

# The Marks *of* Scripture

Rethinking the Nature of the Bible

Daniel Castelo and Robert W. Wall

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*In memoriam*  
John Webster  
(1955–2016)

# Contents

Preface ix

1. The Ontology and Teleology of Scripture 1
2. Speaking of Scripture 17
3. Unity 39
4. Holiness 63
5. Catholicity 89
6. Apostolicity 117
7. The Church's Practice of Scripture 139

Bibliography 163

Scripture and Ancient Writings Index 170

Subject Index 173

# Preface

This book is the product of both a friendship and a shared passion. Our friendship has been forged over a decade at our institutional home, Seattle Pacific University and Seminary. During this time we have had many conversations about a host of things. We truly enjoy one another's company. Our friendship is a gift from God that we cherish very much. We also share a number of passions. One of those shared passions is a deep love for Scripture. Our passion for and confidence in Scripture is grounded in a shared affirmation of its vast potential as a sanctifying auxiliary of God's Spirit in transforming the church's worship, instruction, mission, and devotional life in fresh and powerful ways. We practice Scripture because we have seen the Spirit use it to convict, shape, and change people's lives into conformity to our Lord. We hope this passion is evident in the classroom when we teach our students, nonbelievers and believers alike, and also in our published work. We are intellectually hospitable to engage in conversations with any others over matters of common concern; however, we gladly come to that conference table with firm convictions about the Bible's authority and its continuing relevance for our day. We hope this book clarifies those convictions going forward.

This book is also a response to a shared concern about the nature of theological discourse and the curricula that instantiate it in many divinity schools. Simply put, theologians and biblical scholars have compartmentalized their investigations and conversations about the

core beliefs and practices of the Christian faith they share. Scripture is taught and its meaning reconstructed within the ancient social worlds that come with particular texts. Bible faculty only rarely vest their study of these texts with the dogmatic insight of their theologian colleagues. Although this interaction has happily begun within the guilds of biblical scholarship (e.g., the Society of Biblical Literature, the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, the Institute for Biblical Research), it has yet to trickle down to the seminary classroom, where courses in “theological interpretation” are still uncommon, and team-taught courses of theologians and biblical scholars even less so. We find the same is true of professional theologians whose instruction on the church’s theological goods is often more fluent in contemporary sociological or anthropological models than in biblical studies. We hope, then, this book will be read not so much as an indictment of the “Christ-Scripture” or “incarnational analogy” but principally as an example of the kind of discourse we long for in theological education today: a theologian and a biblical scholar engaged in a mutually glossing conversation over a common theme by utilizing methods and contributions from each discipline to construct a whole greater than the sum of its two parts.

As for those in our classrooms, we often present ourselves as teachers and doctors of and for the church, but sometimes even our Christian students are not as passionate as we are about Scripture. Many hold it in high regard but confess their trust as a routine shibboleth or theological abstraction; they do not know how to talk about the importance they willingly grant Scripture. Ironically, they have learned from others how to affirm their Bible beliefs but not how to articulate why they trust Scripture without budge or blush. Others are dismayed by the way some Christians deny or shortchange what is plainly in the text so as to conform Scripture to fit some predetermined understanding. We find that the primary reason for this situation is a lack of imagination in how congregations teach their membership, including our Christian students, how to think and talk about the Scripture they affirm as a revelatory word. We hope our book sparks an imaginative conversation for our students and their teachers about a new way to envision Scripture’s nature and enduring authority.

In terms of audience, we seek a broad readership that reflects the whole church. We are both faculty members and so naturally had students and their teachers in mind when we wrote this book. Even though not technically academic, it is scholarly enough for use in the academy. Put another way, we did not necessarily write this text for other scholars: the work is not heavily footnoted, and specific details or alternatives were sometimes not pursued for the sake of brevity. We wrote intuitively and experimentally—off the cuff, if you will—so as not to overburden the text with documentation and to preserve some of the energy and vitality with which we come to writing this particular book. There are some loose ends here and there, we know. And yet, we are inclined to author pieces this way occasionally (in addition to our more technical writings) for the sake of the church. Our shared conviction that we are doctors of and for the church sometimes puts us at odds with the academy and sometimes puts us at odds with the church. We believe that the wide chasm between these two constituencies is all too often an intellectual and formational mistake. This work is an extension of our desire to see that gap bridged.

One final note to clarify terminology and style: We take a broad approach to our use of “the church.” We are not bound to use this term along rigid, confessional lines. We are Methodists with Pentecostal roots. We are inclined to join Irenaeus and say that where the church is, there is the Spirit of God, and vice versa (*Against Heresies* 3.24.1). And, we would add, the Spirit of God is evident where people are attentive to the word of God and seek to form loving relationships with God and neighbor. When speaking of “Scripture” we have in mind the two-Testament canon of sacred texts that a faithful people affirm as authoritative and so practice in their worship, instruction, mission, and personal devotions for holy ends. As for the style of this book, we wanted to preserve our distinct voices amid our shared convictions. Therefore, in the chapters devoted to the marks, we begin and conclude with general remarks, but within the chapters themselves are sections distinctly authored by each of us. As for the other chapters, we attempted to maintain a unity of style and thus revised them extensively. Throughout, we liberally use plural first-person pronouns, a demonstration of the extent of our shared visions.

The origins of this book lie in the sanctified imagination of Rob; this was originally his idea to pursue. Rob decided that the idea would be best developed as a collaboration between a Scripture scholar and a theologian, and so Daniel was brought along. We went on to coauthor “Scripture and the Church: A Précis for an Alternative Analogy,” which serves as a precursor to this book. Since this article’s publication, we have developed the analogy we seek to explore here in a variety of publications and settings, both academic and ecclesial. When appropriate, we have identified these explorations in footnotes, grateful to our colleagues and students for their feedback. The conversation continues, and we trust that the publication of this work moves the argument from a précis to a more substantial contribution.

We are thankful for the splendid editorial work of Baker Academic’s Eric Salo, who worked hard editing this manuscript to make a dialogue between two like-minded colleagues from different theological disciplines more coherent and persuasive. We also thank Carla Wall for taking time out from a busy life to read through the galleys of our prospective book as an “ideal reader” to offer her suggestions for greater clarity and better arguments.

Finally, this book is the by-product of many conversations inspired and cultivated within a collegial community marked by its intellectual hospitality and genuine care for one another. In addition to our colleagues in the School of Theology at Seattle Pacific University, we acknowledge with thanksgiving Stephen Fowl of Loyola University of Maryland for his indispensable contributions to our way of thinking about a theology of Scripture and its theological interpretation.

Sadly, however, a recent development made the choice of dedication clear. Even though he is in the company of our Lord, we continue to be saddened by the loss represented in the passing of John Webster. As is quite obvious in these pages, we are influenced significantly by his work, especially his *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*. In many ways we were hoping to extend some of the arguments in that work with our present volume. When Daniel talked to Webster about this project some time ago, he was intrigued and supportive of the idea in its nascent form. His voice is missed, yet we are full of joy that his life had such an impact on so many, including

ourselves. We are looking forward to the day when we will join him and the rest of the heavenly audience, proclaiming for all eternity the words of Isaiah 6:3:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

Daniel Castelo and Robert W. Wall  
Epiphany 2018  
Seattle, Washington



# The Ontology and Teleology of Scripture

What is Scripture? What is its purpose? These are two key questions any thoughtful, earnest, and God-loving reader of the Bible should ask. And yet, rarely do Christians raise them in their reading and reflective practices. The first question can be said to be the ontological question: What is the nature of Scripture’s essence and so its identity? The second question can be labeled teleological: What is the function of Scripture, and for what end do people read it? These are such basic questions that one simply assumes Christians intuitively have answers at their disposal. “The Bible is God’s word and so truth,” one could say, further adding, “and Christians read it in order to know God and God’s truth.” These claims, however, are largely tautologous; they simply affirm and reaffirm a commitment one has to Scripture’s authority, but they do little to secure that authority within a wider paradigm. They suggest nothing in terms of different conceptions of truth, the character of God, or the general nature of interpretation overall. Rather than being deliberate answers to the ontological and teleological questions, these responses are deferrals that bypass the hard work of reflecting *about* Scripture.

Reflecting about Scripture must be undertaken by Christians in the sense that Scripture is not simply a text they read: it is also a theological category. When Christians speak of Scripture, appeal to it, or assume its authority, they do so in ways that are inherently theological; they implicitly recognize Scripture as *being* theologically significant, even though they may not consciously acknowledge the gesture. Perhaps this point was more obvious for previous generations who were inclined to call the Bible “Holy Writ,” “the Holy Bible,” or “the sacred Word.” Calling this text “holy” can suggest that it operates in God’s “economy of sanctification”—the ways and means by which a holy God shapes and transforms a community into a holy people. Whether it is recognized as such in the contemporary scene, Scripture is a category of theological consequence. It has a role to play in God’s manifest work, and this role helps constitute both its identity and its function in the life of the faithful.

Remarkable about academic and popular approaches to Christian Scripture, however, is that something on occasion happens. Rather than thinking of Scripture as a theological category, many look to Scripture as a basis, source, or foundation for doing theology. The difference in this claim is slight but significant. Rather than being a theological category, Scripture is sometimes employed as a resource for theologizing. In this approach, Scripture provides the “source material” for doing theology, but Scripture is not considered outright as theological at its very core. This approach to Scripture is not altogether wrong, but it does present a number of challenges that cannot be easily overcome on their own. Some of these difficulties are highlighted by the following questions: If Scripture is not understood as a theological category, then how can it be categorized or classified? If Scripture is used strictly as a resource for theology, then what does that say about how theology is pursued and the kind of theology that will ensue from this casting? Do other ways of understanding Scripture exist, and if so, why is this first model often privileged? These questions are crucial, particularly since Christians generally, and Protestants particularly (given the way they cast their specific identity), have so much at stake with matters related to the Bible. No Christian will deny the importance of the Bible for Christian identity, but different proposals are available as to how to understand

its authority. These differences matter because they reflect and determine various intellectual and spiritual sensibilities that are at work in interpreting and applying Scripture, and differences on these scores in turn will inevitably shape how one views the Christian life and the Christian God.

In what follows, we will begin a process of engaging Scripture as a theological category by considering it as canon and as a means of grace. In this way, Scripture will be cast as theologically consequential rather than instrumental, a topic of proper theological consideration rather than one that is passed over so as to rush to the pursuit of doing “real theology.” We consider this work crucial as we begin this text; these understandings will inflect all that we subsequently say about the Bible.

As to the first term, “canon” has the advantage of being a theological category that prominently involves both anthropological and pneumatological dimensions. We argue that the same can be said for the term “Scripture,” yet since the Bible is so significantly determined by many Christian constituencies, those points (the anthropological and pneumatological) may be harder to identify and promote, at least at the outset of a discussion. A focus on canon can show that this text is both historical and revelatory, human- and Spirit-generated, and this makes for a more nuanced treatment of the many features of Scripture as a theological phenomenon.

As to the second term, a “means of grace” suggests a different kind of tension: how God and humans are involved in spiritual formation and sanctification. Christians of all kinds read Scripture devotionally in order to foster growth and development in their spiritual journeys. In this, they are approaching Scripture as a means of grace. This kind of activity and practice associated with Scripture is theologically significant. It is academically noteworthy because any treatment of Scripture within the theological academy needs to account for the theological significance of this kind of appropriation; otherwise, we believe, the treatment will be theologically myopic.

With the terms “canon” and “means of grace,” then, Scripture can be thought of in more ways than simply a deposit of theological building blocks. With these alternative castings, the ontology and teleology of the Bible may become clearer and more relevant, and

if so, then its place within the life of the faithful can be richer and more explicitly and practically formative.

## Scripture as Canon

Christians have always been people of the book. The special status granted to the church's Bible in Christian formation is sounded by the theological terms associated with it: "Scripture," "sacrament," "word," "canon," and so on. In particular, the idea that the Bible is a canon of sacred texts signifies it as a book that God's people should read and use in worship, catechesis, devotions, and discussions in order to learn about God and to form a manner of life and faith pleasing to God. The Bible is canon not because it is a singular rule that outperforms every other medium through which God's Spirit makes God known; rather, the Bible is canon precisely because of the indispensable, formative tasks it performs as an auxiliary of the Spirit in directing the church's life toward God. And because they are special in this particular way, the biblical texts selected, collected, and presented as canonical should be picked up, again and again, by every Christian congregation as required reading.

The language of "selection," "collection," and "presentation" suggests a dynamic that on occasion worries some Christians because it can seem too dependent on a historical process. Many wonder about and are even suspicious of this process. Given the conspiracy theories and hypothetical scenarios abounding in popular culture, people may puzzle over why certain books were included while others were not. But a more fundamental worry for many is highlighted via the following question: How can a book that is assumed to be theologically authoritative as the "word of God" be so enmeshed in a process that is very much driven by human judgments and factors, ones that are prone to bias, limits, and ignorance? Of course, this worry is not ancillary to a discussion about Scripture's authority, but on theological grounds, this process cannot be reduced simply to a historical, human dynamic. The postbiblical circumstances and social world that now frame the historian's discussion of the canonical process should be understood in theological terms if Scripture is agreed upon as being a theological category. While John Webster

agrees that canonization is a process of “human decision-making,” he also describes it in terms of the sanctifying participation of the Spirit, whose presence intends to extend the apostolic testimony of the historical Jesus into the future.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the various phenomena that historians ascribe to canonization can also be understood as Spirit-led events that safeguard and textually establish the normative truth about Christ.

As an act of confession, the church recognizes that among its membership in ages past it came to decide which texts best performed a canonical role in its common life. But this act of confession was not based on the church’s savviness or trustworthiness throughout this process; more basically, the church’s confession on this score is that the Holy Spirit inspired these texts, drove these texts to communal prominence, and guided the church in its selection processes so that fitting texts were included for the task of shaping a holy community. Far from spontaneous or chaotic, the canonization process—from a text’s initial composition to its eventual canonization as part of a canonical collection in the church’s two-Testament Bible—is both providential and purposeful. No point of this historical process is arbitrary or accidental; it is from beginning to end a creaturely process superintended by God’s sanctifying Spirit for holy ends in the global church’s worship, catechesis, mission, and personal devotions.<sup>2</sup> Put another way, as human-generated as this process may look when viewed through one lens (i.e., a “canonization from below”), viewed through another lens it is very much a God-determined development (i.e., a “canonization from above”). Humans did not simply make choices. Rather, God-fearing saints made certain judgments within

1. See Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 23–24, 50–52.

2. In fact, the partnership between God’s Spirit and the church’s Scripture continues beyond the initial writing of the text, and extends to the various ongoing performances by a faithful community of practice. “Scripture’s ontology is directly tied to its teleology” (Castelo, *Pneumatology*, 93). That is, Scripture is infused and substantiated by the Spirit-illuminating roles for the divine economy of sanctification that forge a “decisive and full-orbed Christian existence” (*ibid.*, 94)—what Wesleyans call “full salvation.” In this sense, we lay claim to a more functional and expansive notion of Scripture’s authority. The church receives Scripture as God’s word and as an auxiliary of the Spirit who is at work through sanctifying agents to form God’s holy people as a public witness to God’s victory in Christ. See *ibid.*, 90–94 for a précis of our “pneumatology of Scripture.”

a Spirit-drenched context, one in which the Spirit was involved at the beginning, during the process, and toward the end of a complex series of developments called “canonization.”

The church’s “canon-consciousness,” then, is the graced (God-given) capacity to discern what substantively agrees with the apostolic testimony of Jesus from what does not. The church’s act of discernment is not a magical performance. This recognition of a text’s canonicity, if properly led by the Spirit, is necessarily honed in worship by prayer and in faithful use when teaching and training God’s people.<sup>3</sup> Canonization is a process of and for the church in which God’s Spirit is present, performing the role for which the Spirit was sent (see John 14–16). There is no need for a biblical canon if there is no church, and without a biblical canon the church would be spiritually impoverished. For this practical reason, we insist (to highlight one of our major commitments in this book) that the marks of a Spirit-led community, which is competent to produce and use a canon of Scripture, will necessarily be of a piece with the marks of that book it produces and uses. This is the essential circularity of the canonical process.

Canonization is a complex but crucial phenomenon for the current discussion because its careful construction can help shape how one answers the ontological and teleological matters sketched above. In terms of Scripture’s essence, one has to reply in light of the developmental nature of canonization that Scripture is not simply a category but a running argument, one that requires an ongoing set of judgments. And at one level, these judgments are ecclesial in nature: the worshiping faithful came to use and recognize certain texts as “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16) for those in its fold.

The church’s episcopacy made these judgments at a moment of history wrapped in its own social world and exigencies.<sup>4</sup> Most historical studies of what we are calling a “canonization from below” are framed by the reconstruction of a variety of threats, both internal and external, which occasioned an epistemic crisis—“What is

3. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 58–67.

4. For a summary of this history, see Wall, “Canon.”

truth?”—that incited the formation of a Christian Bible. Although we are convinced that the community’s canon-consciousness, shaped by its use of Israel’s scripture and apostolic writings from the beginning (see 1 John 1:1–2), would have made the formation of this book inevitable, we agree that the urgency of doing so was made more so by the contested reception of the apostolic tradition during the second century. There were a variety of Christianities, which required a stable textual boundary within which theological and ethical matters could be debated and resolved as a practical matter of the church’s unity.<sup>5</sup>

The pivotal figure in Adolf von Harnack’s programmatic narrative on these matters is Marcion (ca. 85–ca. 160), whom the Apologists considered a rival of the apostles (although a Pauline tradent<sup>6</sup>) but who is reputed to be the first teacher to design and use a Christian Bible for catechetical purposes. According to Harnack’s narrative, Marcion objected to the prevailing version of apostolic Christianity and sought to purify it of its Jewish theology and Hellenistic ethics by establishing a canon of Pauline Letters as revelatory of Christ’s genuine gospel. In response to Marcion, the Apologists proposed a canon of their own, which enfolded Marcion’s Pauline collection into a Christian Bible including the writings of the Lord’s original apostles that Marcion had rejected.<sup>7</sup> Most who follow this plotline suspect that Marcion’s motive for producing a discrete Christian Bible was to secure his apostolicity (see chap. 6 below). But perhaps it is better to understand his Bible as incited by the same canon-consciousness and awareness of the same apostolic writings that later shaped Irenaeus’s conception of a Christian Bible. The materials Marcion gathered, based on the broad experience of various Christian (predominantly Gentile) congregations—an early edition of Luke’s Gospel and a ten-letter collection of Paul’s canonical letters to form a Gospel-Letter canon—had already begun to eclipse Israel’s scripture in the

5. This intramural battle over the theological grammar of an “orthodox” faith is reflected in the pages of the New Testament. Again, an element of canon-consciousness is this practical concern of turning to certain texts in order to figure out God’s word when this is the very thing being debated.

6. A *tradent* is any believer who belongs to and is shaped by the theological grammar of a particular apostolic tradition.

7. The most succinct narrative of Harnack’s contested reconstruction of Marcion’s influence is found in his massive *History of Dogma*, 1:266–81.

Bible practices of the apostolic community. One need not name-call Marcion a “supersessionist” when most of the church had already come to depend more on Paul than on the Pentateuch for its theological instruction at this time. In fact, Irenaeus himself recognized that the real “problem” with Marcion’s canon was not that it was anti-apostolic but that it was an exclusively Pauline “canon within the canon,” concentrating normative truth claims on the received writings of a single apostolic tradition (including Luke’s Gospel), to the exclusion of the writings of the Jerusalem pillars and the Septuagint. Sharply put, the problem with Marcion’s canon was that it had an incomplete shape and size, which had the deleterious effect of shaping an incomplete and ineffective theology for the church’s life.

We might gloss this general observation pneumatologically by what we are calling a “canonization from above.” That is, the use of Marcion’s Pauline canon (and, even today, certain Protestant groups follow it in practice!) quenches the Spirit’s various uses of Scripture by limiting the range of its pluriform prophetic and apostolic witness of the incarnate Word. Put positively, if the Spirit takes the lead in the canonical process by first choosing those writings that the church then recognizes as “divinely inspired,” the literary product produced by that process—that is, the church’s *textus receptus* in its final canonical form—must be approached and appropriated as maximally effective for the Spirit’s own illuminating, formative work within the church. However, without this entire canon in full play, the Spirit’s use of Scripture as an auxiliary of its teaching ministry to mark out God’s people as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic will be seriously subverted.<sup>8</sup>

8. This notion of the Spirit’s use of Scripture was informed by what the church deemed as helpful in the task of inspiring believers and keeping them faithful to Jesus and the teachings and preaching of the apostles. Often, when people speak of the canonical process, criteria are appealed to that are of a historical (authorial origins, context, and so on) as well as theological (how well a book coheres to other established books and so forth) nature. From these gleanings, people stamp the process as a recognition of a text’s “inspiration,” with the appeal sometimes made to 2 Tim. 3:16 (“All scripture is inspired by God”). Missing from this allusion, however, is the second half of the verse (“and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness”), which might in turn function as a gloss on what the term “inspiration” may involve and how a text comes to be recognized as “inspired” in the first place. In this sense, “Scripture” is a dynamic

On the basis of a belief in God's providential work, we can claim that the Spirit's sanctification of the canonical process orders it in a precise and purposeful way, which has produced a biblical canon for the ongoing community of faith that effectively serves the holy ends appointed and enabled by the Spirit's inspiring presence. We might think of this in the same way the evangelist summarizes the announcement of the historical Jesus, who arrives into his first-century Palestinian world when "the time is fulfilled" (Mark 1:15). His messianic life is not somehow less than historical. The Creator's providential partnership with earthly creatures directs and animates them as the *necessary property of their material existence* toward an eternal end of God's own making. In other words, Jesus's Jewishness, shaped by his first-century Roman Palestinian world, is of a piece with his messianic mission, and that mission is of a piece with God's gracious and kindhearted purposes for all creation.

Our response to those critics who continue to fix the theological and hermeneutical importance of canonization and its literary production in an ancient past follows this same line of argument. The Bible's composition and canonization, as thoroughly creaturely activities, took place under the Spirit's direction in the fullness of time for the Spirit's use until kingdom come (when Scripture is no longer needed) as an auxiliary of the Spirit's illumination of God's purposes already realized through the risen One. Today's worshipping faithful should own the warrants and implications of such judgments, not because ancient others have deemed it so, but because their past judgments register God's design, reaffirmed time and again as effective from generation to generation of the church catholic whenever and wherever biblical texts are practiced and performed in congregational worship, catechesis, and mission. In this sense, Scripture is the church's book; its legal address is the church (the ontological dimension). Additionally, in this sense, Scripture was purposefully shaped and ordered to form the church's covenant-keeping communion with the living God for heaven's sake (the teleological dimension).

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process, a dynamism shaped during the canonical process by historical and theological factors and by a formational impress as well.

## Scripture as a Means of Grace

We are also inclined to think of Scripture as a means of grace. We are aware that this phrase can be off-putting for those who are not used to employing it. In our case, as Methodists, we use the language in a very specific way, drawing on an Anglican heritage that was embodied in the ministry and thought of John Wesley.

Wesley himself recognized that this language was potentially misleading. In a sermon by the same name, he offered this general definition: “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the *ordinary* channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.” Wesley says he uses the phrase because he knows none better, in that it was employed in the Church of England’s delineation of sacraments. He notes, “In particular [the phrase is used] by our own church, which directs us to bless God both for the ‘means of grace and hope of glory’; and teaches us that a sacrament is ‘an outward sign of an inward *grace*, and a *means* whereby we receive the same.’”<sup>9</sup>

If Scripture is a means of grace in the sense noted above, what that rendering achieves is to place Scripture in the company of both spiritual disciplines and sacraments. Wesley continues, “The chief of these means are prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon) and receiving the Lord’s Supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of him.” He continues, “These we believe to be ordained of God as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.”<sup>10</sup> This collective casting is quite generative, for it suggests that a similar logic may be at work in each of the three “means” mentioned: prayer is akin to reading the Scriptures, and both are akin to partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Within the triad, how one is understood has the potential to be relatable to how the other two are. Therefore, reading Scripture can be understood similarly to praying and to partaking of the sacrament of Communion. Reading Scripture, then, can and ought to be understood to some degree in terms of spiritual disciplines and sacraments.

9. Wesley, “Means of Grace,” 381, including additional citations.

10. Wesley, “Means of Grace,” 381.

Of course, in all three a formalism could emerge in which, despite “having a form of godliness,” one ends up “denying the power thereof” (2 Tim. 3:5 KJV). Perhaps this would be the running reservation by many with the language of “means,” but it should be refuted from the onset: The means of grace cannot be understood to be calculated means for achieving predetermined ends, all in a process that is accomplished primarily by human striving. Wesley is very well aware of the point. If these activities do not attend to the end of religion—that is, if they do not lead to the knowledge and love of God—they have no value before God’s eyes; in fact, at such a point, they would be an abomination to God.<sup>11</sup> Therefore Wesley attends to the means of grace very much in terms of the way they are utilized. The modality of their use is crucial: How, in what manner, and to what end are they employed?

For Wesley, a doxological modality, one of worship, is primary here. Praying, reading Scripture, and partaking of the Lord’s Supper are first and foremost worshipful activities. Christians undertake them to worship the living God and to commune with this God. Wesley straightforwardly remarks, “We know that there is no inherent power in the words that are spoken in prayer, in the letter of Scripture read, the sound thereof heard, or the bread and wine received in the Lord’s Supper; but that it is God alone who is the giver of every good gift, the author of all grace.”<sup>12</sup> In casting the means as doxological, Wesley places God front and center in their efficaciousness.

The theo-logic<sup>13</sup> of the means of grace is ascetical in a certain sense. That is to say, their inner workings involve both active and passive dimensions. The dynamic can be said to work in the following way: God’s salvation is a graciously given gift, which is in turn received by faith via active forms of waiting. These active forms of waiting are otherwise known as “the means of grace.”<sup>14</sup> In this, Wesley is trying to avoid many different extremes.<sup>15</sup> For one, we are not

11. Wesley, “Means of Grace,” 381.

12. Wesley, “Means of Grace,” 382.

13. We use the term “theo-logic” to show that theological discernment (“theo-”) is a rational, logical process (“-logic”).

14. Wesley, “Means of Grace,” 383.

15. Wesley addresses many of the reservations in “Means of Grace,” 390–93.

the meritorious cause of salvation; we cannot earn or accomplish our salvation because only one can save—namely, Christ. Therefore, we should not look to the practice of the means of grace as somehow achieving or guaranteeing anything on our behalf simply by our practice of them. And yet to press another point, we are not to sit idly by, waiting for God to appear in our midst, for that would lead to the heresy of quietism, which wrongfully locates the context of knowing God exclusively in privatized experiences we passively “feel.” Contrary to this, Wesley believed that knowing God involves all that God has graciously provided the church to sustain, uphold, and transform it into God’s likeness. Included in this heritage we are bequeathed as Christ-followers is Holy Writ. As Hal Knight declares of the Wesleyan view, “The identity of God can only be known by faith through participation in those means of grace which convey identity, such as scripture and the eucharist.”<sup>16</sup>

When Wesley elaborates Scripture as a means of grace, he goes on to extensively engage the Timothy correspondence, which is significant for us in this work. The admonition of Paul to Timothy that Scripture can make him “wise unto salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15 KJV) applies to us today as well. And Wesley does not simply stop with the notion that Scripture is inspired but goes on to affirm (as we have been emphasizing throughout this chapter) the subsequent claim as stated in the Authorized Version: “and [Scripture] is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” to the end “that the man [*anthrōpos*] of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”<sup>17</sup> The point to emphasize here is that the doxological modality of reading Scripture as a means of grace involves formative dimensions. We are shaped by the work of the Holy Spirit when we attend patiently and attentively to the Bible as Holy Writ.

## Reducing Scripture

Both the terms “canon” and “means of grace” help situate Scripture within the specific context of God’s sanctifying work. Providentially,

16. Knight, *Presence of God*, 12.

17. Wesley, “Means of Grace,” 388, quoting 2 Tim. 3:16–17 KJV.

God's Spirit led the canonization process to give to the church a collection of texts for its spiritual nourishment and growth. Furthermore, God has given us Scripture as a means of grace to help us along in the Christian journey. In reading this text, the church has repeatedly heard the voice of the living God beckoning, challenging, awakening, and transforming it. With such a rich dynamic at work, why is Scripture often neglected as a theological category? And tied to this, why is the Bible frequently used in a reductively utilitarian fashion?

Much of the onus on this score is related to the intellectual imaginaries of Scripture's readers. When people come to the Bible, they do not abandon their ways of thinking and interpreting. Quite the contrary, they come to this text with expectations and tendencies that reflect their immediate environs. These expectations and tendencies relate not only to how they read the Bible but also to what they come to assume about the Bible's character and role, and these are often determined by their wider commitments to and beliefs about how truth coheres. In other words, one's worldview is not incidental to one's reading practices and thus to the way one engages the Bible.

Such are the dynamics related to understanding Scripture as a feeder or resource for theological reflection. For many who are inclined to think that this is how knowledge works, Scripture provides the "base materials" for theological thinking: one collects the facts or data and goes on to compile them in meaningful ways. For some Christians, Scripture presents the facts of faith, and theologians are to compile these meaningfully, coherently, and systematically. Charles Hodge, one of the "Old Princeton" divines, took such an approach to Scripture.<sup>18</sup> In this, he had both antecedents and descendants who followed such conventions of thought.

Those who are inclined to think of Scripture as simply a source for theology tend to be Protestants of a particular sort. Of course, Protestantism found it important to elevate Scripture epistemically in its efforts to correct a particular ecclesial formation, the Roman Catholic Church of the sixteenth century. This kind of privileging is sometimes associated with the *sola Scriptura* tag, for the running assumption here is that Scripture is solely reliable and trustworthy in the

18. See Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:1–10.

establishment of a faithful and true Christianity. Human traditions, customs, judgments, and the like are deemed to be open to fallibility, but Protestants find recourse in Scripture: as the word of God, Scripture is stable and reliable for knowing God's will and purposes.

Within this paradigm, Scripture functions as foundational to the theological task. Scripture is pressured, then, to serve epistemic purposes, and this role becomes significantly and solely associated with Scripture. This casting of Scripture overshadows, maybe not explicitly but certainly through usage, its identity as canon and a means of grace. As a result, Scripture retains a place of privilege largely at the epistemic level, and as such, its theological character is neglected. Even terms such as "perspicuity" and "sufficiency" can be pressed for use within this confining paradigm. Such terms can be understood, not as qualities of a theological category (as they certainly were in various dogmatic proposals), but as characteristics of an epistemic category.

Any number of factors could be identified as prompting this shift. For instance, formal biblical study migrated from the church and monastery to the university in a way that relativized the interpreter's location and aims. Also, knowledge at this time was increasingly mathematized and shaped by empirical methodologies so that a person progressed in the creation of knowledge by the establishment of certain principles or axioms that one could then test, employ, and extend in a variety of settings and circumstances so as to form the basis for subsequent claims. Scripture shifted from being revelatory to overwhelming the dogmatic category of revelation, thereby becoming the first topic of choice methodologically when Protestant theologies were written or statements of faith formulated. The most significant culprit of this shift was a morphing of the hermeneutical process altogether so that a gulf was created between text (with its various characteristics and qualities) and readers (including their identities and motives). The gulf was achievable through a collapse and conflation of the text with the practice of interpretation. In a sense, the text became self-interpreting and clear on its own terms and within its own boundaries. The consequence of this move was that the text was understood as not needing a community of interpretation for its meaning to be understood and its purposes to be realized; people

just needed to attend to “what was there” in some commonsensical kind of way. Without the communal aspect, a deliberative mechanism for discerning the Spirit’s promptings was not deemed necessary.

Through such developments, a democratization of the interpretive process ensued. Each believer was left to his or her own conscience to understand God’s holy word. If pressed, the assumption was that the human conscience was guided by the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, but explicitly the process was deemed more so an act stemming from a hermeneutical positivism: people simply read and noted what was in the text already. Such an interpretive outlook yielded innumerable factions and a plethora of ecclesial divisions as a result. In light of these, one could postulate a link between a certain species of scriptural foundationalism and the Protestant invention of denominationalism—no appeals process was available to negotiate rival and competing interpretations. Rather than questioning the epistemic conditions that led to such divisiveness, many simply proliferated the divisions, all the while claiming their interpretation as the “right” one. Of course, such outcomes work against the unity Christians are to have in Christ, but they also contribute to an impoverished account of Scripture’s character and role among the faithful.

## Moving Forward

In light of these past developments, we seek in this volume to explore the theological category of Scripture, and we do so with the outright recognition that many of the contemporary ways Scripture is deployed and understood collectively represent a problematic reduction of Scripture’s ontology and teleology. We recognize this situation as partially stemming from identifiable political, cultural, and philosophical shifts that have taken place in the history of the West. These factors make a dogmatic account of Scripture difficult to sustain. Overall, these outcomes debilitate the role and function of Scripture in the lives of the faithful. If Scripture is simply an epistemological foundation or criterion, then people may employ it as a specific means for a particular end that can ultimately be unrelated to the catechetical task—that is, “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who

belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

We wish to move past these unhelpful determinations to give a more bountiful and rich account of Scripture’s role and place among the reading faithful. However one answers the questions with which we began this chapter—What is Scripture? What is its purpose?—the results will inevitably shape what can ensue as a theological characterization or dogmatic treatment of the Bible. For us, Scripture as an auxiliary of the Holy Spirit is providentially shaped and constituted within the church to aid in this community’s ongoing sanctification and formation as it aims to be faithful to the memory, presence, and return of the risen One.<sup>19</sup> Scripture is an important auxiliary no doubt, but it is one of several that the Spirit employs to shape a people’s character and witness over time.<sup>20</sup> The task before us is to reclaim Scripture’s character and function within the church in accordance with its God-granted purpose of building up the faithful. Such aims will no doubt influence what we deem as fitting and helpful in our speech regarding Holy Scripture, including the metaphors, images, and analogies we pursue toward the realization of these ends.

19. For an elaboration of this more functional and expansive pneumatology of Scripture, see Castelo’s engagement with Wall’s theology of Scripture (Castelo, “Inspiration as Providence,” 69–81).

20. William Abraham and his collaborators refer to these materials as constituting a “canonical heritage” that includes the episcopacy, church councils, creeds, and so forth; see Abraham, Vickers, and Van Kirk, *Canonical Theism*.