief in witches and ghosts—but truth, the truth that God exists, reveals himself, and is knowable. Religion and faith must precede theological reflection; the theologian must be a person of faith, and the first *theological* step for a person of faith is to acknowledge revelation.

## THE PROBLEM OF CERTAINTY: CHURCH AND SCRIPTURE

[19] From what has been said so far, it should be apparent that the method of dogmatic theology is determined by whether in religion, and specifically in Christianity, there is a way to arrive at certainty other than that which is usually taken in science, especially the natural sciences. Does theology possess a certain degree of independence from other sciences? Even though it may exhibit parallels with general human certainty, is religious certainty nonetheless unique, following its own path?<sup>22</sup> We will deal with this at greater length later when we consider revelation and faith.<sup>23</sup> But a few remarks may be helpful here.

It is clear that there are varying kinds and degrees of certainty in the broader range of human sensing and knowing. There is a certainty that is acquired by *personal observation*; we are absolutely certain of that which we see with our eyes and hear with our ears and touch with our hands. There is an *intuitive* kind of certainty, moreover, which, in virtue of the peculiar organization of our mind, arises automatically and spontaneously without any compulsion and prior to all rational reflection. For example, we intuitively and without proof accept that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points, that sense perception does not deceive us, that the world outside us really exists, that the laws of logic are reliable, that there is a difference between true and false, good and evil, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, and so forth. Beyond this there is a certainty that is based on the *witness of credible persons*, a certainty that is of the greatest significance and substantially expands our knowledge in daily living and in the study of history. Finally, there is still another form of certainty that is acquired by *reasoning and supported by proofs*. In different arenas of human knowledge, including the distinct sciences, we will be compelled by different proofs and have varying levels of certainty. A lover does not seek *mathematical* certainty before plighting his troth; one does not ordinarily require *chemical* certainty that the food about to be eaten is free of poison. There is no single kind of certainty that is equally strong in all the sciences; the certainty obtainable in mathematical science differs from that in natural science, and the latter again differs from that in history, morality, law, philosophy, and so forth.

Now, what about religion? It seems clear that religious certainty is not to be reduced to that which comes from our senses or is mathematically and logically deduced from our sensory experience. If God exists and he is truly God he cannot, *by definition*, be contained by our senses and reasoning. An accessible God, called up by our will and under our control, cannot be said to be God. Religion has a character of its own and must have a certainty of its own available to the simple and unsophisticated as well as to the philosophically literate.

22. Ed. note: For an illuminating and accessible discussion of faith's certainty in relation to other kinds of certainty, see Herman Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. H. der Nederlanden (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia, 1980).

23. Ed. note: See chaps. 4 and 6 below.

Our aptitude for God cannot vary in accord with our intellectual capacity for abstraction and speculation. If religion is to be what it is said to be, namely the service of God, the love of God with all one's mind, heart, and strength, then it must be grounded in *revelation*, in a word from God that comes with his authority. Divine authority is the foundation of religion and therefore the source and basis of theology as well. All this is naturally implied in the concept and essence of religion.

Christianity meets these criteria. Objectively, it claims that God reveals himself in nature and history and particularly and centrally in Christ, a general and a special revelation. Christianity makes universal claims and nevertheless claims a distinct place for itself. Subjectively, it makes an appeal to and connects with a humanity created in the image of God that, although it is fallen, cannot forget or erase its divine origin, nature, and destiny. At the same time, Christianity says that we cannot naturally understand the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14) but must be born again and renewed to understand God's revelation and submit to the authority of his Word. Either one believes that Christianity is no different from other human religions, that there are a variety of paths to religious truth, *or* one believes that God in Christ is the highest revelation and makes universal claims. In the former case one is no longer qualified or able to write a Christian work of theology; a dogmatic theologian can only take a stand within the circle of faith if the work is to be true.

[20–21] For a theologian to work with the reality of God, God must speak first. If theology is to deal with real knowledge, God must be knowable and have made himself known, and we human creatures must have the capacity to know God. For a theology to be true, the religion on which the theologian's faith is based must be true, and the theologian's faith must be genuine. A true religion has its own distinct path to knowledge and certainty. Christian theologians must place themselves within the circle of faith and, while using church tradition and personal experience, take their stand in the reality of revelation. Bound by revelation, taking seriously the confessions of the church, a theologian must appropriate the Christian faith personally. This is a liberating reality; it made it possible for heroic figures such as Martin Luther to stand up to false teaching and misconduct in the church. We must obey God rather than men.

If the Christian theologian is to take a stand in faith based on revelation, where is revelation to be found? At most, three factors come up for consideration—Scripture, the church, and the Christian consciousness—and all three in turn, successively or in conjunction, have been used as sources for Christian theology. The Reformation returned to Holy Scripture and, along with the ancient Christian church, acknowledged it as the sole foundation of theology. Rome has a tendency to elevate tradition next to Scripture, while rationalists and mystics alike draw the content of their theology from the religious subject. Since Schleiermacher, much of theology has changed, among orthodox as well as modern theologians, into a theology of consciousness. This is reflected in the concern among many

evangelical Christians for a “personal relationship to Jesus,” a call that is sometimes set over against “head knowledge,” doctrine and theology.

This is at best a half-truth. The idea that good theology is, has always been, and must be, personal is so self-evident that it should not have to be expressly mentioned or demanded. The knowledge of God given in revelation is not abstract and impersonal but the vital and personal knowledge of faith. The objective revelation in Scripture must be completed in subjective illumination, which is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, all works of scholarship, including dogmatic theology, bear the stamp of their authors. Precisely because a work of dogmatic theology is not a mere historical account but sets forth what we *ought* to believe, it cannot escape the influence of individuality. But this is something very different from the notion that the theologian is free from all objective constraints. The expectation that doctrinal theology be personal may not lead to caprice or arbitrariness as though the content of faith does not matter. It is God’s will that we should love him also with the mind and think of him in a manner worthy of him. To that end he gave his revelation, the revelation to which dogmatic theology is absolutely bound, just as every other science is bound to the object it studies. If a work of theology turns out to be only the subjective and hence individual knowledge of someone’s personal Christian faith, it can no longer be considered a work of Christian dogmatic theology. Dogmatics can exist only if there is a divine revelation on whose authority it rests and whose content it unfolds.

How we come to know the content of Christian theology parallels the way we come to know anything. We are products of our environment also in the area of religion. We receive our religious ideas and impressions from those who raise and nurture us, and we remain at all times bound to the circle in which we live. In no domain of life are the intellect and the heart, reason and conscience, feeling and imagination, the epistemic *source* of truth but only organs by which we perceive truth and make it our own. We are receptors of truth that is outside us and greater than us; we are not our own creators, not the makers of our own worlds. Just as physically we are bound to nature and must receive food and drink, shelter and clothing from it, so psychically—in the arts, sciences, religion, and morality—we are dependent on the world outside us. In short, we are not autonomous.

To claim radical autonomy for ourselves places us in the camps of either deism or pantheism. Deism makes human beings independent of God and the world, teaches the all-sufficiency of reason, and leads to rationalism. Pantheism, on the other hand, teaches that God discloses himself and comes to self-consciousness in human beings and fosters mysticism. Both destroy objective truth, leave reason and feeling, the intellect and the heart, to themselves, and end up in unbelief or superstition. Reason criticizes all revelation to death, and feeling gives us the right to imagine the world as we wish and to claim as dogma what seems right to us. It is therefore noteworthy that Holy Scripture never refers human beings to themselves as the epistemic source and standard of religious truth. Indeed, how could it? We are by nature blind and corrupt in the imaginings of our hearts. For the

knowledge of truth, Scripture always refers us to objective revelation, to the word and instruction that proceeded from God (Deut. 4:1; Isa. 8:20; John 5:39; 2 Tim. 3:15; 2 Pet. 1:19; etc.). Where the objective truth is personally appropriated by us by faith, that faith still is never like a fountain that from itself brings forth the living water but like a channel that conducts the water to us from another source.

[22] From the preceding it might seem that the correct method in theology is followed by developing a “biblical theology.” There are works of theology that claim to do nothing more than summarize the teachings of Scripture.<sup>24</sup> This definition, however, lacks methodological self-awareness. No one is completely unbiased in relating to Scripture and reproduces its content accurately and objectively. Every believer and every theologian first of all receives his or her religious convictions from a faith community, brings along from that background a certain understanding of the content of revelation, and looks at Scripture with the aid of the glasses that their churches have put on them. All theologians stand consciously or unconsciously in the tradition of the Christian faith in which they were born and nurtured and come to Scripture as Reformed, or Lutheran, or Roman Catholic Christians. In this respect as well, we cannot simply divest ourselves of our environment; we are always children of our time, the products of our background. Theological textbooks tend to reflect the personal and ecclesiastical viewpoint of their authors. This is unavoidable. When theologians attempt to transcend Christian tradition in order to be more purely “biblical,” they often create “new” traditions of their own that are no more objective (or “biblical”) than those who honestly acknowledge their ecclesiastical traditions. These new traditions do not prove to be as durable as the traditions they reject. Ironically, when ecclesiastical tradition speaks *for* the Bible it is usually more true *to* the Bible.

It is a mistake to treat the Bible as a legal document that should be consulted when we have specific questions. It is composed of many books written by various authors, dating back to different times and divergent in content. It is a living whole, not abstract but organic. It is not given to us simply to parrot its exact words and phrases but so that we, drawing from the entire organism of Scripture, as free and thoughtful children, think God’s thoughts after him. This is a demanding task that no person can possibly do alone. The church was appointed this task and given the promise of the Spirit’s guidance into all truth, a task which has taken centuries. Isolating oneself from the church, i.e., from Christianity as a whole, from the history of dogma in its entirety, is to lose the truth of the Christian faith. Such a person becomes a branch that is torn from the tree and shrivels, an organ that is separated from the body and therefore doomed to die. Only within the communion of the saints can the length and the breadth, the depth and the height, of the love of Christ be comprehended (Eph. 3:18). We must not separate

24. Ed. note: This could be said to be the position of Charles Hodge, who defined the task of the theologian thus: “to collect, authenticate, arrange, and exhibit [the truths of Scripture] in their internal relation to each other.” C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888), I, 1; see further, note 27 below.

biblical theology and dogmatic theology, as though one reproduced the content of Scripture while the other restated the dogmas of the church. The sole aim of dogmatic theology is to set forth the thoughts of God that he has laid down in Holy Scripture.

Dogmatic theology does this, in a scholarly fashion, in a scholarly form, and in accordance with a scholarly method. In that sense, Reformed scholars in earlier centuries defended the validity of so-called Scholastic theology in distinction from a more basic church catechesis. In this way they maintained the unity and bond between faith and theology, church and school *and* held high the scientific character of theology. However high and wonderful the thoughts of God might be, they were not aphorisms but constituted an organic unity, a systematic whole, that could also be thought through and cast in a scientific form. Scripture itself prompts this theological labor when everywhere it lays the strongest emphasis, not on abstract cognition, but on doctrine and truth, knowledge and wisdom.

[23] A good dogmatic method, therefore, needs to take into account Scripture, church, and Christian experience (consciousness) to keep a theologian from one-sidedness. As a rule we receive our religious convictions from our environment. That is true in all religions, including Christianity. When, as often happens, doubt arises about the teachings of one's church, we may find ourselves drawn to the doctrines of another historical Christian church; Baptists do become Pentecostals; Lutherans do become Reformed. In such cases, though change is significant, there is no loss of religion itself or of Christian identity. A dogma remains that is established and supplies comfort and support in life. On this basis, then, a dogmatic theology that describes the truth of God as it is recognized in a particular church remains possible.

But when doubt makes much deeper inroads in the religious life so that one loses all faith and falls into skepticism and agnosticism, then faith, confession, and dogmatic theology are impossible; mere negation is incapable of creating fellowship. Since human beings seek fellowship in their convictions, some move away from the fellowship of the church into a school of philosophy or a social movement. In such cases it is important to note that religious faith remains; it has only transferred its object and found certainty in a new dogma.

[24] Accordingly, Christian theology is possible only for one who lives in the fellowship of faith with one Christian church or another. This is implicit in the very nature of religious faith, which is distinguishable from scientific concepts, among others, in that the former is not rooted in one's own insight, in the authority of some human being, but only in the authority of an external object of devotion, i.e., God. This authority is *acknowledged*; its ideas have found credence and recognition in a religious circle, i.e., a church. Dogma does not traffic in human opinion but with divine truth. A church does not believe its confession because of scientific proof but because it believes God has spoken. To seek religious conviction in a school of philosophy confuses religion with science and gains nothing but a learned judgment or opinion that is eminently disputable.

A church is the natural soil for religion and theology, and in this present age there is a plurality of churches and a similar plurality of theologies. This will be the case until in Christ the church has attained its full maturity and all have come to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. It is an obligation for every church and every theologian to seek this unity of truth by thinking through the faith of one's own church and presenting it faithfully. Christ promised his church the Holy Spirit, who would guide her into all truth. This promise sheds a glorious light on the history of dogma as the explication of Scripture, the exposition that the Holy Spirit has given, in the church, of the treasures of the Word. A theologian should not restrict his work to his own fellowship but view it in the total context of the unique faith and life of his church, and then again in the context of the history of the whole church of Christ. We stand on the shoulders of previous generations; we know we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses and are called to let our witness merge with the voice of these many waters. Every work of theology ought to be in full accord with and a part of the doxology sung to God by the church of all ages.

Virtually every work of dogmatic theology begins with the doctrine of Scripture as the sole foundation of theology. The best-equipped theologian carries out the task by living in full communion of faith with the church of Christ. Of course, there is a difference between the way in which a theologian is shaped and the primary principle from which a work of theology receives its material. In all sciences, practitioners gain initial acquaintance with the field from an authority and must know the history of the field and the present state of knowledge before moving on to independent work and new areas of research. In other words, pedagogically, the tradition precedes the scientific work. But the tradition is never confused with the discipline itself or considered to be the source of knowledge for the discipline. Knowing that astrology and alchemy are part of the tradition of modern astronomy and chemistry respectively does not lead one to search in either for true knowledge about those fields. It is similar for theology. Pedagogically, the church is prior to Scripture. But in the logical order, Scripture is the sole foundation of church and theology. In case of conflict between them, the church and confession must yield to Scripture. Only Scripture is self-authenticating (αὐτοπιστος) and its own interpreter, and nothing may be put on a level with Scripture. All Christian churches are united in the confession that Holy Scripture is the foundation of theology, as the Belgic Confession states in its fifth article.<sup>25</sup>

Admittedly, article 2 of the Belgic Confession states that God is known by two means—nature and Scripture—and all Reformed theologians uphold natural theology in its truth and value. Calvin incorporated natural theology into the

25. "We receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith. And we believe without a doubt all things contained in them—not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from God. For even the blind themselves are able to see that the things predicted in them do happen."

body of Christian theology, saying that Scripture was the spectacles by which believers see God more distinctly also in the works of nature.<sup>26</sup> Natural theology was accepted by the Reformed but never as an independent source of saving truth apart from faith. Reformed theology took its stand in faith and then, with Christian eyes, armed by Holy Scripture, also discovered in nature the footprints of the God whom it had come to know—in Christ and by Scripture—as Father. Nature did not stand on its own as an independent principle alongside Holy Scripture, each of them supplying a set of truths of its own. Rather, nature was viewed in the light of Scripture, and Scripture was needed to see nature rightly as the gift of the Creator.

So, though we do acknowledge a knowledge of God derived from nature, dogmatic theology still has but one external foundation (*principium externum*), i.e., Holy Scripture. Important as the church's traditions and confessions are, they are not an additional epistemic source for theology *alongside* Holy Scripture. Today there is no "pure tradition" of Christianity apart from Scripture; we no longer have any knowledge of Christian truth except that which comes to us from Holy Scripture. All dogmatic theologians assert that clear and complete knowledge of God can only be obtained from Scripture and that it is the sole foundation of theology. The attributes of authority, sufficiency, and perfection, which Protestants in their struggle with Rome attributed to Holy Scripture, demonstrate the same thing. The term "foundation" (*principium*) here is much to be preferred over "source" (*fons*). The latter describes the relation between Scripture and theology as a mechanical one, as though dogmas could be drawn from Holy Scripture like water from a well.<sup>27</sup> But "foundation" or "first principle" suggests an organic connection. In a formal sense, there are no dogmas in Scripture, but the material for them is all to be found in it. Hence dogmatic theology can be defined as the truth of Scripture, absorbed and reproduced by the thinking consciousness of the Christian theologian.

## FAITH AND METHOD: THE ORGANIZATION OF THEOLOGY

[25] This, however, is not to deny the personal character of doctrinal theology, which seeks to describe not merely what was historically the case but rather what

26. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.vi.1 (ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], 1:69–71).

27. Ed. note: This theological method distances itself at this point from the Princeton tradition represented by Charles Hodge, who advocates an empirical-inductive method that sees the Bible as a "storehouse of facts." The task of the theologian is then "to ascertain, collect, and combine all the facts" in an orderly system, guided by the same rules as the man of Science" (C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I, 10–11). Bavinck insists here that it is also inappropriate to use the language of "experiment" and "hypothesis" with respect to theology. When God speaks in his word there is no longer any room for "experiment." On Hodge, see further A. Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. H. De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965 [1898]), 318–19; Robert McCheyne Edgar, "Christianity and the Experimental Method," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 6, no. 22 (April 1895): 201–23.

in religion ought to count as truth. Dogmatic theology must be free from arbitrariness and caprice; it is bound to a real object that must exist in the real world. Furthermore, this object must be knowable and the theologian must be strictly bound to that object. To say that theology must be personal may not be used as a reason to deny the reality of its knowable object. The tendency to set the personal character of theology over against its objectivity is a mistake. Theology can be personal only if its object is real. This is true of all human knowledge and science. Every science is bound to its object, and that object, with its authority and normative power, remains prior to and greater than the corresponding science.

We also need to acknowledge the differences between theology and many other sciences. Personal assent matters more in theology than in most other sciences; human sympathies and antipathies are heavily invested in it. In dogmatic theology, personality plays an important role, not because it is unfortunately unavoidable, but because it ought to play an important role. The revelation in which God communicates knowledge of himself intends to foster religion; it is *designed* to generate faith in our hearts, to place us in a proper relation to God. Revelation is designed to give us knowledge—not merely abstract theoretical knowledge, as in the other sciences, but vital personal knowledge: in a word, the knowledge of faith. Hence for dogmatic work, personal faith is imperative.

Personal faith, however, is not the source of true religious knowledge for in that case the inner self of human beings would have to be considered as the object and source of theology. This is to confuse the reality of God with our subjective sense of God. Human subjective response to God is crucial; Scripture teaches that objective revelation should be completed in subjective illumination. The Reformed doctrine of Scripture is most intimately tied in with that of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. The external word does not remain outside us but, through faith, becomes an internal word. The Holy Spirit who gave us Scripture also bears witness to that Scripture in the hearts of believers. Scripture itself attends to its own acceptance in the consciousness of the church of Christ. Believers, in consequence, feel that with their whole souls they are bound to Scripture. They are inducted into it by the Holy Spirit, the church's supreme Teacher (*Doctor ecclesiae*). And the whole intent of believers is to take the thoughts of God laid down in Scripture into their consciousness and to understand them rationally. But in all this they remain human beings with disposition, upbringing, and insights all their own. Faith itself does not originate in the same way in every person, nor does it have the same strength in all. Individual powers of reasoning differ in sharpness, depth, and clarity since the influence of sin also remains operative in the human consciousness and intellect. As a result of all these influences, doctrinal theology continues to bear a personal character and is diverse.

As in every other science, so it is the case here. Even prophets and apostles saw the same truth from different perspectives. Unity of faith has no more been realized than unity of knowledge. But precisely through this diversity, God leads his church toward unity. Once that unity of faith and knowledge has been reached,

dogmatic theology too will have accomplished its task. Until then, however, it is entrusted with the calling, in the domain of science, to interpret the thoughts that God has laid down for us in Holy Scripture.

[26] A theologian will be most fully equipped to carry out this task by living in communion of faith with the church of Christ and confessing Scripture as the only and sufficient basis (*principium*) of the knowledge of God. Accordingly, theologians receive the content of their faith from the hands of the church; pedagogically, we come to Scripture through the church. But no more than any other believer can this be the stopping-off place. We are called to analyze the very fiber of the dogmas we have come to know from the church and to examine how they are rooted in Holy Scripture. Thus the task is sometimes said to consist in, first, objectively reproducing the dogmas and then tracing them back to Holy Scripture—a method called *historical-analytical*. In this way one begins with the church's teaching and summarizes it. For a few dogmas as such this method may be highly commendable, and it may be true that theologians undervalue it. Nonetheless, the objection to it is that by using this method one cannot achieve a unified scientific system—the theologian will be overwhelmed by the disparate dogmas under review. The dogmatic theologian therefore will do better taking a different road. Instead of proceeding from the river back to the source (historical-analytic method), it is preferable to travel from the source to the river. Without shortchanging the truth that in a pedagogical sense the church precedes Scripture, a theologian can nevertheless be positioned in Scripture itself as the foundation of theology (*principium theologiae*) and from there develop dogmas. What a theologian does in that case is to replicate, as it were, the intellectual labor of the church. We are shown how dogmas have arisen organically from Scripture—that the firm and broad foundation on which the edifice of dogmatics rises is not a single text in its isolation but Scripture as a whole. This is properly called the *synthetic-genetic* method.

This synthetic-genetic method brings word and historical fact together, acknowledging that the Bible does not merely convey facts that we have to explain but itself clearly illumines those facts. Scripture is not a collection of facts or sayings but the living Word of God, the witness of the Holy Spirit. Scripture not only calls for assent; it demands faith. God speaks; we must believe, trust, and obey. Scripture's message, furthermore, is a unity that displays an organic wholeness and order. The different dogmas are not isolated propositions but constitute a unity. The dogmatic theologian is called to a critical task of genetically and systematically unfolding the dogmatic truths of Scripture, a task already implied in the systematic nature of the work one does on the dogmatic material. In this genetic and systematic unfolding of the dogmas, the theologian is to point out possible deviations, to fill possible gaps, and so to work at the development of dogmas in the future. In that way dogmatic theology attempts to furnish an exposition of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are hidden in Christ and exhibited in Scripture.

[27–28] How should such a dogmatic work then be organized and structured? What is its logical order? Early works in theology were simple and lacked systematic order. Origen's work *On First Principles* (*Peri Archon*) introduces some order in the material and is divided into four major parts: God, the world, freedom, and revelation. Augustine's *Enchiridion* treats subjects of dogmatic theology and ethics under the headings of the three Christian virtues: faith, hope, and love. Peter Lombard in the Middle Ages divided his *Sentences* into four books. The first three deal with things (*res*), the last with signs (*signa*). The entire content of revelation, to his mind, consists of these two: *things* and *signs*. In accordance with this order, the first book of the *Sentences* deals with the mystery of the Trinity and the second with the creation and formation of physical and spiritual things: creation, angels, the six-day period of creation, humanity, fall, sin. The third book deals with the incarnation of the Word: the person and work of Christ; faith, hope, and love; the four principal virtues; and other ethical topics. Finally, the fourth book, concerning the sacraments, contains the doctrine of the seven sacraments, the resurrection, the judgment, heaven, and hell.

There is discernible progress here. There is better grouping and delimitation of the topics; the whole is divided into four parts, each with its own distinct object, and the ethical material is incorporated in the dogmatics itself. The sacraments, formerly only touched upon, are treated at length. On the other hand, the order still leaves much to be desired, and several subjects, such as Scripture, the church, and particularly soteriology, are left virtually undiscussed. A place of honor, especially from a formal viewpoint, needs to be given to Bonaventure's *Breviloquium*. We find here a firmly methodical approach, complete mastery of the material, a clean delimitation of the topics, and a purposefully chosen principle of division. This is apparent when in part I, chapter 1, Bonaventure states that though theology comprises all seven topics it is nevertheless a single science, for "God is not only the efficient and exemplary Cause of things through creation, but also their reflective [or renewing; *reflectivum*] Principle through redemption, and their perfective Principle through remuneration [restoration]."<sup>28</sup>

Thomas's division in his *Summa* is quite different and inferior. This work contains three parts; the parts are divided into questions, and these again into articles. Part I deals with God and his creation before and apart from sin: God as first principle and exemplary cause of all things. Part II speaks of man as his image and again is divided into a *prima* and a *secunda*. The third part describes the way by which we human beings can attain to the blessedness of eternal life, i.e., Christ and the sacraments. An appendix composed of three questions discusses purgatory. Thomas frames every tenet of faith in the form of a question and raises all the objections advanced against it by opponents. Then, with an appeal to authority (Scripture, church fathers, or Aristotle), he demonstrates the truth of the thing

28. Cited from *The Works of Bonaventure*, vol. 2, *The Breviloquium*, trans. Jose De Vinck (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1963), 33.

questioned and draws the conclusion. This is then further explained and finally defended against the objections raised.

[30–31] Reformation theology was originally characterized by an anti-Scholastic attitude and initially presented in a very simple and practical form. Melancthon's *Loci Communes*, published in 1521, have their roots in lectures on Paul's Epistle to the Romans. They are practical through and through in that they treat only anthropological and soteriological topics, especially those of sin and grace and law and gospel, while leaving undiscussed the objective dogmas of God, Trinity, creation, incarnation, and satisfaction. Subsequent editions, however, expanded the number of *loci* and their content, and successive editions exhibit an ever-growing approximation to the synthetic division, which begins with God and from there descends to his works in nature and grace. Zwingli's *Commentary on True and False Religion*, as well as his *Exposition of the Christian Faith*, while also treating a number of dogmatic *loci*, were soon overshadowed by Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Its final (1559) edition contained four books, covering the knowledge of God as Creator, God as Redeemer in Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit (internal = book 3; external = book 4). The division is not strictly trinitarian but derived from the Apostles' Creed. The starting point of the *Institutes* is theological; however, Calvin does not proceed from an abstract concept of God but from God as he is known by humanity from nature and Scripture.

In the course of the seventeenth century, the treatment of the separate *loci* became increasingly more Scholastic, and their connectedness with the life of faith became less apparent as it was experienced less. A reaction followed: theology became increasingly *analytic*; that is to say, it was seen as a *practical* science whose concern was human salvation and well-being.<sup>29</sup> Theology was viewed less as the science of God and more about human wisdom needed for arriving at salvation. There appear to be advantages in focusing on those concerns that are important to all believers such as the question: "What must I do to be saved?" The Heidelberg Catechism also repeatedly asks us, "What does it benefit you to know this?" Nonetheless, this method is inadequate *theologically* since it diverts us from the objective reality of God to anthropological concerns. The covenant theologian Johannes Cocceius similarly exchanged the theological for an anthropological viewpoint. In his *Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God* (1648) he divided all the material of dogmatics in terms of the covenant idea in the hope of offering a more biblical-theological and anti-Scholastic dogmatics. But Cocceius' arrangement of the different covenant dispensations so sharply distinguished them, treating the history of the covenant of grace as a series of *abrogations*, an abolition of the covenant of works, that the unity of God's covenant promise was lost. The major objection to this approach is that its theological starting point is not God but the covenant between God and humanity. Here, doctrines of God and humanity

29. Ed. note: The word "analytic" here refers not to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of "analytic philosophy" but to the method of beginning with a stated goal and working back to the means.

function only in an introductory way as presupposition for the work of salvation. Any boundary between the history of revelation and the content of dogmatics is lost in this approach, and the distinctive work of dogmatic theology is subsumed under a specious “biblical theology” which undermines it.

[32] The shape of dogmatic theology was changed significantly under the influence of modern philosophy, which diminished its content and enlarged the formal discussion about method. Questions about methodology and epistemology became primary, trumping metaphysical ones. Since Kant declared God to be unknowable, reason and natural theology were substituted for divine revelation. Morality and religious feeling became the starting point and subject matter of theology; the prolegomena of religious philosophy grew in size and influence in comparison with the content of theology. This is a major change from the Reformation era and earlier where Scripture’s truth and authority were simply assumed and the battles took place over particular dogmas. Now, reason and historical criticism of Scripture together served as challenges to the church’s dogmas. The conviction took hold that human reason, even apart from faith, could of itself produce all the truths of natural theology. Reason not only received its own domain alongside revelation but eventually extended its powers over that of revelation itself. Reason was given the prerogative of investigating the truth of revelation. Natural theology was believed to provide a solid ground on which to stand, a purely scientific foundation, and revelation too was examined this way. Reason was no longer content with the modest role of servant and demanded a controlling voice. The prolegomena to theology consistently grew in scope and shaped the content.

[33] Rationalist foundations for theology, however, could not withstand the philosophical challenge initiated by Kant. Schleiermacher, among others, attempted to save faith and the doctrine of faith by restricting them to feelings and the description of feeling, specifically the “feeling of absolute dependence.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, the actual organization of dogmatic theology does not change dramatically in the nineteenth century. Attacks on the Christian religion in the nineteenth century were primarily directed against the foundations themselves. The philosophical underpinnings of dogmatics came under fire; not isolated doctrines but the very possibility of doctrine and dogmatic theology were questioned. When, in addition, Holy Scripture is robbed of its divine authority by historical criticism, it should not surprise us that religious life loses its vitality. Faith is no longer sure of itself; the childlike and simultaneously heroic statement “I believe” is heard less and less as criticism, doubt, and uncertainty gain the upper hand. Even the warrant for and value of religion was seriously disputed. Consequently, and partly caused by all this, religious life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is dramatically less vigorous than before. There may be movement in the domain of religion and the study of religion, but there is little

30. F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §4.

genuinely religious life. People perhaps still believe their confessions, but they no longer confess their faith.<sup>31</sup>

[34] The irony here is that in the attempt to liberate theology from past errors, including the error of metaphysics, theologians such as Schleiermacher only made it even more dependent on philosophy. When questions of theological method and/or apologetics dominate a theologian's work we generally see a weaker tie to the truth of Scripture and tradition and an increasing dependence on the philosophy *du jour*. Even when Reformed theologians begin their work with the natural knowledge of God and the rational and historical proofs of the Christian religion, all as a *preamble* to the content of theology proper, they forsake the starting point in faith. Giving reasons for believing ought to arise out of faith itself and not serve as the preamble to theology.<sup>32</sup> Still, dealing with the foundations of theology before the content is a useful and good thing. Care must be taken to ensure that this prolegomena material does not lose its theological character and make dogmatic theology subservient to philosophy. The foundations of faith (*principia fidei*) are themselves articles of faith (*articuli fidei*), based not on human arguments and proofs but on divine authority. The recognition of revelation, of Scripture as the Word of God, is an act of faith as well as its fruit. Dogmatic theology is from start to finish the work of a believer who is confessing and giving an account of the ground and content of his faith. The foundations of faith are twofold: the external and internal, the objective and the formal, revelation and faith. These two topics are the proper subject matter of theological prolegomena.

When we move to the *content* of dogmatic theology, different organizing principles have been suggested, including the creedal trinitarian structure, Father and Creation, Son and Redemption, Holy Spirit and Sanctification.<sup>33</sup> Although not objectionable as such, this scheme is not altogether satisfactory for a number of reasons. First, it cannot accommodate the treatment of the Trinity itself because it does not naturally fit in any of the three economies and so has to be discussed by way of hypothesis in a prior chapter. Furthermore, in following this division one runs the risk that the outward or external works of God (*opera Dei ad extra*) are conceived too much as the individual works of the three Persons (*opera Dei personalia*) and not enough as essential works of the one God (*opera Dei essentialia*), i.e., the common works of the divine person. Although this structure preserves unity, the Trinity is viewed only economically and its ontological character not recognized. In addition, the *loci* on creation, angels, humanity, sin, church, etc., cannot come into their own. Organizing the content of dogmatic theology on a christological

31. A. Schweizer, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre nach protestantischen Grundsätzen dargestellt*, 2 vols. in 3 (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1863–72).

32. Ed. note: This position thus differs significantly from that of Benjamin Warfield; see his reviews of Francis R. Beattie, *Apologetics, or, the Rational Vindication of Christianity* (1903), and H. Bavinck, *De Zekerheid de Geloofs* (1901), in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1973 [1907]), II, 93–123.

33. See *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 8.

basis is even less satisfying because it often rests on the false assumption that rather than Scripture the person of Christ specifically is the foundation and epistemic source of dogmatics. However, we know Christ only from and through Scripture. In addition, though Christ is quite certainly the central focus and main content of Holy Scripture, he cannot be its starting point. Christ presupposes the existence of God and humanity. He did not make his historical appearance immediately at the time of the promise (in Eden) but many centuries later. Furthermore, God's revelation through the Son does not nullify the many and varied ways he spoke through the prophets. Scripture *as a whole* is God's Word to us and not the New Testament alone nor the words of Jesus alone.

Other organizations of dogmatic theology, such as those modeled on the three virtues (faith, hope, and love); on the scheme of faith, prayer, and commandment; on the final end and destiny of humanity; on the covenant or the fellowship between God and man; on the kingdom of God; on the concepts of life, love, spirit, etc., are also inadequate. Although they may have many practical advantages and be perfectly appropriate in a catechism, these systems are unsuitable for a work of theology, which is a system of the knowledge of God; they are not central and comprehensive enough. Either they have been introduced from the outside and do not govern the system, or they are strictly adhered to as principles of organization but fail to do justice to the various *loci*.

[35] The content of dogmatic theology is the knowledge of God as he has revealed it in Christ through his Word. The knowledge of believers is unique in that they view the whole of life religiously and theologically and see everything in God's light, from the perspective of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*). That is the difference between their worldview and a philosophical or scientific worldview. In dogmatic theology it is always Christian believers who are speaking. They do not speculate about God or proceed from an abstract philosophical concept of God, but only describe the knowledge of God that has been revealed to them in Christ. In every dogma, therefore, throbs the heartbeat of religion. Theologians explicate the content of their faith as it is objectively exhibited by God himself before their believing eyes in revelation. They are not governed by the believing subject but by the object of faith and derive the principle of organization and the arrangement of the material from the selfsame object that it is their task to describe.

If this starting point is correct, then the method of organization that commends itself is the *historic-genetic* or *synthetic* method. It takes its point of departure in God and views all creatures only in relation to him. Proceeding from God, it descends to his works, in order through them again to ascend to and end in him. So in this method God is beginning, middle, and end. From him, through him, and to him are all things (Rom. 11:36). The content of the Christian faith is the knowledge of God in his being and in his works.

God and his works are, however, clearly distinguished. God is Creator, Redeemer, and Perfecter. He is "the efficient and exemplary Cause of things through creation, their renewing Principle through redemption, and their perfective Prin-

ciple in restoration” (Bonaventure). Dogmatic theology is the system of the knowledge of God as he has revealed himself in Christ; it is the system of the Christian religion. And the essence of the Christian religion consists in the reality that what the Father has created, ruined by sin, is restored in the death of the Son of God and re-created by the grace of the Holy Spirit into a kingdom of God. Dogmatic theology shows us how God, who is all-sufficient in himself, nevertheless glorifies himself in his creation, which, even when it is torn apart by sin, is gathered up again in Christ (Eph. 1:10). It describes for us God, always God, from beginning to end—God in his being, God in his creation, God against sin, God in Christ, God breaking down all resistance through the Holy Spirit and guiding the whole of creation back to the objective he decreed for it: the glory of his name. Dogmatic theology, therefore, is not a dull and arid science. It is a theodicy, a doxology to all God’s virtues and perfections, a hymn of adoration and thanksgiving, a “glory to God in the highest” (Luke 2:14). Theology is about God and should reflect a doxological tone that glorifies him.