

The
FAITH
ONCE
DELIVERED

THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY
AND THE REFORMED FAITH

A Series

CARL R. TRUEMAN

Series Editor

The
FAITH
ONCE
DELIVERED

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF
DR. WAYNE R. SPEAR

Edited by
ANTHONY T. SELVAGGIO

Foreword by
W. ROBERT GODFREY


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Series Introduction

The last two decades have seen a revolution in the way in which scholars have come to understand the nature and development of Reformed theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was in this context, and to further this scholarly revolution, that Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia established the Craig Center for the Study of the Westminster Standards in 2002. The center provides a forum for promoting scholarly study of the history and theology of the Westminster Assembly, the various documents that it produced, and the way in which these documents have been received and used over the years.

As part of this project, the Craig Center has joined forces with P&R Publishing Company to commission a series of books, including monographs and collections of essays, that reflect this agenda. Each volume stands within the trajectories set by this new scholarship and takes seriously the theological content of Reformed orthodoxy while not naively divorcing that content from its historical or ecclesiastical context. Yet in doing this, these books do not become simply examples of antiquarianism or historicism. In fact, our desire is that this approach will free the past from the shackles and constraints of the agendas of the immediate present and thus allow voices from history to speak meaningfully to the world of today. It is thus the hope of the Craig Committee that both church and academy will benefit from this series for many years to come.

Carl R. Trueman
Chair of the Craig Committee

Foreword

W. ROBERT GODFREY



In the midst of growing political and social turmoil—leading to civil war and the execution of a king—commissioners called by the English parliament began to meet in 1643. Over a period of years they worked in the precincts of Westminster Abbey in London to compose standards that they hoped would guide a newly reformed church in Great Britain. Their work was prodigious and profound, manifesting remarkable balance and solidity in light of the chaotic conditions that often surrounded them.

The commissioners to this Westminster Assembly did not see themselves as religious revolutionaries, tearing down an old church to erect a brand-new one. They saw themselves as reformers who could at last bring the churches of England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland into great conformity to the Word of God, to each other, and to the Reformed churches of continental Europe.

This Assembly is best remembered today for the Westminster Confession of Faith and the catechisms that it prepared. But unlike those who embrace the modern tendency to reductionism, the members of the Assembly knew that a reformed church needed more than a summary of its official doctrine. The commissioners also prepared a form of church government to structure the official organization of the church. In addition, they prepared a Directory of Public Worship to guide the churches in meeting with their God. And they arranged for the preparation of a Psalter as the praise book for public worship.

The fruit of the work of the Assembly had little effect in England. The triumph of Independency over Presbyterianism in England

during the Commonwealth and the restoration of episcopacy under King Charles II prevented that. But in Scotland and in Presbyterian churches around the world, the work of the Westminster Assembly had great and blessed effect.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, most Protestant churches in America find themselves in very serious turmoil and trouble in the very areas about which the Assembly worked and wrote with such care. In the evangelical, Pentecostal, and Reformed churches we see great confusion and error on doctrine, church government, and worship.

The depth of the current disarray in evangelical churches is well documented in a book by Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, provocatively titled *Is the Reformation Over?* This book largely examines the changes in the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and evangelical churches in the last fifty years. The contention of the book is that Roman Catholics and evangelicals are much closer to each other in theology and practice than they were fifty years ago and that while the differences that remain are not trivial, many evangelicals now rightly recognize Roman Catholics as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Noll and Nystrom list a number of evangelical weaknesses (“ecclesiology, tradition, the intellectual life, sacraments, theology of culture, aesthetics, philosophical theology, or historical consciousness”) and note that evangelicals in these areas “almost always” find some help in the Roman Catholic tradition.¹ Modern evangelicals seem seldom to look to the great Reformed and Lutheran traditions of the Reformation for help. In fact, Noll and Nystrom’s book illustrates—largely unintentionally—how little evangelicals know or understand the concerns and work of the Reformation. Indeed, this book—again unintentionally—is further evidence that the evangelical tradition is as different from the Reformed tradition as it is from Lutheranism or Pentecostalism.

To speak just of the Reformed heritage of the Reformation, one could not charge the Reformed with a lack of concern for ecclesiology.

1. Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 71.

Much study was undertaken and many books written on that subject, exploring the fullness of biblical teaching. (If the Reformed had a fault, it was not the neglect of ecclesiology, but a failure to maintain a clear witness to and practice of biblical Presbyterianism.) On tradition and historical consciousness, the Reformed studied with care the ancient fathers and medieval theologians, recognizing both value and errors in their work. The intellectual life of Reformed scholars has been second to none for over four hundred years. On sacraments the Reformed thought deeply, and they wrote widely on baptism and the Lord's Supper. They also made them an integral part of Christian worship and experience. The Reformed contributions on culture, aesthetics, and philosophical theology have been significant, especially in Dutch Reformed circles in the last hundred years.

Many evangelicals, in their pursuit of vital religion, abandoned their Reformation heritage in most of the areas of weakness highlighted by Noll and Nystrom. It is not surprising that they should find their own tradition to be shallow and impoverished. Yet it is very disappointing that they seem so driven by the pursuit of religious experience that they find more affinity with the human inventions of Rome than with the biblical, confessional commitments of the Reformed.

Dr. Wayne Spear has spent much of his ministry teaching the theology contained in the Westminster Standards. It is right that he should be honored at his retirement with a volume of essays examining the riches of the work of the Westminster Assembly. Our prayer should be that the solid Reformed teaching exemplified in his life and in this book may help reform the churches in our day according to the Word of God. Perhaps more than at any other time since the Reformation, churches today need biblical doctrine instead of human ideas of truth. They need biblical church government rather than government by offices of human contrivance. They need biblical worship rather than the vain pursuit of human rites and practices. The Reformation is not over. The Reformation is needed more today than ever, and the wisdom of the Westminster Standards is more relevant today than at any other time in recent memory.

Editor's Preface

ANTHONY T. SELVAGGIO



This volume is a celebration of Reformed systematic theology. It celebrates the theology that emerged during the years of the Reformation and reached its high-water mark at the Westminster Assembly. Celebrating systematic theology is vitally important in our current theological climate. The current trend in theological studies is to neglect traditional systematic theology. Many modern theologians have eschewed the topical and rational approach of systematic theology in favor of practical and narrative approaches. This trend is both unfortunate and dangerous. The intent of this volume is to encourage the church to once again focus on *theology*, the humble study of God through his self-revelation. Given this intent, it is therefore fitting that the volume include contributions from those engaged in systematic theology from a variety of Reformed denominations and from several different nations. It is also fitting that the volume begin with an inspiring and thoughtful essay entitled “The Vitality of Reformed Systematic Theology.”

This volume is also a celebration of the teaching career of Dr. Wayne R. Spear, who taught systematic theology at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for over thirty years. Dr. Spear taught me the value of the traditional approach to systematic theology. The most noteworthy aspect of Dr. Spear's approach to teaching systematic theology was his insistence on using both the Bible and the Westminster Confession of Faith as the primary references. Dr. Spear recognized that systematic theology flows from the Bible itself and that there is no better summary of

ANTHONY T. SELVAGGIO

Reformed systematic theology than the Westminster Confession of Faith. He unashamedly and unapologetically taught “confessional” Reformed systematic theology. Therefore, it is fitting to honor him with a collection of essays that touch on some of the great themes and theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith. In order to specially honor Dr. Spear, two of the essays in this volume were written by former students, C. J. Williams and me, and one was written by Dr. Spear’s successor, Dr. Richard Gamble.

In this book the reader will be exposed to the theological topics at the core of Westminster’s theology, topics such as justification, adoption, the kingship of Christ, the doctrine of Scripture, the Lord’s Day, covenant theology, the atonement, and Christian liberty. These topics served as pillars of the theology that was forged in Westminster Abbey in the seventeenth century and, if the church is to adhere to the “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3 NASB), must continue to serve as pillars of the Reformed church in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Introduction

JERRY O'NEILL



On more than one occasion I have heard my friend and colleague Dr. Wayne Spear lecture on the history of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). No one is more qualified to do so. His knowledge and thoroughness in covering this subject so dear to his heart are evident to all. But when his lectures come to the latter half of the twentieth century and the early days of the twenty-first century, they omit the one man who has arguably had the most profound influence on the RPCNA for the last half-century.

In these lectures, Dr. Spear rightly discusses the continuing impact of the late J. G. Vos, and he carefully explains some of the important decisions made by our synod over these years. He mentions presidents of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary (RPTS) who have provided formal and informal leadership for the denomination because of their labors at the denominational seminary. He notes pastors such as Kenneth Smith, Roy Blackwood, and Edward Robson, who have been tremendously used by the Lord in our generation. But his humility keeps him from even considering in this context the one man who many of us think has done more than anyone else to shape pastors and ultimately congregations within our denomination in the last generation: Wayne Renwick Spear.

Dr. Spear served as professor of systematic theology at RPTS for thirty-five years. At the time of his retirement in the summer of 2005, he had spent exactly half his life serving his Lord, and his denomination, in this capacity. During many of those years he also taught church history, taught homiletics, or served as dean of faculty.

But it is not merely the fact that he served for thirty-five years in one ministry position that is so impressive. Many others in the church who have been blessed by God with good health and perseverance have labored in Christ's kingdom for an equal number of years. But few have labored more faithfully and more ably than this humble servant of the Lord.

I count it an honor to have served on the seminary faculty with Dr. Spear. He was my teacher of systematic theology when I was a student at RPTS, and I still have (and occasionally use) the notes that I took in his classes. When I returned to the seminary to serve in my current position, Dr. Spear's counsel to me in his role as dean of faculty was invaluable.

I have also had the privilege of serving with Dr. Spear in the various courts of the church—the session in the North Hills of Pittsburgh, the Presbytery of the Alleghenies, and the Synod of the RPCNA. His has always been a voice of reason in such settings. Younger men often do much of the talking in these meetings, but when Dr. Spear speaks, others listen—and learn. His service to the church has sometimes been public (chairing the Geneva College Board of Corporators, for example) and sometimes private. But he always serves humbly and without fanfare. Few who read this book will have any idea of the myriad ways in which he faithfully serves Christ and his church behind the scenes.

As intimated earlier, Dr. Spear's teaching has tremendously influenced my theological convictions, as it has those of so many others who have studied at the seminary both before and after me. He has the uncanny ability to read difficult and complicated theological works, understand what the authors are trying to communicate, critique these works from a biblical perspective, and then explain it all to others who might not even be able to wade through the original material.

Dr. Spear's knowledge of theology and church history is remarkable. Seldom is he without an answer to a student's question. Sometimes a student will ask a question on an obscure subject about which few others in the class have any knowledge whatsoever. Certain students seem to have the desire to stump the professor with these kinds of questions. But all of us who have sat in Dr. Spear's classes can recall how he will often pause (sometimes for a considerable length

of time), reach back into his vast memory reservoir—almost appearing to be thumbing through his mental Rolodex—and pull out an answer that just “blows away” everyone in the class. Not only will he recall the author and the book from which he draws his answer, but he will be able to quote the author who addressed the point under consideration almost verbatim.

Dr. Spear’s teaching is known to be clear, systematic, and thorough. Occasional stories, illustrations, and wise proverbs that inject both clarification and humor into his lectures also mark his teaching. Some of these were passed along from those who taught him in a previous day; some are his own. One example, given to budding preachers as they consider the preferred length of sermons, is Spear’s Law: “If it is long, it had better be good!”

One story that Dr. Spear likes to tell his students in his doctrine of salvation course is passed along from one of his former professors at Geneva College about a student who was falling asleep in class just as his Bible teacher asked him whether he could explain how the sovereignty of God in election could be reconciled with the biblical teachings of human responsibility and free will. The student heard his name called, but had not heard the question. Rather than admitting this, he replied, “Yesterday I knew the answer to that question, but today I have forgotten it.” To this the professor replied to the class, “This is indeed a great tragedy. Only two persons in all of history have known the answer to my question. One is God, and he has chosen not to reveal the answer to us. The other is our brother here, and he has forgotten!”

I’m reminded of one illustration that demonstrates Dr. Spear’s ability to use a modern-day parable to drive a particular teaching home. When discussing the topic of redemption, he tells a story passed on to him by a former pastor of his. The story is about a young lad who, with great and loving care, built a small wooden boat. It was without any question his prized possession, and he frequently played with the boat in the small creek near his home. One night he left the boat by the creek, attempting to secure it safely to a nearby tree before he went home for the evening. During the night, a storm came up and the boat was swept away, to the boy’s deep chagrin. Sometime later, though, the boy walked by a secondhand store, and he spotted

his prized little boat. Quickly he ran home, gathered together all his money, and returned to the store to purchase the boat that had once been his. As he carried the boat out of the store, he looked at it fondly and said, "Little boat, you are twice mine. I made you, and now I have bought you back." How better can you teach such a profound biblical truth?

Dr. Spear was born into a preacher's family on July 24, 1935. His father, Norman, died shortly before Wayne's twelfth birthday, and he spent his teenage years on his uncle's farm in Bovina Center, New York. This agricultural background did much to shape his personality and interests, and to this day he owns, loves, and carefully tends to Haflinger horses on his small farm in Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, several miles north of Pittsburgh.

While in high school Wayne demonstrated the gifts and interests that would mark his later life when he developed an original outline of the book of Romans. At a time in life when most of us were pursuing sports or other temporal pleasures, Wayne was giving serious time to the study of God's Word. He did enjoy sports and other recreational activities, but his life was already balanced and Christ-centered.

While a student at Geneva College, Wayne distinguished himself in the classroom, ran cross-country, and fell in love with Mary Grace McCracken, whom he married after his first year at seminary. Although Wayne himself is not quick to confirm the following account, a widespread rumor has it that during his senior year of college, he not only aced the comprehensive examination in Bible, which was his major field of study, but also took the comprehensive exam in science and scored higher than all the science majors. (In those days, students were required to pass a comprehensive exam in their major field of study before graduation. Also in those days, Geneva's science department was highly esteemed, with medical schools gladly accepting most Geneva students who applied.)

After graduating from RPTS in 1960, Wayne spent six years in pastoral ministry before pursuing graduate studies at the request of Synod—at Princeton Theological Seminary, Westminster Theological Seminary (where he received a Th.M.), the University of Pittsburgh, and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (where he received his Ph.D.).

In 1970 he began his teaching responsibilities at RPTS, where he taught until he retired.

Because RPTS has been the site of most of Dr. Spear's ministry over the years, and because the seminary is not well known to many in the Reformed and evangelical communities, it seems appropriate in these words of introduction to say just a little about the institution. An understanding of RPTS will help you, the reader, understand the context of this man's labors.

The seminary was founded in 1810, one year after the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America had been officially organized. The establishment of the seminary was one of the first acts of the new synod and demonstrates the priority that this fledgling church placed on preparing pastors for the gospel ministry. RPTS is the fifth oldest seminary, and the oldest evangelical or Reformed seminary, in the United States.

For many years, consistent with how other seminaries of that era operated, a professor of theology was elected by Synod and the students of theology came to study with him wherever he ministered. When the pastor-professor moved to serve a different congregation, the seminary moved with him. In its first forty-six years, RPTS operated in at least five different locations, depending on where the lead professor was serving as pastor.

In 1856 the seminary was moved to a permanent location in what is now called the North Side of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1923 RPTS was moved to its present site in Point Breeze, in Pittsburgh's East End. This beautiful site was originally a mansion built by a retail magnate near the end of the nineteenth century, and has been extensively remodeled and enlarged to house the seminary.

For many years the seminary primarily served Reformed Presbyterian students preparing for pastoral ministry or the mission field. In the last half of the twentieth century the ministry began to expand to include students from a wide variety of evangelical and Reformed churches. In 1973 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania granted RPTS the authority to offer the Master of Divinity degree, and in 1994 the seminary was accredited by the Association of Theological Schools.

Today the seminary is, in the judgment of those of us who are called to serve there, a very special place where the blessing of God's

Spirit seems most evident. God has, in his grace, enabled RPTS to remain firmly committed to the historic Reformed faith in its teaching while ministering to students from various cultures, nations, and denominational backgrounds. Students find the seminary to be a haven, a safe refuge, an ideal environment in which to learn the great truths of the historic faith.

The seminary also houses the Center for Urban Biblical Ministry, which works with Geneva College to provide associate's degrees for students in our city. We also provide a site for Geneva College to offer modular courses leading to a bachelor's degree in community ministry in a nontraditional evening-school format. On this one site, therefore, a student can get an associate's degree through the Center for Urban Biblical Ministry, a bachelor's degree in community ministry from Geneva College, and either a Master of Theological Studies degree or a Master of Divinity degree from RPTS.

The seminary's great desire is to be faithful to the Word of God and the mission he has given us. In God's grace, Dr. Spear has played an enormous role in enabling us to fulfill this mission for the last thirty-five years.

Because RPTS has historically been a seminary where teaching was emphasized, with little time available for professors to do research and writing, Dr. Spear has not been a prolific author and is not as widely known as some who spend much of their time writing books. Nevertheless, *The Theology of Prayer*, his first book, printed in 1974, was revised and updated in 2002 under the title *Talking to God: The Theology of Prayer*; and a new book critiquing the neoorthodox theology of Karl Barth is (at my writing of this) soon to be published. Dr. Spear has also written scholarly journal articles and contributed chapters for books edited by others. He is a respected scholar in Reformed academic circles and was asked in 1993 to present material in London, in conjunction with the celebration of the 350th anniversary of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Dr. Spear's life and ministry were seriously threatened in 1986. While running near his home in Gibsonia, he experienced a splitting headache and realized that something was seriously wrong. He went to the emergency room of a local hospital and was diagnosed with an aneurysm in his brain. Thankfully, in response to the urgent prayers

of many people and under the care of a skilled physician, the Lord spared his life, and he has had no further trouble as a result of the aneurysm.

When I first joined the RPTS faculty in 1995, Dr. Spear was already thinking of his retirement. He was quite concerned that younger men be given the opportunity to serve; and he was concerned that after his many years at the seminary, he might be growing stale in the classroom. But in the providence of God, he was asked to go with a team of men to Romania in the summer of 1997 to teach at a small seminary there. This experience seemed to recharge his batteries, reinvigorating him for his teaching responsibilities back home. He enthusiastically returned to RPTS in the fall, and taught with vigor until his recent retirement.

Personally, I look forward to seeing much of Wayne in his retirement. Not only do we serve on the same session in the North Hills of Pittsburgh, we also share certain members of our families. Wayne's youngest son, Sam, is married to my oldest daughter, Meg, and they have seven children. What a blessing for my wife, Ann, and me to share grandkids with Wayne and Mary Spear! But Wayne and Mary don't share all of their grandchildren with us. They have a total of twenty-four as of this writing, and the Lord may have others to come. Truly they have been blessed to see their children's children, and to see God's covenant promises extend from one generation to the next.

On behalf of the entire RPTS community, it is my great joy to introduce Wayne Spear (and his wife, Mary) to the readers of this volume. My prayer is that the Lord will use this work for the advancement of the kingdom of Christ, and that Wayne and Mary will be richly blessed all the days of their lives. They have given selflessly to Christ's work; may they be greatly rewarded for their labors of love.

The Vitality of Reformed Systematic Theology

RICHARD B. GAFFIN JR.



Toward the close of the nineteenth century, the Old School Presbyterian periodical, *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, published an article by the Dutch dogmatician Herman Bavinck, “The Future of Calvinism.”¹ In it Bavinck’s concern is with Calvinism broadly, as a worldview, not just its systematic theology. He reflects on the situation in the Netherlands and then contemplates Calvinism’s future elsewhere. The article remains remarkably timely. Two points of a more general sort are particularly worth highlighting for those, more than a century later, still concerned for the future of Calvinism and the vitality of its systematic theology.

First, in surveying the period of decline in Dutch Calvinism that begins toward the close of the seventeenth century, Bavinck notes that, thankfully, “the treasure of Calvinism” continued to be preserved, but

This chapter was first delivered as a paper, entitled “The Vitality of Reformed Dogmatics,” at the International Theological Congress in Noordwijkerhout, Netherlands, in June 1994 and subsequently published in the proceedings of that Congress (now out of print), J. M. Batteau, J. W. Maris, and K. Veilig, eds., *The Vitality of Reformed Theology* (Kampen: Kok, 1994), 16–50. It is offered here, with some revisions, in appreciation of the life and labors of Wayne Spear.

1. Herman Bavinck, “The Future of Calvinism,” *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 5 (January 1894): 1–24; subsequently published with a revised and shortened introduction and other slight revisions in “Het Calvinisme in Nederland en zijne toekomst,” *Tijdschrift voor Gereformeerde theologie* 3 (1896): 129–63.

in a manner that can be described only as imbalanced and unhealthy. A faithful remnant, increasingly marginalized and alienated from the dominant trends in church and society, became inflexible and reactionary; they lived in the past and despised the present. Calvinism ceased to be properly radical; it lost its vitality.² So, Bavinck cautions, those concerned for revival “do not wish to reprimatinate, and have no desire for the old conditions to return,” and he goes on to warn against “the deadly embrace of a dead conservatism.”³

It would be easy enough to speculate that were Bavinck writing today,⁴ with all that has transpired over the course of the twentieth century to the present, not least of all the developments within his own denomination, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands,⁵ he would adopt a different, more cautious and conservative tone. But that would be gratuitous. Bavinck was not naive. His eyes were open to “the alarming fact that unbelief is increasing on all hands.”⁶ He was well aware that “the tendencies prevailing at the present day in the Christian Church are not favorable to Calvinism.”⁷

In a time, such as our own, of unprecedented radicalism and profligate experimentation, both theologically and ethically, the temptation

2. “In the same proportion that they felt less at home in their own time, they lived in the past, in the world of the old religious literature, in the speech and ideas of the fathers. The Reformed, who had once stood at the head of every movement and been the liberals and radicals of their time, now became conservative, reactionary, panegyrist of the old, and despisers of the new times. . . . It was no longer the old, high-minded, radical Calvinism, but a Calvinism that had become rough, harsh, unpolished, without splendor and fire, cold and dry and dead.” Bavinck, “The Future of Calvinism,” 10–11.

3. Ibid., 13. Similarly, Abraham Kuyper began the last of his Stone Lectures delivered at Princeton Seminary in 1898, “Calvinism and the Future,” by excluding “every idea of imitative reprimatination.” “What the descendants of the old Dutch Calvinists as well as of the Pilgrim fathers have to do,” he went on to say, “is not to copy the past, as if Calvinism were a petrification, but to go back to the living root of the Calvinist plant, to clean and to water it, and so to cause it to bud and to blossom once more, now fully in accordance with our actual life in these modern times, and with the demands of the times to come.” A. Kuyper, *Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 171.

4. Writing in the flush of recent developments culminating in the union of 1892 between churches of the Afscheiding and the Doleantie movements, Bavinck is keenly aware of living in a time of dawning revival and sees that union as “a prophecy perhaps also of a better and more beautiful future.” “The Future of Calvinism,” 12.

5. I am inclined to say, “stunning declension.” Those who may find that assessment too severe, or unfair, will at least have to admit that these developments are hardly the “future of Calvinism” that Bavinck had in mind.

6. Ibid., 13.

7. Ibid., 16.

to be merely reactionary becomes all the stronger. For instance, we may believe, probably rightly, that present abuse of the Reformation's *semper reformanda* has never been more flagrant. But the prostitution of that principle, no matter how glaring, does not remove its truth. "We may not suppose that theological construction ever reaches definitive finality."⁸ Today, no less than in Bavinck's time, we may be sure, to use his striking language, that "the deadly embrace of a dead conservatism" remains a live threat to the vitality of Calvinism, including its systematic theology.

Second, one of the distinctive strengths of Calvinism, according to Bavinck, is that in its theology and church life "it avoids all mechanical uniformity."⁹ He has in mind especially the multiplicity of confessions in the Reformed tradition—in contrast, say, to Lutheranism. Calvinism, he says, has room for the display of individuality and for the differences that exist among various nationalities. The truth is too rich and manifold for any individual person or individual church to assimilate in all its fullness. "Only in company with all the saints can we understand the breadth and length and depth and height of the love of Christ."¹⁰

Again, in view of the religious and theological pluralism rampant today, it would be easy to downplay Bavinck's emphasis, not to mention his allusion to the apostle Paul (Eph. 3:8, 10, 18–19). But that would slight an important point of our Reformed heritage. Bavinck reminds us that variety and Reformed vitality are not in tension. The apostolic ideal, "together with all the saints" (Eph. 3:18),¹¹ and Paul's injunction that "you all say the same thing" (1 Cor. 1:10) do not mean that it has to be said in the same way or with identical formulations.

The vitality of Reformed systematic theology may no doubt be explored in a number of different ways, but these would all seem to reflect one of two basic approaches. On the one hand, we could

8. John Murray, "Systematic Theology," in *Collected Writings*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976–82), 4:7.

9. Bavinck, "The Future of Calvinism," 22.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Scripture quotations in this chapter are my translations.

accent the antithetic stance required within the broader contemporary religious and theological environment. Ours is an era dominated by postmodern pretensions, aggressively pluralistic, rife with deconstructive confusion, and celebrating doctrinal disunity and contradiction in the name of permissible, even healthy, “diversity,” to note several characteristic trends. So we could concern ourselves with these and other tendencies that threaten to sap the vitality of Reformed systematic theology. Alternatively, we could concentrate on the inherent vigor of Reformed systematic theology and how best to preserve and even nurture its strengths. Neither of these approaches need exclude the other. But I have decided here to follow the latter, more positive approach, trying to stay focused always on the notion of vitality, but without entirely neglecting the antithetic stance. In doing so, I am keenly aware at a number of points of having done little more than raise issues and of the need to probe much more deeply. My hope is at least to have stimulated further discussion in a constructive fashion.

The Word of God is “living and active” (Heb. 4:12). Like God himself, it “abides forever” (Isa. 40:8; 1 Peter 1:25). That vitality, ultimately, is the source of whatever vitality, derivatively, Reformed systematic theology has and will continue to have. I assume that this truth is a commonplace for many readers of this volume, but it never becomes so obvious that we may cease reminding each other of it, particularly when it continues to be anything but obvious in the larger theological scene, where denials and enervating misconceptions about God’s Word abound and persist.

If the vitality of systematic theology is the vitality of the Word and, what is equally important, of the Spirit working in the church with the Word, then systematic theology can have no more vital concern than the inscripturated Word and how it handles that Word.¹² Systematic

12. As the briefest indication of my own stance, suffice it to say here that in its heart of hearts God’s Word is the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, and, inseparable from him, the written Word, the canonical Scriptures. These Scriptures, in their entirety, both materially and formally, in diverse text forms and genre as well as varied, multifaceted content, are identified by the exalted Christ (“the self-attesting Christ of Scripture”) as his very own words, and by his Spirit, he maintains them in the life of the church (“the letter written to me and to the whole Church by Christ himself”). The expressions in parentheses are from Cornelius Van Til, “My Credo,”

theology, as I take it, is a radically nonspeculative undertaking. That is, while it formulates with an eye to the confessions of the church and past doctrinal developments, as well as to the contemporary opportunities and challenges that face the church, it, like all the other theological disciplines, is essentially exegesis of Scripture.¹³

A hermeneutical dimension, then, is fundamental to the task of systematic theology. The systematic theologian is a custodial interpreter, proximately of church dogma but ultimately of Scripture. This means that at any given point in time, the basic stance that systematic theology is to adopt toward the doctrines and confessions of the church is, as Klaas Schilder has neatly captured it, “sympathetic-critical.”¹⁴ One of its most cherished ambitions is that church doctrine formulate only what is “either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.”¹⁵ The apostolic injunction “Do not go beyond what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6),¹⁶ adapted to the postapostolic, completed-canon situation of the church, holds for all our theologizing, especially for systematic theology. This, the exegetical-hermeneutical facet of systematic theology in distinction

in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 3, 5, 8.

13. Adapting John Calvin’s well-known figure for Scripture as the “spectacles” indispensable for properly understanding the revelation of the entire creation order (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], 1.6.1, 1.14.1), we may say that theology, in all its parts and whatever its encyclopedic divisions, is a kind of “optometry,” concerned with the composition of lenses and frame and, more importantly, their proper use and the correct, saving “vision” they facilitate. In this sense Scripture is the *principium unicum* of theology, its sole foundational source and norm. Even church history, as Gerhard Ebeling persuasively argued (*Kirchengeschichte als Geschichte der Auslegung der heiligen Schrift* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1947]), is essentially “history of the interpretation of Scripture.”

Does not such a stance eventually result in presumptuously claiming too much for theology as a special discipline? It strikes me that we can become too preoccupied with trying to circumscribe and limit theology in relation to other fields of study. The forces at work in theology are first of all centripetal, not centrifugal. When theology remains centered on Scripture, the boundary questions, though still present and important, will be less urgent, and also more likely to be resolved.

14. As quoted by J. Douma in *Oriëntatie in de theologie: Studiegids samengesteld door de hoogleraren aan de Theologische Hogeschool van De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland te Kampen* (Groningen, Netherlands: De Vuurbaak, n.d. but likely 1974), 20. See the afterword at the end of this chapter.

15. Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6.

16. Whatever may be the written document or material Paul had in view; see the commentaries for the problem here.

from its contemporary-contextual and doctrine-historical facets, is my larger concern in what follows.

About the same time as Bavinck's article appeared, in May of 1894 its translator, Geerhardus Vos, was installed as the first occupant of the newly created chair of biblical theology at Princeton Seminary. This proved to be a significant development because Vos, more than anyone else, deserves to be called the father of a Reformed biblical theology. He more than any other was the initiator within a Reformed context of the rich tradition of redemptive-historical exegesis we now possess.¹⁷ But that prompts us to ask this: How, just over a century later, has Reformed systematic theology utilized this exegetical legacy? To what extent has it discharged its responsibility to redemptive-historical exegesis? Probing that area of questions will further focus the remainder of this chapter.

In his inaugural address Vos treated, appropriately, the program and encyclopedic place of biblical theology as a particular discipline.¹⁸ In the course of articulating some advantages of this relatively young discipline, which he preferred to call "History of Special Revelation,"¹⁹ he makes this statement: "It is certainly not without significance that God has embodied the contents of revelation, not in a dogmatic system, but in a book of history."²⁰ Years later, at the close of his career, he observes in a similar vein, "The Bible is not a dogmatic handbook but a historical book full of dramatic interest." And: "The circle of revelation is not a school, but a 'covenant.'"²¹

The almost identical form of these statements is noteworthy. They express what the Bible is *not* as well as what it is. It is not a "dogmatic handbook"; its structure is not that of a "dogmatic system"; its provenance is not a "school." Such pointedly contrasting formulations

17. Vos's pioneering work has been followed notably by that of Herman Ridderbos and the likes of Schilder, B. Holwerda, M. G. Kline, and (at a more popular level) S. G. De Graaf, and others too numerous to mention.

18. Geerhardus Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," in R. B. Gaffin Jr., ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 3–24.

19. *Ibid.*, 21 n. 2; see also the preface to Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 23.

20. Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology," 23.

21. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 26, 17.

are hardly accidental or merely rhetorical. They confront a more than purely hypothetical misunderstanding and suggest at least a degree of tension.

Whom does Vos have in mind? Clearly he is concerned about the baleful consequences of Enlightenment rationalism. But there is little question from the tenor of his comments that he is also countering an intellectualistic tendency that he finds, closer to home, in the systematic theology of Protestant orthodoxy: the tendency to view the Bible as a compendium of ahistorical first principles or static truths. That tendency can be alleviated, he believes, by biblical theology, that is, by giving greater, more adequate attention to the redemptive-historical structure and content of biblical revelation, or, in other terms, by attending to the embedding of that revelation in the dynamically unfolding history of God's covenant.

How valid is Vos's reservation? That touches on massive historical questions that I am not able to enter into here, except to warn against exaggeration. This caution is all the more necessary because of the widespread but severely distorting model abroad today for reading the history of theology since the Reformation, especially its sweepingly negative assessment of seventeenth-century Protestant orthodoxy.²²

22. It does not seem an unfair caricature to present that model as something like this: "creation"—the Reformation; "the fall"—seventeenth-century orthodoxy (responsible more or less directly, in turn, for eighteenth-century rationalism and nineteenth-century liberalism); "redemption"—primarily Karl Barth and the trends he initiated.

On this view Reformed orthodoxy brings little other than the darkening clouds of medieval synthesis thinking with its baleful dualisms, reappearing after the temporary respite brought by the bright sunshine of the Reformation. Characteristically, this theology is branded with the pejoratives "scholastic" and "scholasticism" (though it is remarkable how seldom an effort is made to define these labels; presumably they are self-evidently bad). Under attack here, if we need reminding of what is obviously at stake, are the biblical integrity and continuing viability of major Reformed confessions such as the Canons of Dort and the Westminster Standards, which stem from a "scholastic" mind-set.

Especially worth mentioning, for a fuller evaluation of post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy and its strengths and weaknesses, out of a growing body of literature by others, is the valuable groundbreaking work of Richard Muller in rehabilitating the Reformed "scholastics" and redressing the distortions of the currently prevailing paradigm by showing the deep and cordial continuity, despite all the differences in method, between the theology of the Reformers and that of the seventeenth century. See especially his four-volume *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatic Theology: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) and his inaugural address, *Scholasticism and Orthodoxy in the Reformed Tradition: An Attempt at Definition* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1995).

In this regard Vos himself has made a most important balancing observation. Writing in 1916, he said of Reformed theology that it

has from the beginning shown itself possessed of a true historic sense in the apprehension of the progressive character of the deliverance of truth. Its doctrine of the covenants on its historical side represents the first attempt at constructing a history of revelation and may be justly considered the precursor of what is at present called biblical theology.²³

Vos reminds us here that the Reformed confessions and the theological framework they entail, particularly the doctrine of the covenant, far from being hostile, are quite hospitable toward and in fact anticipate giving greater, more methodologically self-conscious attention to the redemptive-historical substance of Scripture. Flaws there undoubtedly are in post-Reformation orthodoxy, but we must be on guard against overstating them.

With that important qualification made, however, there can be little doubt that Vos was not just “tilting at windmills.” He voiced a legitimate concern—one that, over a century later, remains a live one. The primary text for producing textbooks on systematic theology is not itself a systematic-theological textbook, an elemental fact but still worth pondering. The question still needs to be asked about the tension between “covenant” and “school” that Vos noted, about those intellectualistic traces in treating doctrine that leave the life of the congregation untouched. Has that tension and have those traces entirely disappeared from Reformed systematic theology? In other words, once more, has Reformed systematic theology adequately processed the heritage of redemptive-historical exegesis and considered its fructifying and reshaping potential? These and like questions, it seems to me, are as challenging and as promising as any today for a systematic theology concerned for its continuing viability.

As already intimated, the larger issue in view here, at least in English-language discussions, concerns the relationship between

23. Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 232.

biblical theology and systematic theology. Leaving to the side for now objections to either one or both of these designations, several points need to be briefly highlighted. The subsequent course of my discussion may serve to elaborate and, where necessary, to substantiate these points, at least to some degree.²⁴

1. Biblical theology (= redemptive-historical exegesis) is concerned with the actual revelation process in back of the Bible. That process is in fact a history, redemptive or, more broadly, covenantal history, a history that begins at creation and, subsequent to the fall and largely incorporating the history of Israel along the way, reaches its culmination in the incarnate Christ and his work.

The clearest, most explicit biblical warrant for this fundamental theological construct is the overarching assertion with which the writer of Hebrews begins: “God, having spoken in the past to the fathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, has spoken to us in these last days in his Son” (1:1–2a). Note how this statement captures three interrelated factors: (a) revelation as a historical process, (b) the diversity involved in that process, including, we might observe, diverse modes and various literary genres, as well as, by implication, whatever legitimate methodologies have emerged in the modern era for dealing with them, and (c) Christ as the omega point, the eschatological end point of the process.

Canonical Scripture, then, itself revelation and its own origin a part of redemptive history, is essentially a record of revelation, providing the church’s sole and sufficient access to that history.

2. The history of revelation, “revelation” understood more narrowly as verbal, unfolds within the mainstream of redemptive history. Or, elementally considered, the focus of revelatory Word is redemptive deed. The Word is tethered to the deed and interprets it; without the deed there is no place for the Word.²⁵ In other words, God is his

24. Cf. Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology,” 23–24, and preface to *Biblical Theology*, 12, 24–25; Murray, “Systematic Theology,” 9–21; and my “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1976): 281–99; in a different vein but with substantially overlapping concerns, W. D. Jonker, “Eksegese en dogmatiek,” in W. D. Jonker et al. eds., *Hermeneutica: Erebundel aangebied aan Prof Dr. E. P. Groenewald . . .* (Pretoria, South Africa: N. G. Kerk-Boekhandel, 1970), 157–79.

25. “Revelation is so interwoven with redemption that, unless allowed to consider the latter, it would be suspended in the air.” Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 24. When, for instance, the

own interpreter, preeminently of his activity relative to his creation and its restoration.

All biblical interpretation, then, is interpretation of interpretation—our interpretation of Scripture’s God-given interpretation of (creation, fall, and) redemption. The unity of Scripture in terms of its content is, globally, a redemptive-historical unity, that is, the unity of a historically differentiated and progressively unfolding whole. In terms of the principle of context, so essential for sound biblical interpretation, the broadest controlling context is the covenant-historical context.²⁶ Canon and covenant are correlatives. The canonical context overall, if it is truly honored,²⁷ and the covenant-historical context are coterminous.

3. In its most important aspect, the relational question in view does *not* concern the placing of biblical theology and systematic theology relative to each other as distinct disciplines, although the question may be put that way. A more fundamental, functional, hermeneutical understanding of biblical theology is called for. All exegesis ought to be biblical-theological (redemptive-historical). At stake, then, in so-called biblical theology is nothing less than the exegetical lifeblood of systematic theology.²⁸ The focus of systematic theology, more ultimately, is not dogma but the history of redemption. The latter should

Westminster Shorter Catechism asserts that “the Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man” (3), it is important to make it immediately clear that this teaching (*credenda*) concerns God, as the covenant God, active in creation and redemption, and that the imperatives (*agenda*) are grounded in *this* (covenant-historical) indicative. Far from denying divine aseity, this emphasis rather leaves it in the largely incomprehensible depths that Scripture does. This redemptive-historical emphasis is also an important antidote to the quasi-gnostic as well as privatized, individualistic notions of Christian truth that continue to plague the church.

26. We may say that in so-called biblical theology the principle of context, of the analogy of Scripture, that Scripture interprets Scripture, so central in the Reformation tradition of interpretation, finds its most thoroughly and pointedly biblical realization and application.

27. This, regrettably, cannot be said of the “canonical criticism,” about which so much has been made in recent years (see the work, e.g., of B. Childs and J. A. Sanders). Its effort to read the Bible (the Old Testament) as canon without abandoning the historical-critical method, and its presuppositions, is ultimately self-defeating.

28. Murray incisively observes: “But systematic theology will fail of its task to the extent to which it discards its rootage in biblical theology as properly conceived and developed. It might seem that an undue limitation is placed upon systematic theology by requiring that the exegesis with which it is so intimately concerned should be regulated by the principle of biblical theology. And it might seem contrary to the canon so important for both exegesis and systematics, namely, the analogy of Scripture. These appearances do not correspond to reality.

set the agenda for the former. Doctrine, as I will try to make clearer below, is a function of redemptive history. The vitality of systematic theology is rooted in the covenant- or redemptive-historical.

A recent large-scale effort in addressing the opportunities and challenges that redemptive-historical interpretation presents for Reformed systematic theology is Gordon Spykman's *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Systematic Theology*.²⁹ As the subtitle indicates, Spykman sees himself as breaking fresh ground. He offers a "New Paradigm," and its overriding concern, in his own words, is "to give the historical-redemptive pattern of biblical revelation a firmer place in Reformed systematic theology." He wishes to highlight that "the entire biblical story line has an eschatological thrust."³⁰ The rest of this chapter consists largely of interactions and reflections prompted by the more prominent structural or "paradigm" elements of this proposal.³¹

1. The key biblical motifs of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation structure Spykman's presentation of the main body of systematic theology; these four categories provide the major sections of the book. This basic framework certainly succeeds in giving prominence to the overall redemptive-historical, eschatological flow of biblical revelation. Further, it has the decided advantage of highlighting the bond between creation and redemption and the characteristic Reformed emphasis that the two are not divorced or in opposition but integrally related as redemption restores and perfects creation. Also, these major divisions are sufficiently broad to allow ample room for

The fact is that only when systematic theology is rooted in biblical theology does it exemplify its true function and achieve its purpose." "Systematic Theology," 19–20.

29. Gordon Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992). To my knowledge, it is the first such effort, at least in the modern era. A precursor might be sought as far back as the eighteenth century in Jonathan Edwards's *A History of the Work of Redemption*, in which he endeavored to present the "body of divinity in an entire new method, being thrown into the form of a history." Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 174; see generally pp. 171–81. Whether, going back even further, Johannes Cocceius and those he influenced ought to be included here is debatable.

30. Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 135.

31. For a more thorough and balanced assessment, see my review article, "A New Paradigm in Theology?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994): 379–90.

differences in judgment on internal development and the subtopics to be discussed under each.

We should not suppose, however, that this is the only or even the ideal format for systematic theology or that there can be only one arrangement for presenting material; nor does Spykman make that claim. In this regard, I am not as sure as is Spykman that a redemptive-historical approach necessitates abandoning the so-called *loci* method of traditional systematic theology. After all, strictly speaking, that method simply calls for a topical presentation of doctrine, and it is difficult to see why the biblical materials preclude such an approach.

For instance, we may compare the message of Scripture as a whole to a massive epic drama. This is quite an appropriate model, considering the Bible's covenant-historical main theme. Accordingly, systematic theology may be seen as large-scale, overall "plot analysis" of this metanarrative: reflection on the various actors and their actions and interaction under appropriate headings (God, man, sin, salvation, the church, etc.).

There is, to be sure, the undeniable inclination in traditional systematic theology to "dehistoricize" or decontextualize the Bible (another way of putting the concern expressed by Vos noted earlier); "the tendency to abstraction . . . ever lurks," as John Murray warns.³² But that hardly means that an "abstract and rationalist" treatment is "inherent" in the *loci* method, as Spykman maintains.³³ A historical-redemptive awareness should go a long way toward counteracting approaches that diminish the eschatologically driven dynamic of biblical revelation as a whole or that tend toward handling topics in a way that isolates them from each other and misses important interconnections.³⁴

There is also another side of the matter to consider here. If Scripture is truly *God's Word*, then its historically progressive and differentiated diversity exists not as a quagmire of doctrinal confusion and

32. Murray, "Systematic Theology," 20.

33. Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 135.

34. Such approaches have their perhaps most substantial (and unfortunate) repercussions in conventional treatments of eschatology, where it is dealt with only in the last, often little more than appended, chapter in systematic theology, a point we will address in part below.

contradiction but as a concordant, mutually reinforcing unity, a unity in diversity. No doubt, the diversity involved will always embody a rich residue of imponderables (e.g., “the unsearchable riches of Christ,” “knowing the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,” Eph. 3:8, 19). Even the most imposing systematic theology is kept from ever becoming self-confident or “system-secure,” keenly aware that “for now we see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12). The cohering unity of this diversity, however, not only permits but enables and authorizes the church to answer this question: What does the *Bible* (not just Isaiah, Paul, etc.) say about *X* (= any topic appropriate to Scripture)? Answering that question must remain a distinguishing concern of systematic theology.

2. An even better basic division of material than Spykman’s four-fold motif might be the triad of creation-fall-redemption, subsuming “consummation” under “redemption” and developing it as two major subdivisions: redemption present and redemption future, the proverbial “already–not yet.” This, faithful to Spykman’s own intention, would highlight even more clearly the eschatological nature of Christ’s work, finished as well as future, a point on which there is a virtually universal consensus across a broad front after a century or more of New Testament exegesis.³⁵

Despite the rich resources resident in the Reformed confessions and theology, including the redemptive-historical sensitivity already displayed there, especially in the doctrine of the covenant, it does seem to me that the exegetical consensus just mentioned has yet to make the impact it ought. Pointedly, in both overall structure and

35. This consensus began forming toward the close of the nineteenth century with reassessments of Jesus’ kingdom proclamation (e.g., the “consistent” eschatology of J. Weiss and A. Schweitzer), in reaction to the idealistic misreading marking the brand of theological liberalism dominant at that time (e.g., A. Ritschl and A. von Harnack). To provide the briefest sampling of New Testament teaching: the coming of Christ in “the fulness of time(s)” (Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:10) means just that—not a particularly auspicious moment during the course of history (though that is no doubt true on other grounds), but the filling up of history, its end in an absolute sense. His sacrificial death for sin occurred “at the end of the ages” (Heb. 9:26), “in these last times” (1 Peter 1:20). As resurrected, Christ is “firstfruits” (1 Cor. 15:20); his resurrection is not an isolated event in the past but the actual, visible beginning in history of the final resurrection-harvest that will include all believers at the end of history. And so on. All told, the first and second comings of Christ are not so much two separate events as two episodes of the one eschatological *parousia* of the Lord.

internal development, systematic theology needs to make clearer that soteriology is eschatology.³⁶ Here I can touch, no more than suggestively, on a couple aspects of a larger complex of issues worthy of discussion.

In his monumental work on Paul's theology, Herman Ridderbos repeatedly says, echoing throughout almost like a refrain, that the apostle's interest on this or that matter is the *historia salutis*, not the *ordo salutis*.³⁷ In my judgment, Ridderbos somewhat overstates this point.³⁸ Nevertheless, if the contrast is taken as a matter of *emphasis*, not

36. By "soteriology" I have in view the total work of the incarnate Christ: the salvation he first accomplishes and then applies by his Spirit.

37. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 14, 63, 173ff., 205ff., 211; cf. 45ff., 91, 214ff., 221ff., 268ff., 365, 378, 404ff.; and *When the Time Had Fully Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 49. This contrasting formulation, like the statements from Vos quoted earlier, is hardly accidental or simply rhetorical. It seems pointedly directed (like the Vos quotes, but three-quarters of a century later), primarily at least, at the considerable theological and pastoral use of Paul that Ridderbos still sees to be dominant in his own Reformed tradition and elsewhere. I take it, by the way, that on the one side of the contrast his concern is not just limited to the *ordo salutis* in the usual specific sense of a logically or causally concatenated sequence of acts and benefits, though it includes that idea. His *historia salutis*–*ordo salutis* contrast is virtually identical with the basic distinction between redemption accomplished and applied. Cf. the closely related, if not identical, orientation of Vos, especially chap. 2, "The Interaction between Eschatology and Soteriology," in *Pauline Eschatology* (1930; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

38. Apart from Ridderbos's valuable treatment of the role of faith (*Paul*, secs. 29, 40–41), he leaves his reader wondering what place, if any, *ordo salutis* concerns have in Paul. The question of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:30), for instance, is a legitimate one, and Paul's answer, for one, opens up a distinct area of reflection for the church.

Spykman's treatment of redemption, under the major heading "The Way of Salvation" (pt. 4), is not only puzzling but troublesome. There the distinction between once-for-all accomplishment and ongoing application, if not entirely missing, is virtually eclipsed; it is at best implicitly in view in a section on "The Christian Life." *Reformational Theology*, 480ff.

Certainly we should agree with Spykman that traditional treatments of the *ordo salutis* have often been overextended and, at times, counterproductive (ibid., 481–83), following Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 14–17; and G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), chap. 1. Particularly in the period following the Synod of Dort, developments largely resulting from increasingly necessary resistance to Arminianism and pietism have had the enduring, though no doubt largely unforeseen, effect of blurring Calvin's sublime focus on union with the exalted Christ, by faith, through "the secret energy of the Spirit," as the Alpha and Omega of the application of redemption—union so pivotal that it both underlies and comprehends all other aspects and benefits. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1; cf. C. Graafland, "Heeft Calvin een bepaalde orde des heils geleerd?" in J. van Oort et al., eds., *Verbi Divini Minister: Opstellen voor L. Kievit* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1983), 109–27, esp. the conclusion, p. 127.

But Spykman's notion that we become "contemporaries" with Christ (*Reformational Theology*, 481) is not helpful, particularly since the distinction between redemption accomplished and applied is not made clear. Union with Christ in his death and resurrection, with all

as mutually exclusive alternatives, then it captures an important and valuable insight, particularly in the light of his thoroughly impressive demonstration of the redemptive-historical, eschatological framework that controls Paul's teaching as a whole.³⁹ The ongoing application of redemption (*ordo salutis*) is a function or outworking of its once-for-all accomplishment (*historia salutis*).⁴⁰

Among other considerations, this entails the need for systematic theology, including ethics, to be more explicit and articulate about the inalienable eschatological dimension fundamental to the Christian life and the present existence of the church. That dimension is probably illustrated most easily and graphically by the commercial and agricultural metaphors that Paul uses for the Holy Spirit presently at work in the church: "down payment" in kind on our eschatological inheritance (2 Cor. 5:5; Eph. 1:14; cf. Eph. 4:30), the actual "first-fruits" of the eschatological harvest of resurrection-adoption (Rom. 8:23). But to highlight by way of contrast, we have only to ask: how many believers think, or have been taught to think, of the Spirit's work in their lives in its entirety, including the undoubted inwardness and personal intimacy of that working, as nonetheless of one

the mystery involved, does not eliminate the historical distance, soteriologically, between the circumstances and conditions of my "now" and the "then" of those once-for-all events.

The present, ongoing appropriation of salvation, in both its corporate and personal dimensions, is not simply on a line or in series with the finished work of Christ. Developments that gave rise to the Reformation (e.g., Rome's soteriology and ecclesiology, focused in its doctrine of the Mass) have made perennially clear the danger in making the one essentially an extension of the other. When that happens, invariably the sufficiency and historical finality of Christ's death and resurrection become eclipsed or even denied. Ultimately the gospel itself stands or falls with the distinction between redemption accomplished and applied. See further my "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003): 165–79, esp. 167–69.

39. See esp. Ridderbos, *Paul*, chap. 2.

40. The challenge clearly implicit in this insight is all the more compelling in view of the dominant role, especially since the Reformation, that Pauline materials, in particular, have played in formulating soteriological doctrine.

As an aside, it seems pertinent to observe that in this area the church has perennially had difficulty, in both its doctrine and its life, in maintaining proper perspective, in keeping its priorities straight. Application is a function of accomplishment, not the reverse; the latter does not exist simply to facilitate the former. Without intending to polarize among equally valid considerations, the "main point," if I may risk putting it that way, of the Christian religion, the religion of God's covenant, is not the Christian but Christ, not our experience but his work, not our needs but his glory. Only when that point is appreciated do Christian identity and experience, both individual and corporate, come to stand in a right light. Otherwise, we are on our way down the long and convoluted road toward Schleiermacher (and beyond).

piece with the great work of God at the end of history in renovating the entire creation?

Further, there is room for systematic theology to make clearer the “already–not yet” structure that qualifies the various elements in the application of salvation. That structure is reflected in the believer’s union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Between Christ’s resurrection and return, according to Paul’s categorical distinction between “inner” and “outer man” (2 Cor. 4:16), the believer both has already been raised and will be raised. Accordingly, the specific benefits that flow from being united to Christ as crucified and resurrected—forensic (justification, adoption) as well as renovative (regeneration, sanctification)—are both realized and still future.⁴¹

On the forensic side, Romans 8, for instance, shows rather plainly that adoption, our eschatological identity as God’s children and co-inheritors with Christ, is both present (vv. 14–16) and still future (v. 23). But systematic-theological treatments have not usually made that clear.

For justification, it is fair to say that, in general, Reformation theology has grasped, at least intuitively, the eschatological “now” emphatically asserted, for instance, in Romans 5:1 and 8:1. It has perceived with sound instinct that the verdict pronounced on believers, declaring them righteous and entitled to eternal life, involves judgment, already realized, that is final and irrevocable.⁴² But it has been much more inhibited, no doubt because of polemics with Rome, in recognizing and incorporating into its doctrinal formulations the still-future aspect of justification clearly implied if not explicitly taught in the New Testament.⁴³ The Westminster catechisms, for instance, confess that believers will be “openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment.”⁴⁴ Such language is thoroughly forensic, and acquittal is at the heart of justification.

41. See, so far as Paul is concerned, my *Resurrection and Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 127–43; cf. the “I am” declaration of Jesus in John 11:25–26.

42. Yet it is also probably true that most often justification, like the work of the Spirit, has been viewed as a transaction in time between God and the individual sinner, without any particular reference to eschatological structure.

43. At issue is whether passages such as Rom. 2:13 and Gal. 5:5 and others on the final judgment teach that justification is in some respect future.

44. Larger Catechism 90; Shorter Catechism 38.

The integral tie between that future acquittal and present justification needs to be made clear. As a *single* justification by the sole instrumentality of faith and based exclusively on the imputed righteousness of Christ, the one is the consummation of the other, as its open manifestation. For now until Jesus comes, the believer's justification is most certainly settled and certain but not uncontested. Romans 8:33–34, for instance, is clear in that regard. The faith that justifies perseveres in love (Gal. 5:6). No doubt, as so often in our theologizing, the proverbial razor's edge between the truth of the gospel and serious error presents itself here, a narrow ledge that will have to be negotiated with care.⁴⁵

Alternatively, Reformed theology has certainly been clear about the future eschatological transformation of the believer, penultimately at death and climactically in the resurrection at Christ's return. But it has been ambiguous at best, and certainly not decisive, that the regeneration/renewal already experienced by believers is likewise nothing less than eschatological in nature. At the core of their being, believers will never be more resurrected than they already are. Their place in the final resurrection-“harvest” (1 Cor. 15:20–23) is now as well as still future.

For instance, in Ephesians 2:5–6, believers' having already been “raised with Christ” is not merely “positional” or metaphorical. It is of one piece with future, bodily resurrection. It is just as “real” and “existential.” That, an enlivening and transforming experience, is plain in the immediate context (vv. 1–10) from the radical reversal in “walk” it effects (vv. 2, 10): from a lifestyle of “being dead in trespasses and sins,” with which the passage opens (vv. 1–3, 5), to the “good works” of new-creation existence in Christ, the note on which it closes (v. 10).

Elsewhere in the New Testament, the believer in Christ is already a participant in the “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). Again, because of their union with the crucified and resurrected Christ, believers no longer “live” in sin as the power that dominates them (Rom. 6:1ff.). In fact, “everyone born of God does not sin[;] . . . he is not able to sin” (1 John

45. On the relationship between justification and (final) judgment according to works in the New Testament, especially Paul, especially helpful is the treatment of Ridderbos, *Paul*, sec. 31.

3:9; cf. v. 6).⁴⁶ Nettlesome questions, especially anthropological, loom large here, as well as the false perfectionism that continues to plague the church. Still, Reformed systematic theology needs to process more adequately the already-realized, nonforensic eschatological “perfection” of the believer that the New Testament does teach.

At the same time, it will also be necessary to keep clear, as Reformed systematic theology has always sought to do, that the eschatologically qualified *ordo salutis* of the New Testament is not an essentially new or different *ordo* than that already present in the Old Testament. Here, too, the controlling viewpoint of the *historia salutis* is critical. The soteriological unity of the covenant of grace can never be properly appreciated or satisfactorily explained apart from recognizing that this unity is predicated on the “revealed mystery” (Rom. 16:25–26; Col. 1:26): the eschatological revelation of the righteousness of God in Christ as the fulfillment of the promise. Only on that basis may the benefits of the covenant be applied in advance, “out of season,” before “the time had fully come” (Gal. 4:4), so that old-covenant believers—Abraham and David, for instance—could serve as models of justification by faith (Rom. 4; Gal. 3).

The unmistakable and substantial contrasts involved in the movement from old to new covenant are preeminently redemptive-historical, and not in terms of the *ordo salutis*. Differences in the latter there no doubt are, but these, despite the understandable tendency to be preoccupied with them, remain on the periphery of biblical revelation and resist full categorization. On the one hand, covenantal fellowship with God becomes for the New Testament believer what it was not, and could not yet be, for Abraham and David: union with the *now-exalted* Christ. But the experiential difference this makes can be only loosely captured by comparative terms such as “enlarged,” “greater,” “fuller” (language used by Westminster Confession 20.1 in treating Christian liberty).

The “something better,” of which Hebrews speaks, does not divide new- and old-covenant believers in the personal appropriation of salvation but, as the writer says, was planned by God “so that only

46. See in this regard Murray’s important discussion of “Definitive Sanctification,” in *Collected Writings*, 2:277–84.

together with us would they be made perfect” (11:40). The soteriological “newness” of Pentecost, for instance, is not anthropological-individual-experiential but Christological and ecclesiological. (a) The Spirit is now present, at last, on the basis of the finished work of Christ, the “life-giving Spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45); he is the *eschatological* Spirit. (b) The Spirit is now “poured out on all flesh,” Gentiles as well as Jews; he is the *universal* Spirit.⁴⁷

3. One of the remarkable features of Spykman’s book is its extensive treatment of theological prolegomena. “Part One: Foundations” is nearly one-fourth of the whole, 136 out of a total of 560 pages.⁴⁸ Along with appreciating much that is useful and stimulating in this lengthy introduction, I am left with several substantial reservations.⁴⁹ For one, Spykman’s theological prolegomena do not really lead into (“introduce”) the redemptive-historical approach taken in the main body of his systematic theology. In fact, they tend to undermine it. There is a certain dissonance between the stance he adopts in this part and what he sets out to do in the rest of the book—a tension present, I suggest, primarily because of his conception of theology and, correlative, of the relationship between theology and Scripture.⁵⁰

47. For further elaboration, see my *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 13–41.

48. Spykman would probably have considered this lengthy discussion, especially the “new directions” he proposes (*Reformational Theology*, 76ff.), its most significant and valuable part. The rest of the book “is intended as a consistent following-through on [its] spirit and thrust.” *Ibid.*, 135.

49. Perhaps most valuable in this part is the exposé of synthesis thinking, especially the various outworkings of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought with its controlling autonomy commitment, although beginning with Barth the critique becomes noticeably less incisive. The importance of Immanuel Kant and the noumenal-phenomenal disjunction for subsequent theology, for instance, is handled with admirable clarity. *Ibid.*, 29–30, 41–42. Among other strengths, along with combating false and objectionable dualisms, is the emphasis on the Creator-creature distinction and on the antithesis, in a religious, directional sense, as fundamental structures in theology.

My other major reservations about this part concern (1) Spykman’s virtual dismissal of post-Reformation Reformed systematic theology (everyone until Kuyper and Bavinck, apparently, and British-American Presbyterianism in its entirety) with the pejorative “scholastic” (“reformational,” presumably, does not include Reformed orthodoxy); and (2) the Christological difficulties, if not confusion, attendant on his call for “three-factor” theologizing: “the Word of God as the pivotal point, the normative boundary and bridge between the revealing God and his responding creatures.” *Ibid.*, 60.

50. Again, we are into issues that call for much more extensive discussion than the comments that follow. See my *Resurrection and Redemption*, 19–30, and my “Introduction” to *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, xiv–xxiii.

(a) Is there theology in the Bible? No, says Spykman, emphatically not. The particular basis on which he reaches that conclusion is his neo-Kuyperian stress on the difference, structurally, between pretheoretical and theoretical thinking. Within that philosophical framework, the Bible, along with Christian confession, exemplifies the former, theology the latter.

This distance between theology and Scripture means that there is no single discipline, theology or any other, that has a privileged position relative to Scripture. Acknowledging this, Spykman thinks, will deliver us from the “triumphalist pretensions”⁵¹ too long present, for instance, in the Reformed tradition, especially in its systematic theology (the proverbial “queen of the sciences” label). Put in its proper place, theology is concerned specifically with *confession* as a human activity. His preferred designation to replace “theology” is the neologism “pistology,” that is, theoretical reflection on faith in its various senses.⁵² The “normative movement,”⁵³ in which this delimited discipline has its role, runs from faith, grounded in Scripture, to a worldview, common to all believers, that in turn underlies all the special sciences, including philosophy and theology in their interaction.

I for one, however, have no hesitation about speaking of the special, even proprietary right of theology to Scripture, and so of its right to speak *about God*, in a careful, methodologically self-conscious and responsible way—speaking that at the same time can and should also be an act of worship and confession. That right the church has recognized from the beginning and proceeded accordingly, however otherwise wrongheadedly or even disastrously at times. To view theology in this way is not to enfranchise a theological guild that deprives other believers of free access to the Bible and lords it over the other special disciplines. Rather, it is to provide those disciplines and the whole church with the shepherding, ministerial services they cannot afford to be without.

At issue here is not the inevitably faith-qualified nature of all human endeavors or the notion of underlying, controlling worldview.

51. Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 106.

52. *Ibid.*, 104–5.

53. *Ibid.*, 102.

Nor is it that for both Reformed systematic theology and Christian philosophy Scripture is “the noetic point of departure.”⁵⁴ These are important insights that Spykman effectively reinforces.

Spykman is not alone in rejecting theology in the Bible. That rejection is shared by others who do not necessarily share his epistemology, or his sweeping anti-“scholastic” agenda.⁵⁵ This suggests a deeper, underlying influence, an influence that is to be found, almost certainly, in Abraham Kuyper’s work on theological encyclopedia, particularly considerations that he voices most clearly in rejecting the expression “biblical theology.”⁵⁶

It is important to recognize that Kuyper’s objections are not primarily in reaction to rationalistic, “critical” theology that, under the slogan “biblical theology,” masqueraded its thinly veiled attacks on the authority of Scripture and orthodox Protestant systematic theology. That historical factor certainly plays a role,⁵⁷ but Kuyper’s rejection has a deeper, principled basis.

His understanding of Scripture as the *principium theologiae* flatly prohibits the expression “biblical theology.” Scripture is not itself theology but underlies it.⁵⁸ The biblical writers must not be called “theologians”⁵⁹ because theology is unthinkable apart from previously formed dogmas, and dogma is a product of the life of the (institutional) church.⁶⁰ The Bible itself contains no dogma but rather the “material” from which the church “constructs” dogma.⁶¹ Biblical revelation comes in “the stylized, symbolic-aesthetic language of the East,” while theology comes into being only when the “Western mind” with its penchant for “dialectical clarity” goes to work on the

54. *Ibid.*, 101.

55. E.g., apparently, the authors of *Oriëntatie in de theologie*, who reject the expression “biblical theology.” This rejection, apparently characteristic of Continental Reformed theology in contrast to British-American Calvinism, is probably bound up with the aversion of the former to the designation “systematic theology”; its preference is for “dogmatics.”

56. Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopaedie der heilige godgeleerdheid*, 3 vols. (Kok, 1909), 3:166–80 (where he discusses the “*historia revelationis*”).

57. *Ibid.*, 169–70, 401–4.

58. *Ibid.*, 167.

59. *Ibid.*, 176.

60. *Ibid.*, 169; cf. 395ff.

61. *Ibid.*, 169, 404; cf. 355ff.

biblical material.⁶² In short, Kuyper stresses exclusively the difference between Scripture and dogma, the discontinuity between the biblical writers and the subsequent theological activity of the church. He rejects biblical theology not only in name but in concept.⁶³

Striking, and highly instructive, is the difference we find in Vos and Ridderbos on this point. In clear contrast with Kuyper, they approach the apostle Paul, say, in terms of their *continuity* with him—a continuity, moreover, that both see to be specifically *theological*. That sense of theological continuity is plain enough in Ridderbos. He subtitles his massive redemptive-historical exposition of Paul's teaching *Outline of His Theology*. But Vos is even more explicit. He speaks of "the Apostle's theological system."⁶⁴ Paul can "justly be called the father of Christian eschatology."⁶⁵ His is "the genius of the greatest constructive mind ever at work on the data of Christianity."⁶⁶ In large

62. *Ibid.*, 168; cf. 2:247–48.

63. To be sure, Kuyper does approve the material interest of biblical theology—namely, its concern with the historical character of biblical revelation. He laments what he perceives to be the shortcomings of the *loca probantia* method of traditional systematic theology in this respect and looks for genuine progress in biblical understanding to result from study of the *historia revelationis*. *Ibid.*, 170ff. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (1906; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:343–46; three of four Dutch volumes have appeared in English thus far.

64. Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 60.

65. *Ibid.*, vi.

66. *Ibid.*, 149. Such statements can be multiplied in Vos: Because the apostle's mind "had by nature a certain systematic bent, which made him pursue with great resoluteness the consequences of given premises" (*ibid.*, 60), and because it was "highly doctrinal and synthetic" (*ibid.*, 148), one ought to think in terms of Paul's "construction of Christian truth," his "system of truth" (*ibid.*), "the dogmatic coloring [of] his teaching" (*ibid.*, 60). Paul's "energetic eschatological thinking tended toward consolidation in an orb of compact theological structure." *Ibid.*, 61. The facile one-sidedness of many of his interpreters results in part "because Paul's mind as a theological thinker was far more exacting than theirs." *Ibid.*, 149. "The Gospel having a precise, doctrinal structure, the doctrinally-gifted Paul was the fit organ for expressing this, because his gifts had been conferred and cultivated in advance with a view to it." Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 17.

Highly instructive is the remarkable difference between such statements, resulting from a lifetime of careful interpretation of Paul, and the following excerpt from his inaugural address. Rejecting the notion "as if in the Bible we had the beginnings of the process that later gave us the works of Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin," he continues: "Only if we take the term Theology in its more primitive and simple meaning, as the practical, historic knowledge of God imparted by revelation and deposited in the Bible can we justify the use of the now commonly accepted name [Biblical Theology] of our science. As for the scientific elaboration of this God-given material, this must be held to lie beyond the Biblical period. It could spring only after revelation and the formation of the Scriptures had been completed. The utmost that can be conceded would be that in the Apostolic teaching of the New Testament the first signs of the beginning of this process are discernable. But even that

measure, I would argue, the refreshing stimulus and fruitfulness of their work in alerting us, within a Reformed context, to the pervasively redemptive-historical subject matter of Scripture come from this approach in terms of theological continuity.

The Bible simply may not be categorized, in a single sweep, as confession but not theology, as Spykman, for one, apparently believes it should be.⁶⁷ In the case of Scripture, if the distinction between theoretical and pretheoretical thought is applicable, it describes a continuum that cuts across them as a whole. Anyone who says, categorically, that Scripture does not contain theology needs to reread much of Paul, for instance, or to reconsider large stretches of the argumentation in the book of Hebrews.⁶⁸

I recognize, and fully share, the deep reservations about the dangers that this accent on theological continuity may occasion: abandonment of the unique authority of the New Testament writers; devaluation, say, of Paul's apostolicity; relativizing of Scripture as canon; and denial of its unity and divine authorship. These dangers are by no means imaginary, as developments, especially since the Enlightenment, show. But such disastrous consequences are not necessary or inevitable. Here, as elsewhere in our theologizing, the old maxim holds: *abusus non tollit usum* ("abuse does not invalidate legitimate use").

For there is also this to consider. The divine origin and perfections of Scripture, the canon and its closedness, apostolicity—all of these are not ahistorical abstractions but derive from and are intrinsically

which the Apostles teach is in no sense primarily to be viewed under the aspect of Theology. It is the inspired Word of God before all other things." Vos, "Idea," 20–21. Here, apparently, Kuyper's model still controls and is not yet questioned or qualified.

67. See, e.g., Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 103. Confession itself, especially the corporate confession of the church, is explicitly *theological* assertion. That, at least, is how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestantism understood what it was doing. Not to appreciate that understanding is inevitably to be on the way to the misuse of these creeds in the life of the church.

68. How, for instance, can Kuyper assert, as a sweeping generalization, that biblical revelation has been given in "the stylized, symbolic-aesthetic language of the East" (if that is a fair rendering of "de symbolisch-aesthetische kunsttaal," *Encyclopaedie*, 2:168)! Presumably his encyclopedic concerns have blinded him at this point to what he himself recognizes elsewhere: "What makes the letters of Paul so difficult is that there the mystical-oriental and western-dialectical streams flow into each other" (*Dictaten dogmatiek*, 10 vols. [Kampen, 1907], vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 54); "Paul is a more acute thinker than James" (*Encyclopaedie*, 2:241).

qualified by a covenant-historical matrix.⁶⁹ To be sure, within that matrix, at its eschatological, new-covenant end point, there is the important transition from apostolic to postapostolic to consider. The attendant distinction between inspired/canonical and noninspired/noncanonical brings the one under the absolute authority of the other. That difference is crucial and may never be obscured.

But there is also a deeper, underlying unity. Apostolic history is *church* history, too. In “church” “apostolic” and “postapostolic” have their common (redemptive-historical) denominator.⁷⁰ In terms of that denominator a double, compounded commonness emerges: (i) a common *focus*, at least in part theologically qualified, on the subject matter of the gospel: Christ, crucified and exalted; and (ii) from a common already—not yet *context or vantage point*: now that Christ has departed and sent his Spirit, until he returns.

Far from devaluing the unique and final authority of Scripture and dragging it down to our own all-too-fallible level, such an approach, it seems to me, serves rather to ensure that the church’s theological activity remains firmly within the parameters of biblical revelation. In terms of Paul’s teaching about the church in Ephesians 2:11ff., this approach helps to keep that activity faithful to “the mystery of Christ, . . . as it has now [finally] been revealed by the Spirit to [God’s] holy apostles and prophets.” It serves to keep our theology firmly “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with [the exalted] Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (3:4–5; 2:20).⁷¹

69. See esp. Herman Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988).

70. “Still we know full well that we ourselves live just as much in the N.T. as did Peter and Paul and John.” Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 324–25. In the same context Vos makes the perceptive and suggestive observation that the “seeming disproportion in chronological extent of the O.T. and the N.T. . . . arises from viewing the new revelation too much by itself, and not sufficiently as *introductory* and *basic* to the large period following.” *Ibid.*, 325, emphasis added.

71. In Eph. 2:20 (as well as 3:5), in view are not Old but New Testament prophets, and revelation given through them, along with the apostles, from the vantage point of the eschatological end point. The concern of the immediate context, 2:11ff., is not the unity/continuity between old and new covenants, but the newness of the new, especially the inclusion of Gentiles with Jews in the church. This view, I take it, is not subject to serious question exegetically; see, e.g., Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 47; my *Perspectives on Pentecost*, 93; and, representative of the virtually universal consensus of recent commentators and monographs, Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1990), 153.

This apostolic model of the church as a building is especially suggestive for appreciating continuity. What is built on the apostolic “foundation” is not a different structure but postapostolic “super-structure.” Both result from the single house-building activity of the exalted Christ (cf. esp. Eph. 4:7ff.) in the period between his resurrection and return. Scripture, we may say, then, not only is canon for the content of systematic theology but has something to say as well about its task. As *principium unicum theologiae*, Scripture not only gives us right answers but teaches us right questions to ask.

(b) Approaching Scripture in terms of a dimension of common theological activity with the New Testament writers will alert us to the models they provide for our own systematic-theological work, models in fact that hold the center of all our systematic-theological reflection where it ought to be—not simply on Christ and his incarnate person and work more generally, but on him as the embodied “fullness of the Deity” (Col. 2:10), as the consummate, eschatological revelation of the triune God.

Before noting some examples, let me again make it clear that my concern is not to force systematic theology into a single, particular format. In fact, if anything, the New Testament sponsors a variety of approaches; it is a diversity in unity.

(i) Herman Ridderbos has written, “It can be rightly said that Paul does nothing but explain the eschatological reality which in Christ’s teachings is called the Kingdom.”⁷² This observation provides a particularly helpful unifying outlook on the New Testament, without overriding its diversity. If, appropriately, we expand Ridderbos’s suggestive insight to include the other New Testament writers, and if, in turn and also properly, we take Jesus’ kingdom proclamation as a grid for reading the whole Old Testament in all its parts, from the vantage point of the fulfillment Christ embodies (as Luke 24:44–47, cf. Acts 1:3, especially, suggests), then we have a kingdom model

72. Herman Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 48–49. This is true despite the fact that kingdom terminology recedes sharply in Paul’s letters in comparison with the Synoptic accounts of Jesus’ teaching. That shows how little the issue is a particular format or single vocabulary. Paul reflects on the “substance” of Jesus’ kingdom proclamation primarily in his teaching on righteousness and the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17; cf. Matt. 6:33; 12:28).

for comprehending the history of revelation, as inscripturated, in its entirety and overall unity—a model, moreover, explicitly attuned to that history, centered on Christ, and sponsored by Scripture itself.

(ii) In English-speaking Calvinism, the expression “the whole counsel of God” has become something of a slogan, evocative of the comprehensive, God-centered concern for truth that distinguishes Reformed theology.⁷³ Yet in its sole biblical occurrence (Acts 20:27), a passage where Paul accounts for an entire lifetime of ministry, “the whole counsel” has a distinctly kingdom profile. There it is not in view, at least in the first place, as a topical compendium of revealed truth, but concerns, as correlative expressions in the immediate context show, the “preaching of the kingdom” (v. 25) as that preaching is “the gospel of the grace of God” (v. 24), focused in the call to repentance and faith (v. 21), and as such, then, omits “nothing profitable” for the church (v. 20). As the broader Lucan (and Pauline) context shows, the controlling preoccupation of the “counsel” is the historical-eschatological dynamic involved in the coming of the kingdom, the lordship of God in Christ exercised at the end of history for the renovation of his creation and the redemption of his people.⁷⁴

(iii) Another notion that Paul uses to signal the redemptive-historical, eschatological orientation of his teaching in its entirety is “the revelation of the mystery” (Rom. 16:25ff.). That notion, properly exegeted, more than encompasses all that the Reformed confessions and theology have found, and must continue to find, essential for maintaining and defending what concerns the divine decree and its realization, and the promise-fulfillment structure of the covenant. But it does so without allowing that mystery-decree to become a separate topic, burdened, whenever that happens, with inevitable and counterproductive speculation. It keeps the focus where it belongs: on its *revelation*, the mystery as *revealed*.⁷⁵ It keeps the focus, in other words,

73. “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture . . .” (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6). It is engraved, for instance, on the seal of Westminster Theological Seminary.

74. For fuller elaboration, see my “The Whole Counsel of God and the Bible,” in John H. White, ed., *The Book of Books* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 19–28.

75. What, for instance, explains the marked de-escalation of the supra-/infralapsarian debate in recent Reformed theology if not the increasing awareness that the questions involved,

on Christ, on his death and resurrection, which, in their soteriological-eschatological significance (“for our sins”) and as the fulfillment of Scripture (“according to the Scriptures”), are “of first importance,” as Paul says elsewhere (1 Cor. 15:1–4), again in describing his gospel proclamation at the heart of his theology as a whole.

There can be nothing more important for Reformed systematic theology than this same *gospel* priority. To anticipate an objection without really being able to address it here, Christocentricity, at least with a proper redemptive-historical focus, and fully theocentric, Trinitarian balance are not in conflict.

These observations, I would add, should not be dismissed as a plea for some sort of biblicism in systematic-theological method. What they do reflect, again, is a concern, especially in our systematic theology, for an ever more faithful articulation of the “pattern of sound words” (2 Tim. 1:13) that Paul not only mentions as the concern of his own ministry but specifically enjoins on the postapostolic church.

(c) Approaching the New Testament in terms of common theological activity enables us to appreciate how systematic theology is a redemptive-historically qualified venture, not only because of its subject matter, as we have just seen, but also in terms of its context. That context, as already noted, it shares, despite important discontinuities, with the New Testament writers.

Systematic theology, then, like all other theological endeavors, is a “timed” enterprise. Specifically, it is for the present time of the church, that we might “know the time” (Rom. 13:11), that time “between the times,” bracketed by Christ’s resurrection and return. Paul neatly captures its essence in 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10: the church consists of those “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,” just as, in that service, they “wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead.” Systematic theology is for the duration: the duration of this hiatus, this Spirit-filled and -energized interim. It, too, with the “timely” knowledge it provides and elaborates, is a part of the “waiting service” of the church. Doctrinal formulation and

though legitimate, cannot be resolved because the biblical writers, with their covenant-historical focus, address them only obliquely, at the “edges” of their teaching?

systematic theology are a function of redemptive history, and the formation of dogma begins in the New Testament.⁷⁶

These observations, by the way, point us to appreciating the New Testament itself as the deepest, most far-reaching as well as “relevant” “contextualization” of the gospel. The Bible is not a composite of ahistorical truths about God, humanity, and so on, needing to be enculturated. Scripture, ultimately, is not in need of contextualization but provides its own.⁷⁷

(d) A systematic theology intent on maintaining its vitality faces no greater danger than a situation in which Scripture can no longer correct it, and in which appeal to Scripture serves only to confirm existing formulations. Accordingly, it can have no more urgent concern than for a recourse to the Scriptures that continues to challenge and refine it.⁷⁸

The confessional commitment, noted earlier, to the “good and necessary consequence . . . deduced from Scripture”⁷⁹ is the *commit-*

76. “Surely it does not become systematic theology to unravel what has been synthesized to a degree even in the Scriptures. Systematic theology ought rather to weave together the related strands yet more systematically.” Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 29. “It is important to see the theological project as embedded in the Scriptures themselves rather than as merely an overlay on them, for this will make it easier to see how the theological project can be restructured to more nearly mirror the structure of Scripture [with reference to the author’s earlier discussion of Edwards and Vos].” Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 261.

77. This comment is surely not meant to preempt ongoing debate on contextualization, at least not all aspects of that debate, nor to deny the legitimacy of issues raised by the distance between the biblical world and the culture of a particular time and place since.

The book of Hebrews is instructive in this regard. Originally addressed, as were the other New Testament documents, to readers in a particular time and place, under specific social, economic, and political conditions, it reveals remarkably little about these cultural factors. The date and the place and identity of the readers continue to be debated, and the perennial question of authorship remains unanswered. What the writer *is* concerned to have his readers grasp clearly is that they are “in these last days” when God has spoken his final word in his Son (1:2), when Christ “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself . . . and . . . will appear a second time . . . to bring salvation” (9:26, 28). The ultimately relevant and decisive “context” of his readers’ existence, in all its undoubtedly enculturated particularity, is not that particular context but the period between the exaltation and return of Christ, in which the church has its identity as the new and final wilderness community (esp. 3:7ff.). This macro-historical and -cultural outlook is integral to the gospel. It not only transforms and redirects life in the first-century Mediterranean world, or any other particular cultural matrix, but also establishes the continuity necessary for truly meaningful transhistorical and cross-cultural contacts.

78. Jonker’s comments in this regard in “Eksegese en dogmatiek,” 163–66, 171–73, are particularly valuable: the concrete statements of Scripture, functioning like a “jamming station” (!), retain a disruptive element for doctrinal formulation.

79. Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6.

ment, especially, that has given rise to Reformed systematic theology. But is the particular deduction truly “good and necessary”? That question, especially, must continue to occupy Reformed systematic theology. Seeing ourselves as involved with the New Testament writers in a common redemptive-historical project or, even more pointedly, a common preoccupation with the *gospel* is a stance that will prove valuable in distinguishing the “good and necessary”—“everything profitable,” as Paul says in Acts 20:20—from what is not.

As long as one continues, with Kuyper, to think of Scripture as providing the raw “material” from which the church “constructs” doctrines and develops its systematic theology, it is difficult to see how an illegitimate proof-texting can be effectively overcome, despite insistence to the contrary, and so the speculative, intellectualistic traces that have marred Reformed systematic theology will persist. The solution to “scholasticism” (to abuse that word), to an overly notional Christianity, to a speculative, excessively cerebral treatment of Christian doctrine, to a less than full-blooded embodiment of the gospel and its implications—the solution to all that, it turns out, is not to deny that Scripture contains theology or to slight that theology, but to recognize it and let it come to its rights.

I have lived long enough to learn that there are no easy formulas for safeguarding sound theologizing. But I submit that for the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the vitality of its systematic theology will be well served by our recognizing and exploring its deep theological continuity, despite the long span of intervening centuries, with the apostolic church and theology of the first century.

Afterword

Recently,⁸⁰ W. Robert Godfrey has taken decided exception to my use in the original version of this chapter (see the footnote at the outset of this chapter) of the expression “sympathetic-critical,” which I borrowed from Schilder for the basic stance of systematic theology toward the church’s confessions (see above at note superscript 13).

80. In David VanDrunen, ed., *The Pattern of Sound Truth: Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 141–42.

This stance, he maintains, “misses the communal, ecclesiastical character of confessions” because it fails “to distinguish clearly between our confessions and our [systematic-theological] tradition.” He even associates it with the attitude of those who “have acted as if the confessions of their churches were out-dated historical documents or pious advice that could be rejected as easily as followed or as brief systematic theologies that they were free to improve upon,” or who forget that, until the church duly changes its confession, “those who have confessed their faith by subscribing a confession are under a moral obligation to uphold that confession.” Instead, our attitude toward confessions as church confessions, particularly those subscribed to, ought to be one of confidence, an attitude that “in the first place is not critical, not even ‘sympathetic-critical.’ ”

I suppose that, taken by itself, “sympathetic-critical” could be read as unsympathetically and critically as Dr. Godfrey reads it, but it hardly needs to be taken that way, and I leave it to the reader to judge whether it is not reasonably clear from the immediate context as well as the tenor of this entire chapter that my own usage, far from betraying ecclesiastical indifference (or moral insensitivity), intends, precisely, to make a *churchly* point about the proper relationship between three factors: Scripture as given to the *church*, church doctrine/confession, and systematic theology as done in the interests of the *church*. At any rate, I have retained the expression above because I remain convinced that it expresses something vital for the church in maintaining its confessions and so for systematic theology faithful to those confessions.

Helpful here is the orthodox Protestant distinction between the absolute authority of the Bible as “norming norm” (*norma normans*) and the subordinate authority of the church’s confession as “normed norm” (*norma normata*). In its work, systematic theology is bound to maintain this distinction and the no-more-than-subordinate authority of the confession. In fact, all those subscribing, *ex animo*, to the Westminster Standards are bound by this very subscription to maintaining this distinction.⁸¹ Undeniably, subscription presupposes cordial

81. “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, . . . and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.10); cf. 20.2: “God alone is Lord of the conscience,

acceptance of the contents of the confession, and when one's views diverge, for whatever reasons, an orderly procedure ought to be in place for adjudicating whether or not such divergences are acceptable by the church or other institutional body responsible for overseeing subscription. If it needs to be said, that is not at issue for me.

But when the distinction in view above (that "critical" distinction, in fact) is lost sight of or otherwise not maintained, then the risk is great that the confession will come to function on a par with Scripture and its authority—in effect, will become absolute (an elevation that Dr. Godfrey certainly does not intend: the attitude he calls for entails "fully recognizing that our confessions are human writings and may need to be changed in light of clearer understanding of the Word of God"). May we not, then, on balance, speak of a "sympathetic-critical confidence" in our church's confession?

Dr. Godfrey connects the faulty attitude he attributes to me with the view, which he likewise rejects, that "the confession is basically a brief form of systematic theology." This latter rejection is puzzling. Certainly, the confession is more than just a systematic theology produced by one or more individuals. But if systematic theology is fairly characterized as presenting the unified teaching of the Bible as a whole on appropriate topics in an orderly fashion, then a confession or catechism is just that: a *privileged* piece of systematic theology, which the church, by adoption, has elevated to the status of a subordinate standard in its life. Is that not what is being confessed virtually, for instance, by those who subscribe to the Westminster Standards "as a summary and just exhibition of that *system of doctrine* . . . contained in Holy Scripture" or "as containing *the system of doctrine* taught in the Holy Scriptures"?⁸²

As noted, the expression "sympathetic-critical" comes from Schilder. Perhaps there will be some value in quoting the passage from J. Douma where I found it.⁸³ Doing that will make clearer the sense that Schilder and he have in mind, and I, in turn, in taking it over.

and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word. . . ."

82. See as well the observation above in note 67.

83. See note 14 above for bibliographic details; all italics original.

The science of theology is in *the service of the church*. . . . Against those [who deny this tethering of theology to the church] we hold that God's revelation has been entrusted to the church. The one who studies this revelation can only do that in the right place: within the church. Given, too, with the office of minister of the Word (pastor and *teacher*) is training for the ministry of the Word.

This ecclesiastical bond does not mean that the theologian is shackled to an ecclesiastical tradition, as in the Roman Catholic Church. Article 7 of the Belgic Confession commands the believer to place the truth of God above everything. That is true as well for the theologians among believers. Confessional committedness is something other than confessionalistic narrowmindedness. Important in this connection is the definition that Schilder gives of dogmatics: Dogmatics is "the science, which in submission to the content and purpose of Holy Scripture, arranges and systematically treats the problems of the theological dogmas of the church [der kerkelijk-theologische dogmata] in a *sympathetic-critical reproduction* of the content of the dogmas established in the line of the ecumenical creeds" (*Dictaten compendium-dogmatiek*, 1:13).

Critical—"If, after all, the church never has exhausted nor will exhaust the truth of inscripturated revelation, and also never was nor will be free from the consequences of sin, then reflection over and reproduction of dogma, just through its tie to inscripturated revelation, will be provoked to a critical stance toward dogmas and confession" (1:12).

Sympathetic—"Naturally this critical stance may only be sympathetic, that is, the dogmatician, as believer even in his scientific thinking, has to begin with the dogmas of his church" (*ibid.*).