

The top half of the cover features an abstract background of thick, textured paint. The primary color is a vibrant blue, with visible brushstrokes and some areas of yellow and white paint mixed in, particularly on the left side.

INTEGRATING

+ SCRIPTURE

+ TRADITION

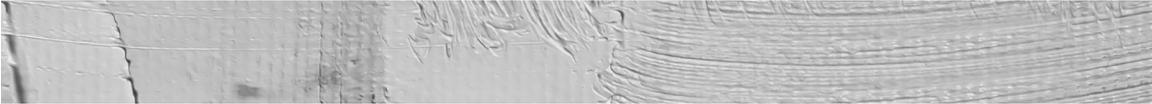
+ REASON

+ EXPERIENCE

+ COMMUNITY

*A Model for
Evangelical
Theology*

GRAHAM
MCFARLANE



A Model for Evangelical Theology



INTEGRATING SCRIPTURE, TRADITION,
REASON, EXPERIENCE, AND COMMUNITY

GRAHAM MCFARLANE



Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Contents

Preface xi

Part 1: Evangelical Theology and Its Method

1. Framing the Skill of Being a Theologian 3

Theology Is about Asking Questions

Theology Is about Our Worldview

Theology Is about Communication

Theology Is about the Whole Person

Theology Is about Developing Habits

Suggested Reading

2. Working Definition 37

The Ordinary and the Academic

What Is Theology?

Suggested Reading

3. The Relational and the Revelational 47

The Relational

The Revelational

Concluding Remarks

Suggested Reading

4. Theological Method 59
The Evangelical in Theological Method
An Integrated Theological Method
Integrative Theology versus Integrative Theological Method
Suggested Reading

Part 2: An Integrated Model for Evangelical Theology

5. Scripture 71
The Supremacy of Scripture
Scripture Speaks and Acts with Authority
Scripture Is Inspired
Why Scripture Does What It Does
Reading Scripture as Indwelling Scripture
Scripture as Revelation
Scripture as a Living Text
Concluding Remarks
Suggested Reading
6. Tradition 101
Tradition Defined
Tradition in Scripture
Continuing the Tradition: Gospel Tradition Process
Continuing the Tradition: Tradition and Orthodoxy
Continuing the Tradition: Tradition in the West
Concluding Remarks
Suggested Reading
7. Reason 133
Setting the Scene
Engaged Reason
Implications for an Evangelical Theological Method
Reason and the Church
An Alternative Evangelical Reason
Foundations
Toward a Reasonable Solution: Reason as Wisdom
Suggested Reading

8. Experience	167
<i>The Great Experiment</i>	
<i>Defining Experience</i>	
<i>The Problem of Experience</i>	
<i>Theological Experience</i>	
<i>What Controls Experience?</i>	
<i>Suggested Reading</i>	
9. Community	203
<i>The Fifth Dimension</i>	
<i>Doing Theology Coram Deo—in the Presence of the Triune God</i>	
<i>Love and Fidelity</i>	
<i>Integration</i>	
<i>Formative and Transformative</i>	
<i>Neighborly Community</i>	
<i>Doing Theology Missio Dei: On the Mission of the Triune God</i>	
<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	
<i>Suggested Reading</i>	
Conclusion: <i>The Quintilateral as a Dynamic Theological Method</i>	239
Notes	247
Bibliography	277
Index	297



PART I

*Evangelical
Theology
and Its
Method*

Framing the Skill of Being a Theologian

Theology Is about Asking Questions

Questions lie at the very heart of human existence. Think about it: they are a way of life—human existence in all its complexity and struggles, as well as beauty and joys, demands questions. We ask questions about everything, from the simple (How are you? Can I help? What’s your name? Where do you live? What’s the time? Have you any milk? Now where did I put those keys? You said what? Didn’t I give you the tickets? Are we there yet?) to the more complex (Why do we nod our heads to signify yes and shake them for no? What is time? Who am I? What’s the meaning of life? Why do some people talk more than others? Is the brain different from the mind? Is there intelligent life anywhere else in the universe? Is there a God? What number do you get if you divide 40 by $\frac{1}{2}$ and add 10^{21}).

Of course, questions are also highly practical. Questions come into their own when we are about to make a big purchase. We compare the price of one car and the value it has with that of another we may well be looking at—we ask questions about depreciation, energy consumption, and insurance brackets to find the best deal. We evaluate with almost every shopping purchase: Is something of better quality or value in another shop? We use comparison websites to determine the best deal for our purchases, whether a mobile phone, travel insurance, currency exchange, or appliances. The list is almost endless. And since questions intrude so much on just about every

aspect of human existence, it is important that we recognize not only how ubiquitous this tool is—the universal drive to ask questions—but even more, how important it is.

Questions also lie at the very heart of human learning. They are the brain's way of “double-clicking” on a topic to get it to divulge meaning. Without questions, we would learn nothing new. So why is it, then, that when it comes to anything to do with our faith, we appear to be less willing to bring this way of life—this tool—to bear on what we believe, on our Christian life, or on our thoughts about God? Indeed, many of us are strangely uncomfortable when it comes to asking our questions about God. Shouldn't we “just believe”? Aren't we meant to have a “simple” faith? Who are we to ask questions of God? Surely this is sheer impertinence! Wasn't it because he asked too many questions that God slammed Job? Isn't it a bit irreverent to be critically thoughtful about what the pastor or teacher has taught or preached?

In addition to these more personal questions is the fact that our beliefs invariably have consequences: What if the church is wrong about something it believes? After all, aren't there some denominations that assumed that women being in leadership was untenable when they first started but are not so comfortable with this position today? And if Mother Church can get one thing wrong, who is to say that other things might not be similarly incorrect? How odd, then, that we ask questions in every other area of our lives but are less likely to do so when it comes to matters of faith, where a mindless piety can parade as an excuse not to engage in the messy business of human life and its transformation. Daniel Migliore captures this tension and the fear that asking questions can elicit when he points out that

while we may be accustomed to raising questions in other areas of life, we are inclined to fear disturbance in matters of faith. We fear questions that might lead us down roads we have not travelled before. We fear disruption in our thinking, believing, and living that might come from inquiring too deeply into God and God's purposes. We fear that if we do not find answers to our questions we will be left in utter despair. As a result of these fears, we imprison our faith, allow it to become boring and stultifying, rather than releasing it to seek deeper understanding.²

There is little doubt that this kind of thinking would be ridiculed in any other contemporary discipline of human inquiry that is driven by the skill of asking judicious questions. For instance, without questions we would not enjoy the quality of life we do today, and most certainly we would not benefit from the many medical and scientific discoveries we take so much for granted. At the very heart of scientific discovery lies the discipline of asking questions:

How does this work? Is there a better way to conduct energy? Does the sun really go around the earth? Is the earth flat? Why do objects fall down rather than float up? What is a quark? Could human life exist on Mars? How can a wave and a particle exist at one and the same time together? Can medicine cure all illnesses? Is all artificial intelligence benign? Then, in response to some of the discoveries scientists make, other questions arise, ones that are more ethical in nature and have more to do with how a given discovery may be used: Which disabilities should genetic coding eradicate? Other questions are concerned about the economic implications of a given possibility: Should a government spend more on education and less on military defense? Others explore the political ramifications of a discovery: Who has the right to a limited vaccine, and thus the right to live, in the face of a fatal pandemic?

Of course, some of us ask more questions than others. For some, asking questions is as normal as breathing: we externally process, we are naturally inquisitive, we have thick skin! For others, whether due to temperament—we are shy or introverted—or because we process internally or have been conditioned to keep quiet or were raised not to speak unless spoken to, or our cultural values silence one gender and not another, or our religious upbringing told us to “just” believe—questioning is something that does not come naturally. However, whether or not we are aware of our questions, still we are involved in the activity of asking them throughout each day. Asking questions is like breathing: we do it without even necessarily being consciously aware of the activity. And yet, without it, we would be at quite a loss. Try going through one day without either asking or answering a question. Put simply, questions are ubiquitous!

Pause

Why not try a simple test that will enable you to discover how many questions you ask in any given day? Note on a tablet or smartphone every time you find yourself asking a question or answering someone else’s question. Learn to recognize not only *how* you engage in this activity but also *when* you do it, *what things* cause you to ask questions, and *how regularly* you do this.

If questioning is such a basic instinct, why is it, then, that so many Christians, who in their everyday lives ask questions about everything and anything, are quietly reluctant to ask questions in relation to their faith or to what they believe about God, or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, or about what the pastor, minister, elder, apostle, or bishop preaches or teaches whether

from the front of church, or at home group, or in the weekly newsletter or church email? Why is it that church has become, for many, a place where our brains are disconnected and disempowered, set on “silent,” like our smartphones? Why are people rendered “questionless” regarding what they hear or are taught within the confines of church? It’s not as though what is being said is infallible! Why, then, does respect for church authority and what it teaches often necessitate unthinking allegiance? And while there are exceptions to the rule, on the whole, why does the physical structure of church buildings, as well as the way services are conducted, create socially constructed spaces and subcultures that render passive those who attend, disempowering them to question, explore, or externally process in any meaningful or participatory way? Would not the gains exceed any losses were time and space made within our church communities in which we could explore questions raised by a sermon or teaching and thus enable our faith to mature? Indeed, it is a rare church where the term “theology” is referred to in a positive sense. Consequently, and often in response, church becomes a place either of unhealthy notions of *mystery* that transcend any need for meaningful explanation or of unthinking *experience* that is to be entered into and enjoyed but never critically explored. As a result, for many, church is rarely an inviting space or place where questions can be asked and explored.

Why is the issue of asking questions such an important issue to raise here at the outset? What is the benefit in doing so? Importantly, the reason for raising this obstacle here is not to undermine the church. As we will discover later, the task of theology is impossible without the church. Rather, the reason is simply this: it is to highlight the fact that *the asking of questions and the subsequent ongoing task of finding answers to them lies at the very heart of theological inquiry!* There are two main reasons for this that come with their own significant challenges:

- The first concerns the matter of theology—God. As John Webster puts it, “Christian theology has a singular preoccupation: God, and everything else *sub specie divinitatis*,”³ which is an old-fashioned Latin way of saying “from the perspective of divinity.” In essence, what Webster is saying is that everything other than God has to be considered in the light of God’s eternal existence. Put like this, theology does not immediately appear to be very clear. And perhaps this is the point that needs to be made here at the start of this book—the task of theology is not that easy or simple, because its subject matter is God. This being the case, the most natural and meaningful response to anything that is not immediately clear is to ask questions in the hope,

by doing so, of discovering more information about it. This is normal procedure in every aspect of human life: when we want to understand something that is unfamiliar, unclear, uncertain, or even unknown, the first thing we do is to ask questions. Questions, in turn, hopefully elicit answers—good ones, wrong ones, half-baked ones, but at least they move us in the direction of discovery. What we call “theology” is simply the result of what Christian thinkers have discovered to be good (or bad) answers to the questions people have asked about and in response to hearing the gospel, being met by Jesus, or wondering about God.⁴

- The second reason for asking questions and finding answers follows from the first: not only is the subject matter of theology, God, not immediately clear, but by virtue of God’s very nature, the subject matter of theology is also completely different from any other subject we can study or about which we can ask questions. Why?
 - » Because God is not created: everything else we ask questions about is.
 - » Because God is not directly observable: just about everything else is.

Therefore, the subject matter of theology raises its own peculiar and particular challenges not only in what can be said about God but also in terms of how we are even able to find out what can be said about God. This book is predominantly about the latter—how we go about the task of talking about God in any meaningful, thoughtful, and consistent manner. In essence, it is about how we go about the task of theology, how we go about asking the what, how, who, and when questions. We call this *theological method*.

Of course, we could be deceived at this point into thinking that the task of theology is perhaps not so difficult and should be a relatively simple and predictable affair; given that God does not change, our subject matter might be considered the most stable of all topics of inquiry. Sadly, however, we would be wrong to make this assumption. Such a theology would be one that fits all shapes and sizes; all social contexts and historical moments; every cultural, gender, age, and human condition. It would be a universal with no particulars. It would be “fundamental” in the wrong sense of the word: unchanging and inhospitable.⁵ The reality is, as we will see, that we never know God in the abstract: we know God only within the context of our own life situations and histories and, in particular, in our places of brokenness, need, and impotence. Only to the extent that the questions we ask arise from the lives we and others live do we engage a living faith.

That this is the case means that the discipline of theology necessitates engaging in struggle and conflict—struggle with its subject matter, God, and

conflict with its context, the good, the bad, the beautiful, and the ugly of human existence.⁶ It means, too, that the setting within which theology takes place, where our questions are asked, will always be “a reality, which is inherently messy.”⁷ In fact, we could say that the task of theology should come with a health warning because of its spiritual and intellectual challenges, which militate against contemporary obsessions for order, control, and sanitized, bite-sized answers. So, be warned: “A theology which seeks always to smooth away life’s rough edges is not likely to be a good theology.”⁸ Indeed, it is bad theology—and bad theology always damages people. So let’s be honest in our starting point on the theological apprenticeship and take ownership of the fact that the nature of the reality in which we find ourselves is messy. We talk about God from this perspective of human brokenness rather than some heavenly idyll. What this means, of course, is that good theology engages with the here and now, with the issues Christians face in their own lives, personal and social—put bluntly, within the midst of our own and others’ messiness. Consequently, I like how Colin Gunton hits the spot when he says that any theology that seeks “to transcend its temporal framework to a timeless realm above and beyond” is nothing other than religion.⁹ That is, theology should not concern itself with religion; rather, its concern is always with God as God is known within the here and now of human existence in all its glory and brokenness.

By virtue of its subject matter—God—theology is a particular discipline in and of itself. Like any other discipline, be it medicine, carpentry, farming, engineering, hairdressing, and so on, theology requires its own set of distinct skills. Without them, it is not possible to master the discipline and practice well the theological craft: particular skills are required if theological inquiry is to be undertaken effectively. For example, when I have a toothache, I go to a dentist who knows how to treat teeth correctly; a woman about to give birth wants the help of a trained midwife or doctor who practices the skills of the profession with the necessary hygiene. The same goes for the task of theology. A trustworthy and dependable theologian is someone who can practice his or her craft correctly and engage wisely with the various questions that people have, that situations provoke, and that the messiness of human existence demands. Like a language, theology also has its own “grammar.” Specifically, evangelical theology has its own “grammar,” one that distinguishes it from other theological disciplines, Christian or otherwise. As we have noted above, theology cannot be separated from the church for the simple reason that theology is how the church throughout its history has expressed itself and given meaning to its beliefs and practices. Without the language of theology, there is no Christian speech. I like the way Robert Jenson, in particular, expresses the relationship between theology and the church in advocating that

theology is the grammar of the church and that “the church is the community of the message.”¹⁰

Theology Is about Our Worldview

This book seeks to offer a theological grammar—a theological method—that makes the contemporary task of being a theologian both possible and meaningful. It does so with the understanding that the discipline of theology has its own distinct set of skills, practices, and habits that enable Christians to articulate and communicate our knowledge of God consistently, first, in relation to each other: there need to be accepted norms and practices if we are to have any meaningful dialogue with our past and present. Second, theology requires specific and mutually agreed-on skills to engage with the complexities of human existence. Third, without some understanding of creation’s meaning as well as human history, the task of making sense of the wider creation in which we live becomes so much more problematic. What the discipline of theology brings to the academic table is that it offers us the ability to transcend the particular in order to get a better vision of the whole, albeit from a particularly theological perspective. Umberto Eco captures the strangeness of such knowledge in his novel *The Name of the Rose* when he writes, “I am He who is, said the God of the Jews. I am the way, the truth, and the life, said our Lord. There you have it: knowledge is nothing but the awed comment on these two truths.”¹¹

Put this way, the task of theology is not so much to provide us with facts about God or with a technique to be learned that can be picked up and laid back down at will. Rather, the task of theology is to inform us how to engage in a particular way of living in the world—a *worldview*—without which meaningful life would not be possible. This worldview furnishes us with answers to the deeper questions of human existence. For example, sociologist Peter Berger pinpoints how our worldview manifests itself culturally as such: “Every human society has its own corpus of officially accredited wisdom, the beliefs and values that most people take for granted as self-evidently true. Every human society has institutions and functionaries whose task it is to represent this putative truth, to transmit it to each new generation, to engage in rituals that reaffirm it and sometimes to deal (at least in words) with those who are benighted or wicked enough to deny it.”¹² Alternatively, apologist-theologian James Sire identifies a worldview as “a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions . . . which we hold . . . about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.”¹³ Interestingly, each worldview itself is the sum total of all the answers men and women like

you and me at various historical moments have asked of their own lives and the various worlds in which they have found themselves:

1. What is prime reality—ultimate being?
2. What is the nature of external reality—that is, the world around us?
3. What is human being?
4. What happens to a person at death?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
7. What is the meaning of human history?¹⁴

Our worldview is, thus, “the shared framework of ideas held by a particular society concerning how they perceive the world. . . . The worldview gives shape and order to the multitude of outward manifestations of a culture.”¹⁵ In general terms, then, a worldview achieves two key things. First, it provides the means by which we make sense of and hold together all the disparate elements of our various cultures, whether politics, religion, law, education, health, family, media, ecology, or the arts. Second, our worldview not only furnishes us with the necessary data by which we understand our world; it also enables us to live consistently within this world.

It is of tremendous importance, then, that we be able to identify the dominant worldviews around us—our own as well as others—a particularly important skill in our increasingly pluralistic contexts. It matters that we be able to locate the meaning of life in relation to each worldview since, if we think about it, each one acts like a “mental map” and attempts to “tell us how to navigate the world effectively.”¹⁶ N. T. Wright identifies four criteria for this task, all of which are pertinent to the task of theological inquiry:

- Worldviews provide the stories with which we understand reality.
- The worldview stories enable us to answer the basic question of human existence.
- We express our answers to such questions through cultural symbols.
- Our worldview provides ways of living in the world.¹⁷

On a grand scale, then, our worldview is a bit like glue—it acts as a unifying principle in what is, otherwise, a seemingly disconnected world. It is what unites belief and practice, faith and thought, and ultimately all of us together, for better or for worse. This has particular relevance for the theologian, for there is an intimate relation between how we live in the world with each other

and what each of us believes (or not) about God. Since we believe that God is Creator and that Jesus presents himself to us as the source of abundant life, it follows, then, that what we believe about the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ should correspond to how we think we can live best in our world. Perhaps I can put it this way: the question is never “Do you have a worldview?” We all do.¹⁸ Rather, the question is “Does your worldview work?” And for the Christian, the question is even more specific given our belief in God as Creator and Savior and can be posed as “How biblical is your worldview?”¹⁹ This biblical worldview is expressed through the narratives of Scripture that outline the master stories of our Christian faith: creation, fall, covenant, re-creation, and consummation.

On a more particular level, our worldview is what comes at us every day through advertising—cultural aspirations are projected through a car, home décor, vacations, clothing. The media—newspapers, magazines, the internet, social media—filter what we read and what they want the public to read and know; entertainment media portray our worldview aspirations and beliefs. For instance, when on research leave at a seminary in the United States, I watched several TV sitcoms, and I was struck by just how central to the American worldview was the belief that everything is possible, problems are always solved, family disputes always get resolved well, and the good always win in the end. What struck me so forcibly was how, as a consequence, this threw light on my own British worldview and the fact that UK sitcoms are quite different: if it can get worse, it does; things don’t usually get better, and good people get walked over. For one worldview, the glass is always half full, and for the other, it remains half empty. Each perspective, however, expresses a deeper, more unconscious worldview that the theologian has not only to identify and understand but also to engage.

Theology Is about Communication

The ubiquitous nature of worldviews means, obviously, that a specifically evangelical theology will have its own worldview too—its own way of doing things, its own beliefs and practices, its own way of living in the world, and, as we have already seen, its own grammar and language. On the one hand, the aim of evangelical theology is, as Kevin Vanhoozer and Daniel Treier describe, “to understand who God is, what he has done and why it counts as good news.”²⁰ On the other hand, in order to go about this aim, as we have noted, we need a language and grammar. And like any other language with its own grammar,²¹ Christian theology will be a very different speech, one that demarcates itself from other worldview languages. This being the case,

we can say along with Jenson that “this grammar distinguishes Christian theology from all other theologies.”²²

As we have noted, Christians live differently from other people of faith and unfaith because their allegiance is to a worldview very different from others on offer. Craig Keener identifies one of the key consequences of embracing and living within the worldview of the Bible: it enables us “to view our own world in a different light (as opposed to primarily immersing ourselves in other narratives popular around us).”²³ That is, it is not merely others’ worldviews that come under Scripture’s scrutiny; it is also our own. Small wonder that Jesus likens living in the worldview of his Father’s kingdom to a narrow path on which few are to be found (Matt. 7:13–14). Put like this, it is clear that an evangelical theological method is one that will be established on a particular view of reality, contoured by a theological understanding of creation—“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Heb. 11:3)—and a clear sense of where history is going. It will be expansive but equally grounded in the realities of human brokenness and the good news of the gospel.

Marva Dawn captures the contemporary glory of the biblical worldview rather pithily: “Scripture is the ‘master-story,’ the ‘meta-Narrative’ that offers meaning, identity, and hope to the channel-surfing postmodern society.”²⁴ Consequently, the imperative for us as theologians is that we should be familiarly conversant with the grammar of our biblical worldview, because by it we speak its language and with it we are better able to engage the messy world that needs to hear good news. This biblical worldview sets Christian theology apart and allows it to be the lingua franca of the worldwide church. And, like all other languages, theology is best mastered by frequent repetition.²⁵

Let’s stop here for a moment. The point just made is important. Pause and try to work out what it might mean for you as a theologian to learn the language of the church and what it will demand of you. Here is what it means for me:

*To be a theologian is
to be bilingual.*

What is required to be a theologian, whether ordinary or academic, on the one hand, is the ability to speak, hear, listen to, understand, translate, and communicate what Karl Barth so beautifully describes as the “strange new world within the Bible.”²⁶ On the other, it is to know how to communicate this strange new world within the Bible to our “old and familiar world of the here and now” as we experience it in our own particular context. Being a theologian, then, necessitates being so familiar with and so constantly listening

to the contents of Scripture as to be able to speak it clearly, effectively, and consistently. It means the same, too, for each here-and-now context into which the theologian speaks and writes: to be listening to the context, the worldview, the issues, the hopes, the expectations both conscious and subconscious, and to be hearing the explicit as well as the implicit grammar and language of those to whom the gospel, with all its implications, is being proclaimed. What this means in practice is that the same kind of attention, time, and effort that is required in learning any new language is required of us in our own theological development. In the same way that the strange world of the Bible provides our new language of faith—a language that enables us to love God and follow Jesus Christ, to learn how to live with and to love the new and sometimes strange group of people who make up “church” or how to live as a disciple of Jesus in our own context—so, too, are we to learn similarly the language and grammar of the world in which our neighbors live. And in so doing, we “square the circle” between these two very distinct and different worlds that the Bible itself tells us cannot coexist.

Jesus Christ himself makes this point very clear in stating the impossibility of following two masters (Matt. 6:24), having qualified earlier a similar impossibility—namely, of serving God, and all that this entails, and at the same time serving “mammon,” a word that embraces not simply the love of money but a much wider greedy intention to gain as much wealth as possible. However, simply “opting out” of the world and living in a Christian bubble is never an option for anyone who follows Jesus Christ, not least for theologians. Rather, while we belong either to the kingdom of God or to counterfeit nation-states, we are obliged to be in the world, but not of it (John 15:19; 17:14–15; Rom. 12:1–2; 1 John 2:15–17). The point will be made that theology is not an autonomous activity or entity but rather one that has meaning only in relation to exegeting Scripture. Theology serves Scripture. Any other is inadequate to the task.

Theologians, like anyone learning a new language, are only successful in learning and maturing in their craft to the degree they live in the text—indwell it—so that it comes alive with meaning and thus facilitates effective understanding and communication. Obviously, then, for this to happen, we need some kind of “tool kit,” a specific means of constructing and maintaining our theology, so that it is *theology* and not anthropology, sociology, philosophy, or anything else we might wish to construct. Fundamental to creating that tool kit is understanding that to be a theologian is

- to identify and articulate the gospel of Jesus Christ;
- to master the discipline of understanding this gospel;

- to identify theology’s way of going about its business;
- to handle theology’s internal grammar;
- to read and speak theology’s language; and
- to live with integrity within a specific worldview.

Theology Is about the Whole Person

It should be clear by now that theology does not “just happen.” It is not the product of divine downloading that directly bypasses the mind of some suitably spiritual recipient or recipients. There is no “theology” folder on which to double-click in order to extract immediate and accessible answers to life’s questions. Rather, because we are constituted as mind, body, and spirit, the task of theological inquiry requires specific realities to be honored. We are embodied spirits, enspirited bodies, and the task of theology engages all three aspects of our existence. It does so through what we can call *habits*—habits that are exercised by our physical, mental, and spiritual faculties. For these habits or disciplines to become working skills, they need to be identified, understood, handled correctly, practiced, repeated, allowed to mature, and, most definitely, mastered and loved. This sounds good in theory, but it is not so easy in practice, particularly when, for some of us, we are not all that comfortable with asking questions, let alone being disciplined in our habits.

However, even a cursory reading of New Testament texts shows that this theological task of learning new habits, of aspiring to certain virtues, is essential. Throughout the two Testaments, we discover an ongoing endorsement of disciplined habits that constitute a thoroughly holistic theological approach. First, there is the habit or discipline of using our mind effectively; second, there are bodily habits and disciplines that facilitate transformation; last, Scripture refers consistently to essential spiritual—that is, relational—habits that empower us in our calling to become the body politic of Christ.²⁷ Even a sample set of verses illustrates the point that our theological endeavors should embrace our entire being. Thus, when it comes to the mind, we discover exhortations that are really a radical call to develop new habits:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. (2 Tim. 2:15)

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom. 12:2)

Be made new in the attitude of your minds. (Eph. 4:23)

For he is the kind of person
who is always thinking about the cost.²⁸
“Eat and drink,” he says to you,
but his heart is not with you. (Prov. 23:7)

Then there are habits that specifically relate to our physical existence, our embodiedness, which demonstrate not only that our bodies directly influence *how* we know God (for instance, if I refuse the act of bodily worship, I clearly miss out on a particular corpus of knowledge) but also that our bodies are the *means* of knowing God. In other words, my knowledge of God comes via my body and is not external to it.²⁹ As Lance Peeler reminds us, “Brains are housed in bodies. . . . Thinking is more than just our brains—our whole bodies are involved in thinking, the same way that they are involved in eating, running, or resting.”³⁰ Simply put, we come to a knowledge of the living God by virtue of what the gospel achieves in our individual physical bodies as well as in our wider social bodies:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. (Rom. 12:1)

For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. (Rom. 8:13)

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. (Col. 3:5)

Last, there is what we can describe as “spiritual” habits and disciplines. Of course, these habits turn on what we mean by the term “spiritual.” In some contexts, the spiritual is something that stands in juxtaposition to the mind, to the rational, and even to the body, the physical. For others, the spiritual is a purely individualistic concept: something that goes on between God and the believer. At this point, it may be more helpful to think of the spiritual as an aspect of human existence that works organically or holistically with the mind (soul) and the body to establish healthy relationships. It is clearly a powerful and leveling habit:

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this

he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. (John 7:37–39)

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (Matt. 7:12)

Pray continually. (1 Thess. 5:17)

Pause

Theological integrity requires proper use of words. This linguistic transparency is essential both to enable effective communication and to bring about clear understanding. Before you proceed, test your language skills on the three terms that we have been using: “body,” “mind,” “spirit.”

- Write down your definition of each term in no more than two succinct sentences.
- You might want to clarify the terms by asking a variety of questions: Is the brain part of the body or the mind, or both? Is the mind different from the brain? What is “spirit”? Does my smartphone have “spirit”—if not, why not? If it does, what does it look like? How does spirit relate to mind? How does body relate to spirit?

Theology Is about Developing Habits

The task of theology is a “craft,” and like any other craft it has its chief tools. One key tool is language, and in particular, words. After all, words make worlds: the Creator God simply speaks the command and creation comes into existence. Words destroy worlds too.³¹ Trevor Hart points out that theology is made up of “words and the ideas to which they are related.” Theologians, then, are “wordsmiths,” but as Hart continues, “these words and ideas are inevitably finite: drawn from the available pool of human language and experience, handled by human thinkers and wordsmiths who can make no claim to have transcended their own finitude and sinfulness in the process, any more than can their readers in receiving the results.”³² What this means for the theological task is that our theology will always be constrained by our own humanity, history, and culture and require some help if it is to make sense to people outside of our own world of thinking and experience.

You might be realizing at this point that these habits, disciplines, and the skills they require remain an abstraction unless they are further clarified. For deeper understanding, in the next section I identify the various components necessary in any theological practice. These components are both *distinct* and *discrete*. They are distinct in that each one has its own particular function and therefore identity. They are discrete in that each one operates in a specific manner in relation to the others. Thus, to be effective theologians we must be able to identify each component as well as understand how it works, both in and of itself and in relation to others. Together, these components enable us “to do” theology—that is, they become the constituent parts of our theological method. And the degree to which we recognize and understand them will be the degree to which we are better able to undertake the task of being theologically minded. In essence, these various components “frame” the skill of being a theologian. This “frame” is, however, not rigid: the components have a liquidity, a flexibility, a fluidity about them because our theological inquiry is never abstracted from the variables of human existence, including history and culture. And these components enable us

to ask the right questions;
to engage the questions;
to respond to the questions; and
to construct answers to the questions.

There is a distinction to be understood at this point: while these components frame our theological endeavors, they are not necessarily, at the same time, the theological method itself. The tools of our theological method are quite different and will be the focus of our attention once the frame has been identified. What we can do here is explore what these various components look like and how they might help us construct our theological responses.

Knowledge

KNOWLEDGE THAT IS CONSTANT

A peculiar aspect of Christian theology is its nonnegotiable stance on Scripture. We will explore this in much more detail in the next chapter; for the moment I highlight four things:

1. The influence and authority of Scripture do not change—nothing can be added to Scripture, and no other writing has the same authority.

2. Most important, the belief that Scripture's source is God is nonnegotiable—which means that Scripture acts as the permanent constant in theological reflection.
3. The unity of the Bible cannot be separated from the God of the Bible.³³ Emil Brunner makes this last point well when he says, "The God of the Bible is the God who speaks, and the Word of the Bible is the Word of this God."³⁴ That is, whatever the historical and universal church believes, the credibility of its belief is the degree to which it corresponds with what God speaks in Scripture. Therefore, theological constructions are not necessarily relativistic; rather, they are merely the product of a specific culture, time, or thinker and, as a consequence, have no universal or objective application. Rather, because Scripture is God speaking, we can definitely argue that it is able to stand as truth, whatever the context, time, or circumstance.
4. Since Scripture cannot be separated from God's self-revelation and his goodwill for creation, including us, we cannot isolate Scripture from "its reception in the community of faith."³⁵ Why? Because Scripture does not exist in some kind of spiritual vacuum but rather has an authoritative place within the wider grand scheme of God's saving work—beginning with Israel and concluding with Jesus Christ—which is to unite the entire created order, both heavenly and earthly, in one great friendship with God.

KNOWLEDGE THAT IS ONGOING

Theology requires a body of knowledge, whether facts, data, information, thoughts, imaginations, poetry, aspirations, hopes, or beliefs. Without this body of knowledge, the task of theology is made more problematic. In turn, the kind of knowledge that engages theological construction is multifaceted, not one-dimensional. It comes to us through a variety of different media and rarely constitutes one single message. In addition, our theological reflections are the product of different contexts; thus, we need to differentiate the *contextual* from the *constant*. Colin Gunton comments that "all theologies belong in a particular context, and so are, to a degree, limited by the constraints of that context. To that extent, the context is one of the authorities to which the theologian must listen."³⁶ This kind of knowledge is also continually developing: it is dynamic rather than inert. Questions asked by one generation regarding a specific event elicit answers that may provide new information. In turn, this data is incorporated into what is already known. In addition, it may also raise new questions for which there might not be an immediate answer.

Thus, importantly, an evangelical theology will be marked out by particular beliefs that go against the grain of modern and postmodern cultures. It will hold to the belief that knowing the truth really is possible, and thus it will reject modernist and postmodernist notions of relativism, in which truth is a social construct and thus purely contextual and therefore something that can be different according to context. It will also hold to the belief that it is possible to know something directly or as a reality in and of itself, that objective knowledge is possible, and thus reject the idea that our knowledge is simply the result of language, culture, gender, or tradition.³⁷

One of the most important examples of how theological knowledge develops is the way in which the earliest Christians wrestled with Jesus Christ's identity. They knew that he was human—they had lived, worked, eaten, laughed, and cried with him and were convinced that he was the Messiah of God, a prophet, a rabbi, a man worth believing in and following. They had seen him die; some had even embalmed his dead body and interred him in a rocky grave. Most definitely, his humanity was not in question. However, after his resurrection, this identity underwent serious thought. It would be quite strange had Jesus's disciples not asked a whole raft of questions once they met him three days after having seen him die agonizingly on a Roman cross. After all, when did you last see someone come back to life? This alone would be good enough reason to rethink who they thought Jesus was and ask an avalanche of questions. However, additional factors emerged after the resurrection that demanded that new questions be asked of Jesus. The risen and ascended Jesus was now Lord over God's Spirit; that is, Jesus now exercised authority over God's Spirit. The Spirit now made Jesus present to his followers scattered throughout Judea and the Roman Empire in the same way that, under the old covenant, the Spirit made God present to Jewish believers. In addition, Jesus was now identified with the God of Israel: God was his Father, Jesus was God's Son. One could not now be named without the other. Most importantly, the earliest Christians were at ease in worshiping Jesus alongside God (the Father) despite being monotheists, believers in one God.³⁸ These different experiences of the risen Christ were new and unprecedented realities that demanded that seriously searching questions be asked about his identity—about Jesus's relation not to his fellow humans but to the God of Israel.

Over a period of the next three hundred years, various answers were given to the question "Who is Jesus?" until finally, in AD 325, at a gathering of all the church's leaders, the church fathers assembled at Nicaea (Iznik, modern-day Turkey) to establish an official answer to the question, in response to one very clever but equally problematic solution offered by a theologian named Arius. They came up with a superb answer: not only is Jesus Christ fully human, like us in all ways except for sin; he is also the same nature or substance as

the Father. As such, he is as much divine as the Father is. Therefore, in answer to the question “Who is Jesus?” Christians could affirm with confidence that Jesus Christ is everything it means to be fully human, and he is also everything it means to be fully divine. Problem solved!

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance [*homoousion*] with the Father; by whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

(But those who say: “There was a time when he was not”; and “He was not before he was made”; and “He was made out of nothing,” or “He is of another substance” or “essence,” or “The Son of God is created,” or “changeable,” or “alterable”—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.)³⁹

However, once the “Who are you?” question of Jesus’s identity was resolved, the answer itself immediately raised other, more problematic, questions. One concerned Jesus: “How is it possible for one person to be completely human and completely divine at the same time?” Another concerned God: “Who is God?” The God question was to become the next big theological challenge simply because if there is only *one* God, how can the Father and the Son both be God without signifying that there are two Gods, and in doing so jeopardizing the whole ability to maintain a monotheistic view of God?

The way in which the church’s understanding of Jesus Christ developed in the first four centuries of its existence is a very helpful example of how theological understanding develops. What Christians believe is not derived from head knowledge alone. Whether it concerns Jesus Christ’s identity or how God can be one in nature but also three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the fact remains that the fluid and dynamic nature of theological understanding comes about because our questions arise from the fact that *we live in* the reality of Jesus being a Savior who has affected our lives in such a way that we are left asking questions about him. How can his death bring about my new life? What did he mean when he taught that I should give my life away rather than keep it? How did he enable me to break my addiction? What on earth is happening when we take communion? The list could be endless. Yet note this: the direction of questioning is not one way. Theology cannot be reduced to a purely human endeavor, as though the theologian is able to stand over and

above the subject matter, God, ask the necessary questions, and objectively extract data. What Christians have discovered over millennia is that we are as much to be questioned as we are to question. The personal nature of theological inquiry means that the very task of theology opens us up to be questioned, challenged, even discombobulated, and sometimes silenced, ourselves. I like how Migliore puts it when he comments, “As a continuing inquiry, the spirit of theology is interrogative rather than doctrinaire; it presupposes a readiness to question and to be questioned.”⁴⁰ Theological questions invite dialogue; theological dialogue invites questions. Questions undermine false beliefs and lead to greater understanding. Thus, they are dangerous!

And so, any form of specifically personal knowledge comes about not through reading a birth, marriage, or death certificate, or looking up a Wiki page, or even reading an autobiography. Rather, it comes out of personal engagement, relational inquiry. Thus, our knowledge of God as Father, Son, and Spirit is not something conjured out of thin air or the result of theological confusion. Rather, it comes about and continues to arise as a result of ongoing living in and for the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, out of our obedience to our Savior and under the empowering agency of God’s Spirit. Such living causes discussion by people like us, who, in declaring Jesus to be Lord, experience a very distinct and shared *lived-in* reality:

- The gospel of Jesus leads us to the Father and at the same time brings about a personal transformation that resembles what other believers experience and goes on to produce a way of life that has to be described in terms of being energized by God’s Spirit.
- We can relate to God as Father only by virtue of having his life, his energy, his Spirit and having these through the intercessory work of Jesus Christ, his Son.
- When we become living temples in whom God’s Spirit can abide (when we are filled with the Spirit), we discover that we start living out the life of Jesus and become active citizens of and participants in the kingdom of God the Father.

Can you see what is happening here? As a result, first, of reflecting on their experience of God, which came about as a response to Jesus Christ and his gospel, our Christian forefathers and foremothers began to ask questions, engage habits, establish disciplines of inquiry that ultimately led them to answers that resonate with the rest of the church and make the best sense, to date, of Christian experience. Second, they discovered that the face of Christian faith, as well as the identity of the One they were trying to understand,

is always *trinitarian*. It always involves the undivided activity or presence of the Father, his Son, and their Holy Spirit, always together, never separately. I think Mark McIntosh puts the trinitarian face of theology most clearly when he points out that “both the practices of Christian life and the theory of Christian faith are human expressions of God’s action within the lives and minds of the believing community.”⁴¹ And what we discover is the threefold manner by which the one God acts.

- At the center of our theological beliefs is “the formative and expressive power of Christ the *Word* provoking the church into reflective teaching.”
- Our desire for understanding is driven by the *Spirit*, “pulling the church into an ever deeper sharing in its new identity in Christ.”
- The *Father* is “at the unseen end of all theological endeavour . . . calling all things into the perfect fullness of their truth.”⁴²

This reflective element to the craft of theological thinking characterizes an important point—namely, that theology is not static but constantly moving; it is an event, a process, an ongoing conversation that enables us to sort out “the sound beliefs and practices from the unsound ones.”⁴³ We can call this kind of knowledge *personal* knowledge—personal because it comes about as a result of living in the reality of the personal and triune God and the messy business of re-creation rather than standing apart from or above it objectively. As such, it is living, dynamic, fluid, and ongoing. And it is to be lived. We capture a sense of the “lived-in-ness” of this process when we look at what Paul says to Timothy as he learns his own craft in what clearly is an equally challenging historical and cultural context:

If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe. Command and teach these things. (1 Tim. 4:6–11)

History and Culture

A second habit for the theologian to develop is what we might describe as a “historical nose” and a “cultural sensibility”—that is, the ability to recognize,

and a practice of recognizing, the historical situatedness of any given belief and its cultural expression. All human belief is a product of history—it originates at a particular time and in a specific cultural context, none more so than for Christian belief. What Christians believe is better understood as a social construct, one that spans several thousand years of human-divine encounter and reflection, belief and practice. It is *social* in that it only occurs within the various matrices of human-divine relationships and is then passed on to each subsequent generation through very regulated and controlled means in order to safeguard its content. It is a *construct* in that what we believe is more than information or technique: it constitutes a worldview, a way of living, which requires structures to function, whether legal, religious, financial, political, or economic.⁴⁴ This is the stuff of history! And as a product of history and culture, it is neither monochrome nor relativistic. Why? Because no moment in history is the same, and no two cultures are identical: each is dynamic and constantly developing, for good or for ill. Once again, developing an awareness of history and culture constitutes a habit that is necessary when we are engaging an ancient text spanning multiple generations and cultures. The relativistic nature of history and culture is tempered only to the degree we remind ourselves of the constants in theological construction and how these constants regulate our theological responses: the subject matter of theology—God—and the means of knowing God—Jesus Christ and Scripture.

One way I like to demonstrate the contemporaneity of this cultural and historical habit is to ask some of my international students to read out loud to the rest of the group a well-known verse to all, only this time the students read in their mother tongue and ask their colleagues what the verse is in English. For instance:

Imâk Gûdib sillaksoarmuit nagligivait, Ernetuane tunnîlugo, illûnatik okpertut tâpsomunga assiokonnagit, nungusuitomigle inôgutekarkovlugit.⁴⁵

Cristo nos rescató de la maldición de la ley al hacerse maldición por nosotros, pues está escrito: «Maldito todo el que es colgado de un madero». Así sucedió, para que, por medio de Cristo Jesús, la bendición prometida a Abraham llegara a las naciones, y para que por la fe recibiéramos el Espíritu según la promesa.⁴⁶

De HERE is mijn herder,
dus heb ik alles wat ik nodig heb!
Hij laat mij uitrusten in een groene weide
en wijst mij de weg langs kabbelende beekjes.
Hij verfrist mijn innerlijk
en leidt mij op de weg waar zijn recht geldt,
tot eer van zijn naam.

Zelfs als ik door een donker dal moet lopen,
 ben ik niet bang,
 want U bent dicht bij mij.
 Uw herdersstaf beschermt mij
 en begeleidt mij heel de weg.⁴⁷

Căci mie nu mi-e rușine de Evanghelia lui Hristos, fiindcă ea este puterea lui Dumnezeu pentru mântuirea fiecăruia care crede: întâi a iudeului, apoi a grecului, deoarece în ea este descoperită o neprihănire pe care o dă Dumnezeu prin credință și care duce la credință, după cum este scris: „Cel neprihănit va trăi prin credință.”⁴⁸

The effect on my students is usually one of complete silence—understandably so! However, the point is made with great effect. It is not about understanding the biblical text given in an unfamiliar language. Rather, it is to press home the point that our key beliefs are often encapsulated in iconic texts that, often unconsciously and uncritically, we think belong to us and thus become framed within our own language, our own time, and our wider culture or our specific Christian subculture. However, the simple act of hearing these familiar texts in a language unfamiliar to us alerts us to the fact that our understanding is indeed a linguistic, historical, and cultural expression, bound to our own context and time and our own way of seeing things.

Given, however, that the Majority World church is one that is growing predominantly where very little English is spoken, read, or thought, this theological habit takes on a deeper meaning: we need to learn the habit of being critically aware of our own situatedness, historical context, and cultural conditioning. Why? Because this habit equips us to realize that our histories and our cultures do not determine the theologies of other people groups. Our context, both historical and cultural, is ours, not theirs, and is a variable unique to ourselves, as much as theirs is to them. It is the result of the questions *we* have asked and the answers we have found most helpful. They might be of use to others; they might not. Thus, this habit enables us to be aware of Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen’s truism: “It belongs to the essence of faith and worldviews in general that we often simply accept the tenets of our faith or worldview without much explicit reflection on them. But we also have a built-in need to make sense of what we believe.”⁴⁹ Our task, then, is to ensure that we do not project our faith, theology, or worldview onto others but ensure, rather, that they remain as distinct as possible, and in doing so, better position ourselves for conversation. What we all hold in common, however, is that our historical and cultural constructs are profoundly *relational*, pointing to the fact that theology is itself a relational construct—it is the church’s

language of confession, communication, declaration, and, most importantly, worship in every cultural context and throughout its history.

Togetherness

Jesus Christ had a particular gift in being able to state the theologically obvious to devastating effect. He did this most effectively when he identified habits that militated against the central tenets of the Second Temple Jewish faith of his day. Here is one example. Every Jewish scholar, lawyer, theologian knew that the whole of Jewish Scripture hung on two foundational purposes: to love God with one's entire being and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:30–31; Luke 10:27). Achieve this and you will have hit perfection. It was the complete fulfillment of Torah: the zenith points of righteousness, of abundant, full, complete human life and flourishing. This was the way of the good life for all and was intended to bring about a particular political and social community and provide the common good for all people. It comes as no surprise, then, that Jesus lambastes the theologians of his day for believing one thing (upholding Torah on these two points) while doing quite the opposite (exacting higher standards for others than for themselves). He takes them to task regarding these two great purposes of Torah, for their actions toward those who lived on the margins of Jewish society who were being excluded, for their xenophobic attitudes toward foreigners, and for the extortive practices of temple commerce. Anything that broke down this essential relational matrix and prohibited community was less than God's standard for the people of God. Such action militated against Jewish theology, which is hallmarked by a sense of togetherness—togetherness with God, with each other, and of each person with himself or herself.⁵⁰

What might this same standard—of matching what we teach with how we relate—mean today for contemporary theologians? For many in the Western church, while we talk about community and the relational face of our faith, in practice we go about our theology in private, as individuals, and often disconnected from any wider social intercourse. In turn, we live this individualism out in church: as one observant friend once said, “We tend to bring our big gardens to church!” However, as we saw earlier when looking at the relation between history and culture, *theology cannot be anything other than communal*. We can identify four reasons that undergird this communal approach:

- First, Christians believe that theological beliefs are not mere intellectual statements for an elite to own. Rather, they are the church's collective response to what God has communicated in creation and in re-creation. As such, they are dialogical—that is, they address us as much as we address them.⁵¹ They have an inclusive, communal character.

- Second, since the church is a collective group of people gathered together in Christ from different cultures and points in history, and theology is the language of the church as it seeks to make sense of this collective gathering—this kingdom with its politics and economics—our theology should represent the church in its entirety as a communal body, not merely our own individual or denominational positions.
- Third, since the purpose of theology is to equip the people of God in our calling, to help us be faithful, obedient, and believing—to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves—theology should, of all disciplines, bring about a sense of togetherness, should be essentially communal in nature—relational rather than individual. It is not all about me.
- And last, what Christians believe is not premised on one single author’s viewpoint: the Old and New Testaments span far too long a time for this to be the case. Rather, the sacred texts of both Jews and Christians constitute a communal reality—that is, one that is the shared and common experience of believers, Jewish (for the Old Testament) and Christian (for both Old and New Testaments) throughout their respective histories. And theology is the result of this experience. No surprise, then, that theology should reflect this sense of togetherness both in its content and in its consequence.

If I can borrow Schubert Ogden’s distinction regarding how we have arrived at what we believe about Jesus Christ and apply it more widely to theology itself, we can say that theology is the product of two activities. First, it constitutes the collective *witness* of believers that has credibility regarding what they have experienced in relation to God: a body of data, events, gestalt, and so forth that requires some kind of processing to make any sense of what has occurred. This processing, second, takes place in the form of *reflection*, whereby the raw data, as it were, undergoes careful inquiry and thought, is discussed and turned over repeatedly, is pondered, undergoes debate and sometimes critical dissection, is argued about until—sooner or later—a sort of consensus is settled that is both appropriate to what has been witnessed and can be effectively communicated.⁵²

Personal

We can identify two movements that together constitute the personal habit. One has to do with a movement from an encounter with the gospel of Jesus Christ—its transformative power and an ultimate new relationship with God

as Father—to an understanding of God: theology. Perhaps it is stating the obvious, but it is good to remind ourselves that Christian theology is the product of the encounters of millions of individual people with the risen Christ and the command to live in unity with their new family. The other movement has to do with the fact that since our theology arises from personal encounter and personal engagement, its goal is to end in personal transformation.

Therefore, theology should not be an isolated and purely cerebral activity. Rather, it should cause spiritual transformation, if only because it comes out of our knowledge of God gained in worship, in doxology. Academic or ordinary, the study of theology renews our minds and is, therefore, transformational. And this is not a New Testament notion. As Craig Keener points out, “Jewish teachers expected the Torah to enlighten reason to provide power to overcome passions,” and so for this reason we are able to understand the apostle Paul’s concern that “the mind equipped with the law without the Spirit remains the mind of the flesh.”⁵³ That is, information remains information, data remains data, until it becomes transformative. I particularly like the word that Ellen Charry has coined to express this very dynamic: “aretegenic.” That is, Christian doctrines seek to be “conducive to virtue”⁵⁴ and are to be “good for us by forming or reforming our character; they aim to be salutary.”⁵⁵ As we will see later, when we engage an evangelical view of reason, our minds and our reasoning were never meant to act as data depositories. Rather, they are the very means by which we can grow in maturity, change in character, flourish in thinking. Again, let’s remind ourselves of what we have already noted: that Paul the apostle understood this same transformational process when he wrote to the Roman church, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2), and likewise when he wrote to his convert and traveling companion, Titus, describing his own calling in a way that captures the transformational dynamic of theology, the “knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness” (Titus 1:1).

Cardinal Newman puts the transformational dynamic of theological belief wisely when he comments, “Those whose beliefs carry them into encounters with the reality of God will manifest signs that they are animated by love and humility in their bearing.”⁵⁶ Put simply, theological knowledge is supposed to bring about personal transformation and character improvement. We don’t expect a biologist studying bees to turn into a bee or exhibit bee-like characteristics since a bee is not made in the image of a human being, but we do expect a theologian studying God to become more like Christ since we are made in the image of God and are called to conform to Christ, who is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15).

It is not by accident, then, that theological construction, reflection, or study is transformational. It is the product of human engagement with the divine as it is made known to us through the gospel—with the God who self-identifies as love: a loving Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we get to know this God in the process of being set free from the power of sin, through transformation, in redemption, by salvation. Thus, it is not by accident, either, that we refer to both God the Father and Jesus Christ as “Savior.” This is not a surname—rather, it bears witness to the powerful change the gospel continues to have in people’s lives. Many of us do not call Jesus “Savior” because he has rescued us from a future form of damnation. Rather, Jesus has—literally for many of us—*saved* us from lifestyles that were utterly chaotic, addictions that were lethal, relationships that were destructive, characters that were rotting from the inside. He really is our Savior! This is such an important point—our theological language expresses a *living* reality and is not meant to be rigid, inflexible, or dead. “Savior” and “Lord” are not dead terms similar to “foot of the mountain” or “muscle.”⁵⁷ Rather, theology is a subdiscipline to the Christian evangel, the gospel, and serves the proclamation of God the Father reaching out to people in and through Jesus Christ and empowering them by his Spirit to live to their fullest potential in the here and now. It is not, as John Webster points out, “just the ‘theme’ or ‘matter’ of theology, as if the gospel were simply one more topic to which the inquiring human mind might choose to direct itself; rather, the gospel is that which brings theology into existence and holds it in being.”⁵⁸

Pause

Given that theology engages the whole person—body, soul, and spirit—and is transformative, why not take this moment to do two things.

- Identify the various ways in which the gospel has brought about personal transformation in your life. What difference does following Jesus bring to your mind, your body, your spirit?
- How would you express this change? What descriptors best communicate what *your* personal transformation says about who *God* is? Your answer will be *your theology*!

Can you see what you have just done? You have engaged in the practice of trying to understand your faith, what your experience tells you about God, and what might be the best language to communicate this to others, let alone make sense of it for yourself. You have engaged in the ancient, ongoing, and

necessary theological craft of *faith seeking understanding*!⁵⁹ And with this insight we are able to summarize another aspect of theology:

Theology is personal, believing faith:

It is *faith seeking understanding*: it engages the *spirit*.⁶⁰

It is *faith seeking understanding*: it engages the *mind*.

It is *faith seeking understanding*: it engages the *body*.

This seeking-understanding kind of faith engages our entire being as we express our trust in what God has declared in his incarnate Word and written Word, and through which we respond in obedience.⁶¹ The result is human words about God—*theo-logia*, or God words—*theology*. Of course, once this process is underway, we discover that there is a second aspect to the personal. It is a movement from understanding to commitment, a movement from theological knowledge to theological praxis whereby we live by our new knowledge of God and develop a lifestyle of action. Jesus Christ himself expresses this reality when he describes God in terms of his kingdom, in which there is a very specific form of politics (love your neighbor as yourself, the least among you will be the greatest, the last will be first, the humble will be exalted) and economics (it is better to give than to receive, give and it will be given back to you, pressed down, running over). We are back to worldview living, where the role of theology has more to do with what Jeff Astley describes as “something Christian believers do with a view to producing something they can believe in and live by.”⁶²

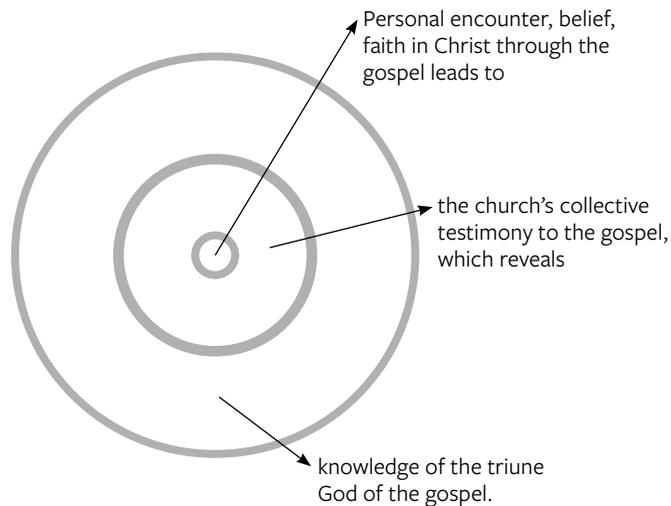
If you think about it, this movement describes what lies at the heart of all human relationships. For example, I am married to a particular someone whom I first met in the very first lecture I gave as a lecturer. Before she was even seated at her desk I knew that I was going to marry her. However, I did not know her. I did not even know her name. Over time, as I stepped out of my own world and ways of doing things and “indwelt” her world, I got to know more about her as a person and discovered more about who she is. What made it a more personal relationship was the fact that my knowledge did not remain at the level of information about her. Rather, it moved from “data” to praxis, from knowledge about her to changed behavior for her. As a result, the relationship deepened, marriage ensued, and the movement of knowledge to praxis grew into a deeper dimension, one where two people start a new life together and create a lifestyle. That is, our knowledge of each other led to habits and beliefs about each other that created a way of life—something we both could believe in about and for each other as well as live by with each other.

The same goes for our knowledge of God—only it is God who does the chasing after us! We get to know God because, as John the apostle puts it so

famously, he loved the world so much that he sent his only begotten Son—the One through whom all things were made—to make reconciliation possible (John 3:16). However, it is even more personal than this: the good news of the gospel is that God the Father chooses to step into our individual worlds and speak words of life to us through the proclamation of this gospel, inviting us to get to know him and believe in his declaration of love over us and find something to live by, live for, and live in. In Christ, God the Father has come to live in our world, stepping out of his world and choosing to discover our individual worlds and give us his transforming Spirit. In turn, we acquire personal knowledge of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Spirit who makes them real to each one of us.

We can illustrate the relational nature of Christian theology and the ebb and flow of theological understanding diagrammatically in this way:

Figure 1.1



Unique

Theology has its own unique subject matter—God. It is unique for at least four reasons:

First is what makes theology similar to all other disciplines: it is a specific topic—God—not geometry, engineering, midwifery—and, therefore, like all other disciplines, theology has its own distinct approach, method, and tools.

The second concerns what makes theology dissimilar to every other discipline: its subject matter—God. Theology is unique among the entire corpus

of human inquiry because its subject matter is God and therefore is distinct from all others in its very being and nature. In what way? First, because everything that exists is created—it is part of creation. God, on the other hand, is neither created nor part of creation. God is Creator.⁶³ All other living realities are creature. Second, Christian theology defies being pigeonholed as a discipline. It cannot be located as myth—that is, not quite truth, or as a product of the imagination that grasps human reality in narrative form in order to communicate or understand. Neither, however, is it reason—that is, the result of trying to make sense of reality. It is not even, argues Ingolf Dalferth, a combination of both. Along with Augustine, from way back in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, Dalferth argues that it is neither a form of natural theology nor a form of political theology. What it does, in fact, is critique all other kinds of theology.⁶⁴ More positively, however, Christian theology “is a sustained intellectual effort to understand everything in a new way from the point of view of the eschatological breaking in of God’s creative presence in the human reality of this life and world in and through God’s Word and Spirit.”⁶⁵

Third, the subject matter of theology presents us with unique challenges not only in terms of understanding, as the second reason highlights, but also in terms of how we communicate any knowledge we have of God. Unlike a doctor who can show an X-ray, or a painter who can paint a picture, or a chef who can create a meal as evidence of what they are communicating, the theologian is unable to “produce” God. And this is a particular problem for the contemporary church in that, on the whole, the metaphysical distinction we have noted between God and everything else is not much reflected upon in church circles. Popular worship and popular Christian thinking in church tend to portray God as an extension of the created realm, albeit unhelpfully invisible and much larger. It is more difficult, on the other hand, to imagine God in terms of being *no thing*, of not being at all created. However, when we do keep this distinction, it becomes clearer that God cannot be described in the same way that we describe that which is created. God has no material, physical, creaturely, or fabricated existence. God is *no thing*. Creation, on the other hand, and human beings, in particular, are *some thing*. Unlike God, we are created. We are a “thing”—and because we are *some thing*, we can distinguish ourselves from other “things” in the grand taxonomy of the universe. In so doing, we discover our unique identity and place within creation. Because we are *some thing*, we can be distinguished, also, from *no thing*—from God, who is not a “thing” but simply exists as pure being.

Note—we are able to self-identify in relation to God only inasmuch as we are creatures and he is Creator. This means that we tend to do so in negative terms. We are created; God is not. We can change; God does not.

We are limited by space and time; God is not. We are temporal; God is not. Can you see what the problem might be if this is the only way we can talk about God? God is not this, nor that, nor the next thing. All very good, but not very helpful. For example, an aardvark is not a rabbit, it does not fly, it cannot be in two places at once—but none of this information actually tells us anything positive about what an aardvark actually is. The same goes for God. It is one thing to state what God is not. It is an altogether different thing to say what or who God actually is. This is the great challenge we face as theologians, whether ordinary or academic: How do we gain, let alone communicate, any knowledge of God, who is not a part of creation? Once again, we have to ask questions in order to arrive at any meaningful answers. The first question, however, is how do we do this? An honest answer is that we do so with great difficulty.

Fourth, theology is unique in its greatest challenge: the very subject matter itself, God. As we have already discovered, theology is a very concrete, not an abstract, discipline. It arises out of the ongoing historical and worldwide experience of Christians who have heard and responded to the gospel; who, as a result, have experienced the saving and transformative power of a new relationship with the living God through the atoning life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ; and who are now energized by his Spirit. Like any other deeply affecting and transformative relationship, this evokes nothing short of a profound sense of mystery.

Enigmatic

This sense of mystery has to do, first, with *who* God is—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and with the fact that *what* God is—pure spirit—is an altogether different and unique reality. As such, both the who and the what of divine reality, God, are very different realities. In addition, knowledge of God is closed off to us. We cannot access divinity since it is not part of creation. Additionally, if to be a person is to be a bit of a mystery, in that we never really arrive at any complete and perfect knowledge of one another, how much more, then, must God be a mystery by virtue of the fact that God the Father, God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit is a person yet is not part of creation? Then, add to these the fact that our knowledge of God will never be the full story; it will always be approximate, never complete. Our language for God can never fully capture divine reality. In Augustine's words, if it can be understood, then it is not God.⁶⁶ This, however, is no excuse either to applaud ignorance or to advocate any sense of "blind faith" in response. Rather, it is helpful to quote at length the distinction Gabriel Marcel makes between a mystery and a problem:

There is this essential difference between a problem and a mystery. A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and its initial validity. A genuine problem is subject to an appropriate technique by the exercise of which it is defined: whereas a mystery, by definition, transcends every conceivable technique. It is, no doubt, always possible (logically and psychologically) to degrade a mystery so as to turn it into a problem. But this is a fundamentally vicious proceeding, whose springs might perhaps be discovered in a kind of corruption of the intelligence.⁶⁷

In brief, what Marcel is pointing out is that “a mystery is very different from a problem. While a problem can be solved, a mystery is inexhaustible.”⁶⁸ A mystery is enigmatic. This term is apt for our subject matter: God is not a problem; God is a mystery! It also means that our knowledge of God is not a solution to a problem so much as the revealing of a mystery. God, then, is not to be considered a problem—a thing—but rather is to be viewed in terms of being a mystery—some “one”—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Israel,⁶⁹ the LORD,⁷⁰ the Creator,⁷¹ the Holy One,⁷² and ultimately the God and Father who is revealed by Jesus Christ.⁷³ It is inappropriate, then, to approach theology in a clinical, objective, and abstract manner. Such an approach—such a theological method—misses the theological point. Theology, rather, is our human response to a profoundly personal and divine mystery, for which the only appropriate response is one that mystery alone elicits—namely, what we have already identified as “faith seeking understanding.” An evangelical theological method recognizes that any dynamic engagement with such an enigmatic God occurs only when we seek to understand who God is in the light of the incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, or when we try to understand how the death of Jesus on a cursed cross can undo the problem of sin,⁷⁴ or when we articulate how the Holy Spirit can bring about transformation, or when we put into words how bread and wine act as the body and blood of Christ, or when we look forward to the new creation and wonder what “time” will look like if there is no sun but only the very presence of God himself with us (Rev. 22:5).

Let’s remember, however, that this theology is not mere data or information. It is so much more than this. Rather, the kind of knowledge we are dealing with here is profoundly personal knowledge on two accounts. First, the information we have about this mystery, whom we call “God” and who is made known to us by Jesus Christ, is personal for the obvious reason that it refers both to God and to us, all of whom are persons. This account should draw out of us a sense of humility and, as Robert K. Johnston puts it, cause

us to be “aware that what can be said pales in significance to what lies beyond and behind our words.”⁷⁵ Second, this knowledge comes out of the deeply transformative impact the gospel has on our lives as we walk out our faith in relation to God, neighbor, and self. It is deeply personal knowledge, as a result, and very precious to those whose lives have been changed.

The second point should elicit love because of the kind of impact the self-revelation of God has on us. As Donald Bloesch illustrates, “God proves himself to us again and again as we believe and obey. Only as we increase in love do we become able to discriminate between the true and the false.”⁷⁶ A similar example might be the way parents have to get to know and understand their newborn child in terms of his or her own unique body, personality, and gifting. That is, parental knowledge of a child is gained to the degree that there is interaction and disclosure between them as well as recognition of patterns of behavior that build up a composite picture of the little one’s individual and unique personality. Only then is such knowledge personal and to some extent also mysterious.

How much more, then, concerning God, who is the subject matter of theology? The mystery we know to be God is made known to us in Jesus Christ’s relation to the world in general and to the people of God in particular. He is a personal mystery: as Creator who moves creation to newness and as Father who brings people to new life through his loving and obedient Son and by means of his life, his energy, his Spirit. Without a doubt, an evangelical theology should be profoundly personal and therefore equally relational, whether in relation to God, to others, or to ourselves.

Pause

How relational is your theology? Take some time to reflect on the following task. Don’t answer the wrong question: it is not about what you would like your theology to be or what you think might be the “correct” answer. Rather, this is another consciousness-raising exercise. Become aware of the strengths in your answer: those aspects you want to keep and strengthen. Try, also, to identify any areas of weakness that need to be addressed.

SUGGESTED READING

Astley, Jeff. *Studying God: Doing Theology*. London: SCM, 2014.

Harris, Brian. *The Big Picture: Building Blocks of a Christian Worldview*. Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2015.

- McFarlane, Graham. *Why Do You Believe What You Believe about Jesus?* Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009.
- McIntosh, Mark A. *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.
- Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.
- Mouw, Richard J. *Restless Faith: Holding Evangelical Beliefs in a World of Contested Labels*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2019.
- Porter, Stanley E., and Steven M. Studebaker, eds. *Evangelical Theological Method: Five Views*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018.
- Samples, Kenneth Richard. *A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth-Claims to the Worldview Test*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007.
- Treier, Daniel J. *Introducing Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019.
- Volf, Miroslav, and Matthew Croasmun. *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2019.
- Webster, John. *The Culture of Theology*. Edited by Ivor J. Davidson and Alden C. McCray. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019.