Acknowledgments

Every effort has been made to reference sources used. The most helpful source was material gleaned from the classroom lectures of former Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Norman Shepherd, of Westminster Theological Seminary. In general, the overall structure and approach follow his treatment of the various loci. Quotations, wherever possible, have been footnoted appropriately. In addition to the footnoted sources, other sources used in the formulation of this outline include classroom notes, lectures, and course materials provided by Professors Robert Bell of Bob Jones University (particularly for sample student worksheets) and John A. Battle, Jr, Faith Theological Seminary. The course instructor acknowledges his debt to all who have trained him in the discipline of Systematic Theology and its related disciplines. This course is provided in hopes that it will bless the student, even as I have been blessed by my many fathers in the faith. The student is free to use any materials contained in this syllabus. It should be apparent that my theological stance is within the reformed tradition. Finally, many thanks to student assistants Jimmy Workman and Rene Garrison who helped improve the readability of this work.

“What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” I Corinthians 4:7, NIV

Note for the 3d revised edition
This third revised edition includes the use of Greek and Hebrew fonts throughout, the recasting of major divisions into the form of questions, and the expansion of several sections. Most sections have been reworked to make the development of ideas flow more smoothly. Many recently published works have been consulted and used throughout. A new section on Creeds and Confessions appears at the end. In addition, appendices provide two taxonomies comparing Protestant and Reformed confessions as well as a list of some internet sites that are valuable for the study of denominations, creeds, and confessions.

Note for the 5th revised edition
The fifth revised edition includes some sections that have been written in narrative (draft) form. Eventually the entire outline will exist in this form. In addition, certain sections throughout have been expanded and additional typographical errors have been identified and corrected.

Note for the online edition
The online edition is divided into sections and may be accessed by clicking on the various courses listed on the Gore Seminary Homepage. Some additional information has been added and some further corrections made.
WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

At its root, “theology” consists of two Greek words: θεός (theos)- which means “God”; and λόγος (logos)- which means “word,” “study,” or “discourse.” In other words, “theology” is a discourse, or study about God. The word “systematic” comes from the Greek words συνίστημι, συνιστάω (synistemi, synistano)- which mean “to comprehend,” “to put together,” or “to organize.” Thus, at its most elemental meaning “Systematic Theology” is an organized discourse about God.

HOW DOES SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY RELATE TO OTHER THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES?

In the classical seminary curriculum, as exemplified at “Old Princeton” (Princeton Theological Seminary, from its founding in 1812 until its reorganization in 1929), the “Theological Encyclopedia” was a comprehensive term used to describe the various disciplines that summarized the entire process of theological inquiry.¹ Those disciplines included: Apologetical Theology, Exegetical Theology, Biblical Theology, Historical Theology, Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology.

**Apologetics:**

The first discipline in the theological encyclopedia is Apologetical Theology, or Apologetics. Apologetics asks the question, “How can we know Christianity is Right?” By definition, Apologetics is the “vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against the various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life.”² While this does not immediately address the issue of methodology, it does have important implications for the nature and task

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² Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 1.
Introduction to Theology

of Apologetics. It is significant to note that in the classical Princeton curriculum, Apologetics was largely an exercise in marshaling arguments to establish the reasonableness of theism. As Benjamin B. Warfield, professor of theology at “Old Princeton,” put it,

It is easy, of course, to say that a Christian man must take his standpoint not above the Scriptures, but in the Scriptures. He very certainly must. But surely he must first have Scriptures, authenticated to him as such, before he can take his standpoint in them. . . . The part that Apologetics has to play in the Christianizing of the world is rather a primary part, and it is a conquering part. It is the distinction of Christianity that it has come into the world clothed with the mission to reason its way to its dominion.3

Once Apologetics had completed its task, i.e., establishing the truth of theism, it then would be supplemented by course work in Evidences to show that Christianity was the most likely or most probable system of truth. After this combined effort in (largely) philosophical apologetics and (largely) historical evidences, it was possible to move on to the other theological disciplines.

For Cornelius Van Til, late Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary and father of “presuppositional apologetics,” apologetics had a different function. In Van Til’s approach, apologetics does not serve as the introduction to theological study by establishing the reasonableness of theism. Rather, it confronts non-Christian thinking across its entire breadth. That is, instead of serving to establish the legitimacy of theism, and then advancing arguments for a “Christian version” of theism, Van Til says “it is Christian theism as a unit that we seek to defend. We do not seek to defend theism in apologetics and Christianity in evidences, but we seek to defend Christian theism in both courses.”4

For Van Til, apologetics and evidences presuppose the truthfulness of the “self-attesting” Scriptures as the necessary foundation for all meaningful thought and discourse. In contrast to the older, model, the presupposition of the truthfulness of God’s Word serves as the only antidote to the errors of a supposedly “neutral method” of apologetics. For Van Til, ultimately, there is no epistemological “common ground” between covenant keepers and


covenant breakers, and to engage in apologetics as though there were such “neutral ground” would be to betray the truth that we have received in God’s revealed Word.

**Exegetical Theology:**

The next discipline in the theological encyclopedia is exegetical theology, which asks the question, **“What does the text say?”** This discipline consists of a number of sub-disciplines, all of which are necessary for a proper exegesis (“reading out”) of the text of Scripture. These sub-disciplines include: 1) Canonics, 2) Textual Criticism, 3) Biblical Languages, 4) Biblical History and Archaeology, 5) Hermeneutics, and 6) Exegesis Proper. Canonics seeks to demonstrate that the commonly received 66 books of the Bible, the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament, constitute the canon that God intended for the Church. Textual Criticism concerns itself with the transmission of the Hebrew (and Aramaic) and Greek texts. It provides criteria and methods for evaluating manuscripts, manuscript fragments, families of manuscripts and related documents in order to determine the most accurate text of Scripture. The study of Biblical languages, Hebrew (and Aramaic) and Greek seeks to introduce the student of Scripture to the vocabulary and grammar of the underlying texts of Scripture. The study of these languages is closely linked to Biblical history and archaeology, disciplines that describe and explain the historical and cultural contexts in which the Biblical stories are set. This information is indispensable for the accurate translation of the original texts and the correct understanding of their meaning. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. It seeks to offer guidelines for the correct interpretation of Scripture according to standard principles of historical-grammatical interpretation. Exegesis proper is the actual reading out of the text, an action dependent upon all these interrelated disciplines, each of which provides a necessary part of the process.

**Biblical Theology:**

The discipline that lies between Exegetical Theology and Systematic Theology, and that bridges the gap between those two disciplines is called Biblical Theology. Biblical Theology asks the question, **“What does the Bible say?”** Biblical Theology is not merely theology that is faithful to the Bible. All good theology should be “biblical” in that sense. Instead, Biblical Theology is theology that follows a particular methodology, a methodology

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dictated by the unfolding of redemptive history. Biblical Theology has also been called the “History of Special Revelation” because it focuses on the unfolding of God’s revelation. As Systematic Theology is organized according to a logical arrangement, even so Biblical Theology is organized according to chronology, or, the organic development of truth. Geerhardus Vos, the pioneer in Biblical Theology at Princeton Seminary, said that, “Biblical Theology is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.”

**Systematic Theology:**

Systematic Theology is “that department or section of theology which is concerned with setting forth systematically, that is to say, as a concatenated whole, what is known concerning God.” Systematic Theology asks the question, “What is true,” or, as Wayne Grudem puts it, “Systematic Theology is any study that answers the question, ‘What does the whole Bible teach us today?’ about any given topic.” Donald Bloesch expands that definition a bit. He says, “theology is the systematic reflection within a particular culture on the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture and witnessed to in the tradition of the catholic church.” Continuing on, Bloesch points to the characteristic of Systematic Theology that makes it most useful in the life of the Church, namely its focus on the contemporary challenges that face each generation of believers. “Theology is the diligent and systematic explication of the Word of God for every age, involving not only painstaking study of the Word of God but also an earnest attempt to relate this Word to a particular age or cultural milieu” (emphasis mine). For our purposes, the key components to doing Systematic Theology will be a reliance on Scripture and, secondarily, the *consensus fidelium* (“consensus of the faithful”), as captured in the Creeds and Confessions of the Church. The action will be the application of God’s Word to issues that challenge us today.

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10 Ibid., 115.
Historical Theology:

Historical Theology includes the sub-disciplines of Church History and the History of Doctrine. The key question for Historical Theology is, “What has the Church believed about a particular truth- and why?” Church History focuses primarily on the facts and data of the unfolding drama of history. It recounts God’s providential dealings with humanity, in general, and with the Church, in particular, from the post-apostolic period to the modern period. The History of Doctrine looks at 1) the development of doctrine as a whole throughout the history of the church, and 2) the development of a particular dogma through the various periods of church history. For example, a focus on the development of a particular dogma, such as the atonement, might ask the following questions: How was the atonement understood in the early church? In the Middle Ages? During the Reformation? During the rise of classical liberal Protestantism? Historical Theology is the Church’s reflection, through time, on God’s revelation. It does not seek to make positive constructions of theology, as in Systematic Theology; rather, it seeks to articulate and understand the positive constructions that others have made.

Practical Theology:

At the end of the theological encyclopedia is Practical Theology and all its sub-disciplines. The key question that Practical Theology asks is “How does the Church live out its beliefs?” In the older seminary model, practical theology often was viewed as a separate entity apart from all other “serious” disciplines. To many, Practical Theology was an inferior discipline, not worthy of serious reflection. This is a faulty way of viewing things for at least two reasons. First, this is not the way in which God’s Word addresses God’s people. For example, it is generally agreed that chapters 1-11 of the Book of Romans treat doctrinal issues while chapters 12-16 touch on practical matters. However, it would be incorrect to view these major divisions as absolute. Indeed, there is much practical application of important doctrinal truths all throughout the first eleven chapters. Furthermore, the practical applications in the latter portion are generally tied to key theological truths which guide and inform their application. Thus, the way Scripture comes to us, as a covenantal book intended to help God’s people to live faithfully before him, belies such a polarization of theory and praxis.
Second, all good theology is engaged theology, so that an absolute distinction between theory and practice does not actually exist. The notion that good theology is merely the attainment of a certain set of facts or the accumulation of a sufficient amount of data fails to recognize theology’s doxological intent. Likewise, the failure to recognize that good practice has a sound exegetical and theological basis diminishes the legitimacy of practical theology. The assumption that all “hard disciplines” are only conceptual while practical theology is “merely application” is a misunderstanding of the nature of these disciplines.

There are a number of sub-disciplines within the field of Practical Theology. These sub-disciplines include: 1) Pastoral Care and Counseling, 2) Christian Education, 3) Homiletics and Liturgics, 4) Evangelism and Missions, and 5) Church Administration. Pastoral Care and Counseling examines the role of pastor as shepherd of the sheep, as binder of wounds, as faithful counselor and seeks to develop skills that will enhance the pastor’s ability to minister to individuals in need.

Christian Education examines the processes by which children, youth, and adults learn and integrate the Christian faith into their lives. Issues of catechetics, generational distinctives, and individual learning/teaching styles are considered in Christian Education courses.

Homiletics and Liturgics cover the skills associated with preaching and worship leadership, respectively. Homiletics investigates the pattern of Biblical preaching and usually considers examples of great preachers throughout the ages. Homiletics offers the student of theology instruction in developing sermons that are Biblically sound, thoughtfully structured, and rhetorically engaging in order to communicate effectively in the pulpit. Liturgics investigates the historical practice of the church, both in terms of rites and ceremonies. It also challenges the student to analyze the structure of the liturgy, particularly in light of contemporary practices and significant new trends.

Evangelism and Missions provide training in communicating the gospel by examining Biblical practices, establishing principles, and developing methods for sharing the gospel effectively. This is a broad area of study, encompassing individual as well as corporate, domestic as well as overseas endeavors. In general, evangelism refers to domestic initiatives, while missions refers to efforts in other lands. Both evangelism and missions must consider

11 “Rites” are what is said in liturgy, while “ceremonies” are what is done.
issues of contextualization and the role of culture in the process of communicating gospel truth. The place of diaconal ministries (“social mission”) is generally discussed in these disciplines as well.

Finally, Church Administration asks, “how can good stewardship be applied to managing the resources of the church?” Church Administration assumes that there is a ministry of supervision. Furthermore, Church Administration contends that the way in which a pastor, or church board develops and relates to personnel, allocates financial resources, and manages time can create an environment that maximizes gifts and talents for more effective ministry.

As you can see, the student of theology who masters a course of study that approximates the traditional theological encyclopedia will receive a well-rounded preparation for the work of the ministry.

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

First of all, we are individuals who think systematically. Although it is true that some of us are more inclined to do this than others, each one has some capacity to relate individual facts to some larger arrangement of facts. Intuitively, we ask the question, “Is there a relationship between fact A and fact B, or fact B and fact C?” Since our minds think systematically, we must reflect on the data of scripture systematically. As Van Til reminds us, “it is with our God-created minds, which must think systematically, that we must rework the content of revelation.”

Second, Systematic Theology holds before us the full panoply of scriptural truth. This focus on the whole counsel of God helps us to maintain a proper balance theologically and Biblically. We may escape the tendency to overemphasize a favorite portion of Scripture, or ride some particular doctrinal hobby-horse. Systematic Theology also helps us to avoid tendencies toward emotionalism or intellectualism. Casual observation betrays the truth that some students of theology, pastors, and professors gravitate towards intellectualism, preferring the abstract discussion of theology to the practical application of

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13 Ibid., 5,6.
truth in real life settings. Others prefer to follow their hearts, convinced that whatever “feels right” must be a true indicator of what “God is doing.” A focus on Systematic Theology as we have defined it will help maintain a balance among individual truths, as well as a balance between concept and practice. If Systematic Theology genuinely seeks to relate God’s truth to the various challenges and questions posed by our culture, we will be better able to avoid the imbalances noted above. Furthermore, “the history of the church bears out the claim that God-centered preaching is the most valuable to the Church of Christ.”¹⁴ The preacher who is an astute student of Systematic Theology will be more successful at achieving such God-centered preaching.

Third, “what is beneficial for the individual believer is also beneficial for the minister, and in consequence the church as a whole.”¹⁵ As we study the Scriptures and seek to do theology, we come to certain conclusions about truth. Systematic Theology provides the constructs, the outlines we need to summarize our findings, to reach useful conclusions. In turn, we are able to convey those conclusions to others within the Church. They, in turn, are fortified against false doctrine and heresy. So, the studied conclusions of Systematic Theology may enable us to strengthen our parishioners to withstand the challenges thrown at them by an unbelieving culture or by teachers of false doctrine.

Fourth, Systematic Theology leads to accuracy and precision in our conversation, teaching, preaching, and counseling. As J. Gresham Machen, founder of Westminster Theological Seminary said, “In religion as well as in other spheres a precise terminology is mentally economical in the end; it repays amply the slight effort required for the mastery of it.”¹⁶ One of my favorite comic strips is a Far Side parody of an operating room. The doctors and nurses are all busy attending to the patient when, what appears to be an internal organ, squirts out of the surgeon’s hands and flies off into a corner. The surgeon, without looking up, says, “Better get that thingamajig; we might need it later.” Now, no clear-thinking person would willingly choose to be operated on by someone with such a cavalier attitude and such a deficient knowledge of gross anatomy. Certainly the parishioners of our

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.
¹⁵ Ibid., 5.
churches expect, and we who deal with eternal matters should strive, for nothing less than a thoughtful, careful, mastery of our field and its conventional language.

Fifth, Van Til reminds us of the value of Systematic Theology when he says, “the best apologetic defense will invariably be made by him who knows the system of truth of Scripture best. The fight between Christianity and non-Christianity is, in modern times, no piece-meal affair.” You see, often those outside the Christian faith are themselves systematic in the development of their secularized dogmas. Van Til goes on to say that today’s conflict is “the life and death struggle between two mutually opposed life and world-views.” Those who engage in Systematic Theology are better able to provide a consistent Christian world and life view to answer the question, “What does it mean for Jesus Christ to be Lord of all?”

**CONCLUDING THOUGHT**

As demonstrated above, there are numerous values to Systematic Theology, but it is possible to summarize the discussion in a very simple way. In a famous article by Benjamin B. Warfield entitled, “The Indispensableness of Systematic Theology to the Preacher,” Warfield made some very pointed observations. He said this, “It has been argued that the business of the preacher is to make Christians not theologians and that for this he needs not a thorough systematic knowledge of the whole circle that is called Christian doctrine but chiefly a firm faith in Jesus Christ as savior and a warm love towards him as Lord.” But Warfield continued, saying: “We cannot preach at all without preaching doctrine and the type of religious life which grows up under our preaching will be determined by the nature of the doctrines which we preach.” 17 If your doctrinal study is limited to the superficial, you have limited your ministry to the shallows. But, if you are willing to plunge into the study of Scripture to gain all that God has revealed, you are ready to do Systematic Theology. And, if you regularly engage in such theological reflection, you will add breadth and depth to your ministry.

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WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

For the Reformed believer, there is one great presupposition that guides all theological enterprises, namely, the principle that “Finitum non capax infiniti.” That is to say, the finite is not capable of the infinite. In other words, God is “beyond us” and, therefore, theology deals with mystery at every point. As Van Til explains it,

Our position is naturally charged with being self-contradictory. It might seem at first glance as though we were willing, with the dialectical theologians, to accept the really contradictory. Yet such is not the case. In fact we hold that our position is the only position that saves one from the necessity of ultimately accepting the really contradictory. We argue that unless we may hold to the presupposition of the self-contained ontological trinity, human rationality itself is a mirage. But to hold to this position requires us to say that while we shun as poison the idea of the really contradictory we embrace with passion the idea of the apparently contradictory. It is through the latter alone that we can reject the former. If it is the self-contained ontological trinity that we need for the rationality of our interpretation of life, it is this same ontological trinity that requires us to hold to the apparently contradictory.¹⁸

To express this in other words, we may say that our knowledge of God is true and accurate, though analogical, and therefore not comprehensive. It is for this reason that the believer must always confess that we will never comprehend God, though we may apprehend him as he has revealed himself in His word.

In his comprehensive Systematic Theology, A.H. Strong listed a number of limitations inherent to the theological enterprise.¹⁹ First, there are “Necessary Mysteries.” The Trinity, by definition, is beyond our comprehension and not subject to the laws of logic. While the

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early Church creeds provide much help in establishing the bounds of orthodoxy, we must be content with speaking of a *description* of the Trinity and not a *definition* of the Trinity. These creeds rule “in” certain formulations and rule “out” certain others. They do not circumscribe the Triune God; indeed, that would have been a mission impossible and that was not their intent. 20 Another good example of a necessary mystery is the interplay between God’s sovereign disposition of all things- and the biblical affirmation of genuine human responsibility. 21 Without the ability to access these matters from the divine perspective, we are left unable to resolve the tension between these two teachings of Scripture. Of course, there are no mysteries for God, and so we believe that, ultimately, these matters are not contradictory, but only apparently so (paradox).

Second, there are “Accidental Mysteries.” Sometimes there are insufficient facts, so that we do not have access to all the data we might need to answer all the questions that arise. For example, the opening chapters of Genesis are sufficient for their purpose, namely to attribute to God the creation of all that exists. However, they do not provide all the data we might find desirable to give a full scientific or historical explanation of the doctrine of Creation.

Third, there is the problem of the “Inadequacy of Language.” For example, the terms, “Substance,” “Person,” “Eternity” all tell us something about significant theological debates. But, in spite of all they tell us, there are many unanswered questions that arise due to the inherent limitations of these words and their inability to reflect fully concepts that defy comprehension. Anyone who has ever contemplated “eternity” is aware of the inadequacy of thoughts and words to capture the notion of infinite time.

Fourth, there is the problem of our “Incomplete Knowledge of Scripture.” We do not know all the parts of Scripture. Each of us has substantial gaps in his or her fund of Scriptural knowledge. If that is the case, there may yet be pertinent data that we have overlooked, data that is essential to understanding correctly the overall teaching of Scripture. Not only do we not know all the parts, it is safe to say that, concerning the parts we know, we

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20 Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 11, “In these creeds the church does not pretend to have enveloped the fullness of the revelation of God. The church knows itself to be dealing with the inexhaustible God. The creeds must therefore be regarded as ‘approximations’ to the fullness of truth as it is in God.”

21 See the helpful summary of this problem in Anthony Hoekema, *Saved By Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 5ff.
do not know them equally well. Thus, there may yet be significant facts contained in the Wisdom Literature, or the Pauline epistles that we have not explored in sufficient detail. Further work in these texts may yield information that requires modification of our understanding, for example, of the doctrine of providence, or of adoption.

Fifth, there is the problem of the “Silence of Revelation” (Deut. 29:29). There is much that God has not seen fit to reveal; indeed, there is much we are incapable of receiving. We must learn to be content with what we have received and, as Calvin puts it, learn to cease talking when He is silent.

Sixth, there is the problem of a “Lack of Spiritual Discernment” (I Cor. 2:14). It is possible that sin has affected us in such a way that our vision and understanding of Scripture is skewed. There may be the even greater problem of the “unregenerate theologian.” Indeed, as John Murray has stated it, “a theologian is not fitted for his undertaking unless he knows the power of the redemptive provision of which Scripture is the revelation.”

WHAT IS THE TASK OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

The Subject Matter of Systematic Theology:

In order to answer the question posed above, a number of subsidiary issues must be addressed. The first of these subsidiary issues is the question of the subject matter of Systematic Theology.

This question came to the foreground of theological discussion in the late 19th century, as German theologians, reacting to Kant’s dualism and his distinction between practical and scientific reason, radically reoriented the task of Systematic Theology. The 19th century “consciousness theologians,” the fathers of modern liberal Protestantism proposed one answer. In direct opposition to the historic focus on God as the proper subject matter of Systematic Theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher proposed that the proper subject matter of theology was the experience of the individual believer. He said, “... the doctrines in all

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23 So-called because of their focus on the individual’s awareness, or “consciousness” of God.
their forms have their ultimate ground so exclusively in the emotions of the religious self-consciousness, that where these do not exist the doctrines cannot arise.”

In an effort to be more objective, Albrecht Ritschl proposed that the proper subject matter of theology is Jesus Christ as experienced by the Church. “Two characteristics are perceptible in religious conceptions which must be stated at the very outset. They are always the possession of a community and they express not merely a relation between God and man, but always at the same time a relation toward the world on the part of God and those who believe in Him.” While acknowledging that grace is effective only to individuals, Ritschl also argued that grace only occurs in the context of the church. “If, therefore, justification and reconciliation of sinners are the leading features of the Christian religion, they can be correctly examined and explained in the case of the individual only when at the same time we take note of his place in the Christian community.” Even more to the point, Ritschl says “. . . the religious conceptions of justification and reconciliation, to be explained, must not be applied in isolation to the individual subject, but to the subject as a member of the community of believers.”

It is not immediately apparent that Ritschl’s “correction” of Schleiermacher avoids the problem of subjectivity. The focus on the experience of God, whether viewed strictly from the standpoint of the individual’s self-consciousness, or the individual in community with others, still leaves us looking at experiences, experiences which are as varied and as different as the individuals involved. At no point does the multiplication of subjectivity ever reach objectivity.

For Benjamin B. Warfield, the proper subject matter of theology is “God in his nature and in his relations to his creatures,” or “the facts concerning God and his relations to his creatures.” Warfield wrote much in deliberate response to Ritschlian theology. However,
at this point he is simply reflecting the teaching of the Shorter Catechism, which asks in question three, “What do the Scriptures principally teach?” Answer, “The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God hath required of him.”

More recently, Gordon Spykman, retired professor of theology at Calvin Seminary wrote, “The key position in a three-factor view of reality belongs to the Word of God. It is the religious bond, the unbreakable link which binds the Creator and his creatures together in covenant partnership.” Spykman speaks of his own effort to overcome the gap between subject and object by developing a “three-factor” approach which sees the Word of God in Scripture as the means by which the distance may be broached. Whether his “three-factor” proposal is acceptable, he is nonetheless in agreement with Warfield that it is the covenant God and his relations to his people that is the proper subject matter of Systematic Theology.

A somewhat different approach is offered by Donald Bloesch, “Its [i.e., theology’s] norm is Scripture, but its field or arena of action is the cultural context in which we find ourselves. It is engaged in reflection not on abstract divinity or on concrete humanity but on the Word made flesh, the divine in the human.” While Bloesch speaks highly of Scripture, he nonetheless at this point departs somewhat from the historic Presbyterian understanding of the subject matter of Systematic Theology. On this issue, his theological viewpoint is closer to the Neo-Orthodoxy of Karl Barth, than the Princeton orthodoxy of Charles Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield.

To say, with Warfield, that the proper subject matter of Systematic Theology is “God in his nature and in his relations to his creatures” is to provide a proper focus on objective truth while recognizing that such truth is not abstractly considered, but considered relationally, in covenantal terms. We, as God’s creatures, are the ones who “do theology,” but we do so in the light of God’s revelation to us, a revelation which is adapted to us in our varying situations.

**The Sources of Revelation:**

The second of these subsidiary issues is the question of *sources of revelation.* Where do we go to obtain information concerning the “subject matter” of Systematic

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Theology? The Roman Catholic Church proposes that there are, essentially, two sources of special revelation, although the official language of the church affirms one source ("tradition") in two kinds ("Tradition One," "Tradition Two"). Revelation is mediated by the teaching office of the Church. In *Dei Verbum*, the dogmatic constitution on the church promulgated by the Second Vatican Council, the church teaches that there is a “single sacred deposit.” Scripture, in Roman Catholic thought, is “Tradition One.” The unwritten oral tradition of the church is “Tradition Two.” The teaching office of the Church, or the *Magisterium Ecclesiae*, is necessary for the correct interpretation of Scripture and oral tradition. The bishops of the church, in union with the Pope, and in consultation with various scholars, constitute this teaching office. Thus, whatever is revealed in Scripture, or in the unwritten tradition of the church, is acknowledged and interpreted by the teaching office of the church, constitutes a genuine revelation from God. Of course, Roman Catholicism generally has a high view of general revelation, employing a nature/grace schema that sees grace (special revelation) completing and supplementing what is revealed in nature (general revelation).

As seen in our discussion of 19th century liberal Protestantism, Schleiermacher and Ritschl argue that the source of revelation is, essentially, *Christian Experience*. While Protestants have been willing to acknowledge experience as a source of revelation, evangelical Protestants generally have rejected the reductionist position of Schleiermacher and Ritschl. By viewing revelation in terms of one’s experience of God, Schleiermacher and Ritschl effectively collapse special revelation into general revelation!

Instead, Protestants have preferred to embrace the concept of *Multiple Sources*. One of the classic formulations of “multiple sources” is that of the Anglican Church. The Anglican formula stipulates three sources of revelation: *Scripture*, as the supreme authority, together with *Reason* and *Tradition*, two categories that would fall under the category of general revelation. In recent years, Methodism has embraced a similar formula, the so-called “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” which acknowledges the three sources of the Anglican Church.

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and adds *Experience* as the fourth source.\(^{32}\) Note the following chart comparing the Anglican Formula with the Wesleyan Quadrilateral:

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<tr>
<th>Anglican Formula</th>
<th>(ANGLICAN FORMULA)</th>
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<tr>
<td>a. Scripture (Supreme Authority)</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. <strong>Reason</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Tradition</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Experience</td>
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(WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL)

Of course, neither the Anglican Formula nor the Wesleyan Quadrilateral implies equality of the sources. Instead, in both constructions Scripture is viewed as the final arbiter of truth, although supplemented with other sources that are usually considered under the category of general revelation.

Benjamin B. Warfield also argued for **Multiple Sources**. His list included 1) Nature, or, what God has created. Human beings, made in the image of God, possess many faculties, including the ability to think and “reason,” 2) Providence, or, what God has done in history, in the Church, (one might well argue that this would encompass “tradition”), 3) Experience, or, what God has done in your life, and 4) Scripture, or, what God has said. Nevertheless, Warfield is clear in regards to the relation of Scripture to all other sources of revelation. “The revelation of God in his written Word is easily shown not only to be incomparably superior to all other manifestations of him in the fullness, richness and clearness of its communications, but also to contain the sole discovery of much that is most important for the soul to know as to its state and destiny.”\(^{33}\) Of course, Warfield’s first three sources correspond with what is called general revelation.

Donald Bloesch argues for **Two Sources**, Scripture and Tradition. At first glance, his view looks like the Roman Catholic view without the magisterium. Bloesch, of course, would not value tradition as highly as would the Roman Catholic theologians. For Bloesch,

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\(^{32}\) The “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” will not be found articulated as such in Wesley’s *Works*. Although the elements are there, and the formula is an accurate representation of Wesley’s thought, the quadrilateral is a construct offered by the late Albert C. Outler, noted Wesley scholar and Methodist theologian. See arguments against the quadrilateral in Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 62ff.

“the sources of theology are Scripture and tradition, but the first has priority. Scripture is the primary, tradition the secondary, witness to divine revelation. Culture or human experience is the medium of revelation but not its source or norm. . . . I prefer to speak of contemporary human experience as the field of theology but not as source or norm.”

Perhaps this reticence to view human experience as a source of revelation is due to the influence of Neo-orthodoxy on Bloesch’s thought. For Karl Barth, there is no “natural theology” and no general revelation, thus ruling out human experience as revelatory. Bloesch appears to be in harmony with this construct.

Gordon Spykman again proposes a three-fold structure that acknowledges three sources of revelation. He says, “Taking Scripture seriously as Word of God leads us to recognize that there is more to the Word of God than Scripture alone. For the Bible itself points to realities beyond itself which it identifies as Word of God.”

The Word takes on three forms: First, there is the Creational Word, which corresponds more or less with general revelation. Second, there is the Inscripturated Word, which corresponds to the 66 books of the canon. Third, there is the Incarnational Word, or Jesus Christ himself. The Scriptures are unique for Spykman. “Scripture’s authority is plenary and verbal, just as it is also plenarily and verbally inspired and infallible. It is therefore the trustworthy guide for faithful living as well as the reliable norm for theology.”

In conclusion, it is clear that God reveals himself through many means, all of which contribute to our knowledge of God. However, we must distinguish between Scripture, as the unique source of revelation, the fons unicum, and other sources as subordinate to Scripture. Reminding us of the special role that Scripture plays, Spykman says, “Given the reality of our radical fall into sin, there is only one noetic point of departure, the Bible.” Likewise, Warfield says, “the superior lucidity of this revelation

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35 Spykman, Reformational Theology, 78.
36 Ibid., 124.
37 Ibid., 76.
makes it the norm of interpretation for what is revealed so much more darkly through the other methods of manifestation.”

There is a helpful distinction that theologians make between the role of Scripture as a source of revelation and the role of experience, tradition, and reason. The Latin terms *norma normans* and *norma normativa* provide help. Scripture is *norma normans*, a rule that rules. All other revelatory media are *norma normativa*, a rule that is governed- in this instance, by Scripture. So, when you speak of Experience, Tradition, Providence, and Reason, you speak of ruling “norms,” but norms that exist under the great norm, the written Word of God.

**WHAT IS THE ACTION OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?**

The word “Systematic” does not imply other disciplines are not systematic. Rather, it refers to the logical coherence that exists among divine truths. It qualifies the *activity* of the discipline, not its coherence per se. The “Action” of Systematic Theology is not bringing order out of chaos. It is not, properly speaking, imposing an external system on Scripture. More importantly, the doing of Systematic Theology does not imply that there is an infinite number of strands which we can weave into any theological tapestry of our own design. The “Action,” instead, is recognizing the fabric of revealed truth that already exists in sacred Scripture.

This activity presupposes certain immutable and unquestioned facts. First, there is *Unity* in the Scriptures by virtue of their ultimate author, God himself. Although written by some 40 authors over the course of 15 centuries, the Bible presents a unity that can only be explained in terms of its primary author. Second, there is an *Integrity* to the Scriptures; it represents the truth its author intended us to know. Third, there is a *Coherence* to the Scriptures- it holds together presenting a seamless fabric of redemptive truth. From the first promise of the Savior to the final consummation- the Bible hangs together. There is not a diffusion of themes or ideas, as in a college course anthology. It is obvious that the redemptive story is the theme of Scripture and all other themes or motifs are subordinate to that one overarching theme (cf. Luke 24:27).

Perhaps the more important question has not yet been asked: Is there any Biblical warrant for doing Systematic Theology? The answer is yes! The New Testament itself

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invites us to do Systematic Theology through its pervasive use of “fulfillment language.” For example, in Matt. 1:22 we read, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet.” Certainly this text cannot be understood fully apart from its Old Testament original, and so we are invited to turn back to the seventh chapter of Isaiah, reflect on the 14th verse- and consider its fulfillment in the birth of Jesus. When we do this, we are doing Systematic Theology.

There is another principle that established the legitimacy of Systematic Theology, namely, the analogy of Scripture. Often, the illumination of one part of Scripture is based upon understanding another part. For example, it is not possible to understand fully Paul’s warning against sexual immorality in I Corinthians 6 apart from an understanding of the Biblical teaching on marriage found in Genesis 2. Likewise, the understanding of one part is often contingent on an understanding of several other parts. For example, it is impossible to understand fully the “Golden Chain” in Romans 8:30 without knowing what the Scripture teaches elsewhere about predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. By consulting the numerous texts elsewhere that address these aspects of God’s saving activity, it is possible to gain additional insight into the linkage between God’s predestinating activity and the believer’s ultimate glorification.

A word of caution is in order. On the one hand, it must be emphasized that doing theology does not produce new truth. Rather, it reproduces the truth. The last thing a good theologian should want to do is to produce “theological novelty,” since theological novelty is usually nothing more than “heresy” under a new name! On the other hand, doing theology may bring to light new truth. Perhaps the classic example of this was Luther’s “rediscovery” of justification by grace through faith at the time of the Protestant Reformation.

**Doing Theology and Culture:**

As we explore the relationship between theology and culture, there is at least one fact that is beyond dispute. Without a doubt, there is a chronological development of theology—this is the lesson of historical theology. Having granted the obvious, it is but a small step to acknowledge that there are cultural influences on the development of theology. This, too, is demonstrated by the unfolding of Church History. Cultural influences include, for example, Hebraic (Old Testament), Greek (New Testament, early Church), Roman (New Testament,
early Church, the Roman Catholic tradition), North African (early church), and Western European (medieval church, Reformation Protestantism, modern church).

There is, however, an Evangelical Presupposition: Since the Scriptures, ultimately, are God’s revelation to all of mankind, there will be a unity of truth even in the midst of diverse cultural emphases and contextualized language. This is a truth that every evangelical should embrace. It is not without potential danger, however. Some evangelicals “have tended to view theology as transcultural or culturally neutral. Always fearful of the historicist notion of theology, these evangelicals have typically championed biblical authority by claiming that there is only one horizon in theology– the biblical text itself.”39

As John Stott has so eloquently reminded us, there are two horizons that must be addressed if one is to do theology properly.40 First, it is necessary to embrace and to understand the “Ancient World,” of the Bible, the Biblical text and its cultural milieu. Second, it is necessary to embrace and understand the “Modern World” of the interpreter and the culture in which the interpretation occurs and is applied. Indeed, “. . . there is still the need to link those understandings [the ‘specific cultural and historical meaning of Scripture’] up with the target culture into which we wish to announce these words, not to mention our need to be aware of our own cultural baggage as interpreters.”41

Evangelicals are not the only ones who have erred in their understanding of the relationship between theology and culture. Some interpreters (usually of more critical convictions) have erred on the other extreme. They suggest “that the meaning of the biblical message is actually determined by the constraints of the contemporary culture, that the Scriptures have no other meaning than that which is permitted by the conceptuality of the present-day situation.”42 As an example of one who employs these presuppositions in his methodology, Lints gives the famed New Testament theologian, Rudolf Bultmann. A


41 Walter Kaiser and Moses Silva, An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 175.

42 Lints, The Fabric of Theology, 102. Roughly speaking, those who view the relationship between theology and culture in this manner would be inclined to embrace a “Christ of Culture” approach, from H. Richard Niebuhr’s typologies in Christ and Culture.

One of the keys to understanding the relationship between theology and culture is the unavoidable fact that “we hear the divine conversation only after it has passed through several filters.” Borrowing from Lints’ discussion, we note that there are a number of interpretive filters (or “matrices”) which every interpreter employs. Personal and family characteristics affect the way we view Scripture. For example, someone whose background has a strong element of self-reliance may very well view biblical teachings on personal financial responsibility quite differently from someone who has benefited personally from local, state, or federal social programs. One’s individual religious tradition may very well influence the way one interprets certain texts. For example, someone who was reared in a church that practices immersion only might be unaware of the wide range of meanings in the Scriptures for the words *baptism* and *baptize*.

National and regional culture influences the way one interprets Scripture. Many Americans assume that God is obligated to provide equal treatment to all. The democratic principles that inform American political life are uncritically transferred to the Kingdom of God and God becomes the ultimate equal opportunity employer. A tragic example of the influence of regional culture is the lingering legacy of segregation in the south. In the past, many southern white Christians unreflectively assumed that racial segregation was a concept rooted in Scriptures. Failure to recognize this filter led to prolonged racial tensions that remain even unto the present.

As implied above, racial heritage can have a tremendous effect on one’s ability to interpret Scripture. African-Americans, who endured centuries of slavery, might have unusual insight into Biblical passages that discuss slavery or bondage. Likewise, Asian-Americans, who come from a culture that honors, even reveres the elderly, might have unique insight into the injunctions to “honor your father and your mother,” Ex. 20:12, or to “obey those who rule over you,” Heb.13:17.

Social relationships, often determined by one’s station in life, may very well affect the way one views such matters as economic justice, right-to-work legislation, and the

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43 Ibid., 600.
relationship between Church and State. Whether one is considered, economically, to be middle class or lower class might very well affect one’s understanding of the Biblical injunctions to care for the “widows and orphans.” Similarly, there is an educational matrix that colors so much of the Church’s life, and, frequently the education matrix is intertwined with the matrix of social relationships. In some denominations, the majority of their membership lacks post-secondary education. In that setting, there will be a bias against college educated ministers and, often enough, an outright fear of seminary education. All too frequently, the lack of education is accompanied by unhealthy, but firmly-held beliefs, such as a bias for certain translations of the Bible, a disdain for worship that is overly formal or “rigidly structured,” or a distrust of tools for the study of the Bible, such as commentaries, theology books, or language helps.

Some Christians have vivid memories of dramatic, personal conversions. One’s personal faith experience may very well color expectations for how God deals with others. For example, the Apostle Paul had a very dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus. To make such an experience normative, and to read the Biblical calls for repentance and conversion in that light would be to establish a standard unattainable for the average believer, most of whom have never experienced anything as profoundly jarring.

Another matrix that influences the way we view Scripture is our vocational and leisure-time matrix. One’s calling in life often determines the hours worked, and the character of that work. Those whose vocation keeps them close to the land might well find their understanding of the many agricultural images in Scripture to be enriched. Similarly, those engaged in business or commerce might better understand many of the Biblical teachings on money and stewardship. Even something as simple as the length of the work-week may have an effect. For example, one who puts in extensive hours of overtime may simply not have the leisure time to engage in detailed study of the Bible.

Finally, the extent of one’s cross-cultural experiences certainly will affect the interpretation of the Word of God. There is a tendency for some evangelicals to interpret the Bible through the single lens of their own culture and experience. For Americans who have never ventured out of the country, their first experience in a foreign culture is often quite shocking. To realize that “the way we do it” is not necessarily the way the rest of the world does it can be a tremendous experience for the interpreter of Scripture. Those who have
become accustomed to the “Golden Arches” at every major intersection, cheap gasoline, and endless options in the supermarket are often at a loss when traveling in lands that have not been blessed with our abundant natural resources and entrepreneurial spirit. This is called “culture shock.” Perhaps there is little else that is as helpful in banishing the tendency to read an ancient near-eastern text as though it were written to a twenty-first century, affluent, suburban, white congregation in upstate South Carolina. Of course, the broader one’s cross-cultural experiences, the greater the opportunity to develop such sensitivities and employ them in interpreting and applying the Scriptures.

Finally, there are two key affirmations that must be made. First, there is a **transcultural aspect to the doing of theology.** This was stated quite powerfully by J. Gresham Machen. “Ought we to give our western creeds to the Oriental mind? . . . Of course those Western creeds ought to be given to the Oriental mind. But that ought to be done only on one condition— that those western creeds are true. If they are not true, they ought not to be given to the Oriental mind or to any other kind of mind; but if they are true, they are just as true in China as they are in the United States.”

Furthermore, Lints makes an eloquent case for God’s accommodation to all of humanity. “Our final and fundamental hope rests in the conviction that God himself communicates across cultures, principally across that cultural chasm that lies between himself and us. As Gabriel Fackre has suggested, ‘We are not so locked into our ecclesial or cultural positions that its truth cannot make itself known to us—the Word addresses the hearer— even to the extent that a contemporary perspective from which a text is viewed can be challenged, modified and even overturned by the text.’”

Second, there is **an unavoidable cultural influence in the doing of theology** and consequently, a need to evaluate critically its effect on the theological task. “Contemporary theologians must also seek to challenge the contemporary mind to think more critically about its own culturally accepted values.” To be more precise, each of us must recognize the cultural influences that affect our ability to interpret Scripture and to do theology. There is

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46 Ibid., 113.
no such thing as cultural neutrality. Stanley Gundry, in an address to the Evangelical Theological Society stated, “I wonder if we really recognize that all theology represents a contextualization, even our own theology? We speak of Latin American theology, black theology, or feminist theology; but without the slightest second thought we will assume that our own theology is simply theology, undoubtedly in its purest form. Do we recognize that the versions of evangelical theology held by most people in this room are in fact North American, white, and male and that they reflect and/or address those values and concerns?\textsuperscript{47}

WHAT IS SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

**Systematic Theology As Science:**

Scientific study is the God-given impulse to seek knowledge, to exercise dominion over the realm of nature. The task given to Adam, to cultivate the garden, provides insight into the question of the nature of theological inquiry. The task of tending the garden was a task of cultural dominion. Cultural dominion is an exercise in image-bearing, committed to the creature as the image-bearer of God. The word, *cultus*, originally referred to tilling the soil, to bringing forth fruit. It is a “tending” of the creation. Later, *cultus*, came to refer to religion and worship, it is an “honoring, a reverencing, a veneration of the divine.”

Humanity’s task, then, was that of tending to the creation, exploring the creation. In a very real sense, this task was at once both religious and scientific. To honor God in this instance was to cultivate the creation. There was no distinction between sacred duty and profane activities. Instead, they were one and the same. Thus, at the beginning, scientific inquiry was, at root, also a religious activity.

We may affirm that there are two types of knowledge, based on the Creator/Creature Distinction. The first type of knowledge is divine knowledge, the knowledge that is appropriate only to God. We speak of this as **Archetypal** knowledge. This knowledge is Original, Transcendent, Intuitive, Immediate, Comprehensive. “God alone knows himself (‘archetypal knowledge of God,’ *cognitio Dei archetypa*).” The second type of knowledge is human knowledge, the knowledge that is appropriate to the creature. We may speak of this as **Ectypal** knowledge. This knowledge is Derivative, Immanent, Discursive, Mediated, Partial. “There is no created being that can know aught [sic] of Him, except He himself

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48 *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, s.v., “cultus.”

reveals something from His self-knowledge and self-consciousness in a form that falls within
the comprehension of the creature (‘ectypal knowledge of God,’ *cognitio Dei ectypa*).”

Ectypal, or “Creaturely” knowledge is perfectly adapted to the creature’s
environment. To say this another way, the creature’s knowledge was sufficient for its
intended purposes. Now at no point was the creature expected to have ALL knowledge. Indeed, the creature’s knowledge was always to be partial. Yet, the opportunity for Adam to expand the base of knowledge was implicit in the command to have dominion. In other words, the knowledge that Adam had was true, though partial, and capable of increase. God has revealed himself in himself in Nature, Providence, Experience, and most importantly, Scripture. **THUS: The knowledge that God has given through all these media are all within the scope of our legitimate investigation.**

**The Antithesis:**

There is an antithesis between the thinking and scientific pursuits of those who are children of God, and those who are children of darkness. The “antithesis” is a concept offered by Dutch Calvinists that seeks to provide a way of viewing the entire cosmos as belonging to God, but, short of the eschaton, under siege by the forces of evil. The antithesis is critical to all theological enterprise because it permeates every part of the created order and affects every issue that arises in creation.

The antithesis represents a spiritual warfare between good and evil which knows no territorial boundaries. It is not geographically, locally, or spatially definable. The enmity between these two hostile forces does not coincide with two parts of reality, as though one sector of life were holy and the other unholy, or one bloc righteous and the other unrighteous. **It is a directional antithesis which runs through all the structures of life.** Sin is totally pervasive. Grace, too, lays its claim on all reality. The antithesis may therefore not be dualistically misconstrued as though it drives a wedge between soul and body, faith and reason, theology and philosophy, church and world- with the former viewed as good and the latter as evil.”

First, we consider the Children of the *Palingenesis*, or “the regeneration.” The regenerate, or the “born again,” believe on Jesus Christ and are part of His Kingdom. The regenerate will think with new hearts and minds. For them, the task of honoring God is

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50 Ibid., 215-216.

indistinguishable from all their activities. Thus, for the regenerate, the investigation of God is but one part of their creation mandate, one avenue of inquiry among many others. They will faithfully engage in theology as a science. Theology is simply a part of their Heavenly Father’s creation and, like all other parts, is a fruitful area for investigation and exploration: a proper venue for the exercise of dominion.

Second, we consider the Children of Darkness. The unregenerate believe there is no God to whom they are accountable- in their estimation. They will rule out theology as a science according to their own, autonomous definition of science. Indeed, much of post-Enlightenment thought has been preoccupied with the limitations on theology as “scientific inquiry.” For Kant and much of liberal Protestantism, theology was admitted as a necessity, but it was based on “practical reason” or experience alone. Since the subject matter of theology is not conducive to empirical investigation, nor does it willingly submit itself to the canons of reason, theology has been reduced largely to the psychology of religion. For the consciousness theologians, the subject matter of theology was switched from “God and his relations to his creatures” to an analysis of human feelings and dependence on ultimate reality.

The role of reason is also disputed by the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. Any scientific investigation employs Logic, the use of Reason, whether through Induction or Deduction. Scientific Investigation employs the use of the senses, through sensory perception. Reason and the Senses are part of our image-bearing, part of the created order. Both Reason and the use of Senses have validity, for they are God-given faculties, enabling us to analyze the data of creation, to think and ponder its implications. But, Scripture must not be placed under the scrutiny of our reason.

Indeed, quite the contrary is true. Reason is subject to Scriptural authority. It is an assumption of the Christian faith that there are truths concerning God that transcend our reason and our senses. As Van Til explains it,

God is completely self-conscious and therefore knows himself and all things analytically. There is in God’s thought complete coherence. Keeping this in mind, we may say that if we are to have coherence in our thinking it will have to be a coherence that corresponds to God’s coherence. Accordingly, our coherence will never be

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52 See the discussion on “Two Kinds of People” in Kuyper, Principles of Sacred Theology, 150ff.

53 Frame, Doctrine of the Knowledge of God, 29.
completely inclusive in the way that God’s coherence is completely inclusive. **Our coherence will be no more than an analogy of the coherence of God. Yet because it is based upon God’s coherence it will be true knowledge.** Our coherence can completely grow in comprehensiveness but in cannot grow in truthfulness. **Those that have the least knowledge have true knowledge** just as well as those that have the greatest knowledge, if only their knowledge is truly analogical, i.e., based upon the knowledge that God has of himself and of the world. If this fundamental point is not forgotten, we can speak in the ordinary epistemological language. **We may say that we employ the methods of analysis and synthesis. . . . we have spoken of the Christian theistic method as the method of implication into the truth of God. It is reasoning in a spiral fashion rather than in a linear fashion. Accordingly, we have said that we can use the old terms deduction and induction if only we remember that they must be thought of as elements in this one process of implication into the truth of God.**

One of the implications of this reality is that “Paradox” (antinomy) is ultimately unavoidable for the Christian thinker. Although our knowledge is true, it is only partial. Furthermore, our knowledge is limited largely to the spatio-temporal reality in which we dwell. God, on the contrary, is not limited by these factors. His knowledge is complete and full. He sees all the parts and their various relationships- as well as the whole. Furthermore, God’s existence is fundamentally extra-dimensional. That is, although God chooses to participate in time and space, he is not confined to our mode of existence.

It will readily be inferred what as Christians we mean by antinomies. They are involved in the fact that human knowledge can never be completely comprehensive knowledge. Every knowledge transaction has in it somewhere a reference point to God. Now since God is not fully comprehensible to us we are bound to come into what seems to be contradiction in all our knowledge. Our knowledge is analogical and therefore must be paradoxical. We say that if there is to be any true knowledge at all there must be in God an absolute system of knowledge. . . . Yet we ourselves cannot fully understand that system.

In other words, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (Isa. 55:8, NIV). To acknowledge that we cannot avoid paradox is simply to acknowledge a basic theistic principle that is affirmed by Calvinistic theologians, viz., the finite is not capable of the infinite.

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55 An intriguing effort to explain the extra-dimensionality of God through the use of physics and “string theory” is found in Hugh Ross, *Beyond the Cosmos* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1996).

56 Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 44.
To speak of theology as a science is to acknowledge a number of different but related ideas. First of all, theology is a practical science. In other words, it has more than mere ontology (existence). Indeed, theology has teleology; it has purpose and direction. The end of theological inquiry is not merely mental equilibrium. As one of my professors of theology once put it, the goal of scientific inquiry is “knowledge that responds in doxology—how Great is the knowledge of the Lord.” (Professor Norman Shepherd)

There is another way to speak of the goal of theology. Instead of viewing theology as mere conceptual abstraction, a truly biblical theology should be an “engaged theology.” That is, it should be a theology that is adapted to, related to, and connected to life. This is one of the recurring themes in Professor John Frame’s excellent volume, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. As Frame summarizes it, “We may helpfully define theology as ‘the application of God’s Word by persons to all areas of life.’”

Theology that is done in abstraction is done in a manner not fitting with the covenantal character of Scripture. God gave his Word to his People in the various situations of life. The task of God’s people was to live out God’s Word in covenantal faithfulness, applying the norms of the Word to the ever-changing situations of life.

**Relationship between Theology and Philosophy:**

Theology and philosophy cover much of the same ground, although they do so from different perspectives. Philosophy deals more with “general” knowledge about reality, providing a conceptual basis for questions such as the nature of reality, or the nature of knowing. Philosophy is concerned with the whole range of knowledge and desires to make some systematic arrangement that is capable of accounting for all of life. It asks questions about “how” we are able to know (epistemology) and “what” we should value (axiology). It seeks to determine the nature of human existence (ontology) and how human beings ought to behave (ethics).

Theology is also concerned with reality, but its focus is more narrowly construed. Rather than surveying the possible ways human beings have thought about the cosmos, theology is concerned with reality— but from the narrow perspective of what God has revealed. Theology looks in great detail at the way in which a particular church or faith

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community structures its understanding of reality. It does not range over the entirety of the created order, seeking to arrange all knowledge into some system or structure, but seeks to understand more fully the revealed Word as contained in both general and special revelation.

While some would deny that there is any relationship between theology and philosophy, the evidence does not confirm this assertion. As Spykman has noted:

Knowingly or not, theology always moves within the larger mainstream of some philosophical tradition. Modern Roman Catholic theology, for examples, especially that which predates the rise of the “New Theology,” assumes the basic structures of Thomist philosophy. The Reformed theology of the Princeton school [that is, Old Princeton before 1929] is deeply influenced by Scottish Realism. Rudolf Bultmann openly acknowledges that his theology is indebted to the existentialist philosophy of Heidegger.58

See the following chart based on distinctions Spykman makes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHILOSOPHY</th>
<th>THEOLOGY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deals with the More General</td>
<td>Deals with the More Specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paints a “totality picture”</td>
<td>Explores in-depth a community’s faith life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys the house of theoretical reflection</td>
<td>Occupies one room of the house</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is no reason why a Christian should not make use of both. As Kuyper says,

Theology has no other task than to take up the ectypal knowledge of God, as it is known from its source, the Holy Scripture, into the consciousness of re-created humanity and to reproduce it. Philosophy . . . on the other hand, is called to construct the human knowledge, which has been brought to light by all other sciences, into one architectonic whole, and to show how this building arises from one basis. . . . [Accordingly] the need of philosophy is a necessity which arises out of the impulse of the human consciousness for unity, and is therefore of equal importance to those who stand outside, as to those who are in the regeneration. To say that a Christian is less in need of philosophy [than a non-Christian] is only the exhibition of spiritual sloth and lack of understanding.59

The relationship between philosophy and theology, then, is as follows. The “most fitting prolegomena” to theology is “Christian philosophy.” The “noetic point of departure for both is Scripture.”60 There is a real danger, however, in the juxtaposition of theology with non-Christian philosophy. That is, to do theology based on non-Christian presuppositions or

58 Spykman, Reformational Theology, 97.

59 Kuyper, Principles of Sacred Theology, 614.

60 Spykman, Reformational Theology, 101.
to do theology employing a methodology not governed by Scripture is inherently unacceptable for the Reformed theologian. This is the problem with much of contemporary theology, theology which was developed, largely, in dependence on the philosophy of *Existenz* (i.e., existentialism). Bloesch warns against the use of philosophy in any form.

I contend that every philosophy represents a rationalization for a false theology or religion and that true theology necessarily excludes philosophy— not its concerns, not even its language, but its world view, its metaphysical claims. In contradistinction to Tillich, I hold that theology and philosophy are not simply two ways of approaching reality, but they speak fundamentally of two different realities. I agree with Pascal that the God of the philosophers is something other than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is the difference between an idol created by the imagination and the experience of the true God. The relation between theology and philosophy is not one of synthesis or correlation but one of conflict and contradiction.61

While Bloesch’s warning is worthy of consideration, he unfortunately goes too far. The key is to recognize the difference between Christian philosophy, that presupposes the truth of revelation (theononomy) and, Non-Christian philosophy, that presupposes the truth of some other axiom or first principle (autonomy). The one is a proper background for doing Systematic Theology; the other, a dangerous if not deadly substitute for the self-attesting Word of God.

HOW DO WE “DO THEOLOGY”?

**Typologies:**

According to Peter Toon, Anglican theologian and evangelical, any discussion of “methodology” must take into account “typologies.” Typology focuses on the “structures of systems of thought.” For our purposes, typology identifies methodology. There are several different ways of identifying types, or methods.

**George Lindbeck** - According to George Lindbeck, there are three types or ways of doing theology. The first is the Cognitive/Propositionalist, or the Traditional Way, which emphasizes cognitive aspects, or truth as captured in propositions. This is the method that is most familiar to evangelicals and those identified with confessional churches. In this method, “right thinking” is identified as essential to right living. This type “emphasizes the cognitive aspects of religion and stresses the ways in which church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities.” The second is the Experiential/Expressive, or Expressively Symbolic, which focuses on feelings, attitudes, experiences- not on propositions. This approach underlies much of classical liberal Protestantism, and “it interprets doctrines as noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations.” The third is a Hybrid that combines elements of the two methods listed above. This hybrid approach is found largely within Roman Catholic circles and is not particularly useful in discussions of Protestant types of theology. Lindbeck’s “types” are very broad and are most useful in distinguishing between theologians employing evangelical/confessional (Cognitive/Propositionalist) and classical liberal Protestant (Experiential/Expressive) approaches.

**Peter Toon** - There are four “types” or ways of doing theology according to Peter Toon, who makes use of Peter Berger’s “3” types and adds his fourth, the “regulative.”

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64 Ibid, 16.

65 Ibid.

66 Toon, *The End of Liberal Theology*, 177ff.
The first is the **Deductive Approach**. This is a method that uses Scripture and/or the tradition of the Church to deduce objective truth. In Neibuhr’s typology, this falls under the category, “Christ Transforming Culture.” Examples of theologians who would represent this type would include Charles Hodge, Karl Barth, Wayne Grudem, Millard Erickson, Thomas Oden, and Robert Reymond. “Wherever we hear or read such statements as ‘the Bible says’ and the ‘Word of God states,’ along with ‘the church teaches’ and ‘tradition declares,’ we are most probably encountering theology of the deductive type.”

The second type is the **Inductive Approach**. This is a method that uses human experience as the starting point. Examples of theologians who would represent this type include Friedrich Schleiermacher, David Tracy, and Hans Kung. In Niebuhr’s typology, this falls under the category, “Christ of Culture.” “Liberal theology, in general, may be said to have followed an inductive method in that it speaks of God from the side of man. That is, it takes the content of Scripture as being a description of religious experience in and among the Jews, Jesus, His apostles, and the early church.” The use of human experience as a starting point qualifies, although it does not encompass the theological enterprise. Analysis must be done, and there must be reflection on experience. However, the experience of God (or, the “consciousness” of God) provides the starting point and the raw data needed for theological reflection.

The third type is the **Reductive Approach**. This is a method that seeks to translate Scripture into a modern idiom. In Niebuhr’s typology, this would fall under the category, “Christ above Culture.” Examples of theologians who would represent this type include

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68 Toon, *The End of Liberal Theology*, 177.

69 Remember, this is Toon’s typology. Many evangelicals have employed and still employ an “inductive” approach to doing theology, beginning with the data of Scripture and drawing conclusions from the teaching of the text. See, e.g., Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 1:17, “The true method of theology is, therefore, the inductive.” Nevertheless, as delineated by Toon, such evangelicals are classified by him under the “Deductive” type due to their starting point which is grounded in the objective revelation of Scripture.

70 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 83.

71 Toon, *The End of Liberal Theology*, 185.

Rudolf Bultmann, James Cone, Gustavo Gutierrez, and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza. Perhaps the best representative of this approach is Bultmann, whose attempt to demythologize the New Testament results in a consistent re-reading of the text in light of modern scientific advances. Bultmann poses, and then answers the question, “Can Christian proclamation today expect men and women to acknowledge the mythical world picture as true? To do so would be both pointless and impossible. It would be pointless because there is nothing specifically Christian about the mythical world picture, which is simply the world picture of a time now past that was not yet formed by scientific thinking.”

Toon notes that much of theological work since the 1960’s has followed the Reductive Approach. He includes in this type “much (but not all) of what is called political, liberationist, black, and feminist theology.”

The fourth and final type is the **Regulative Approach**. This is a method that views the Bible “as being primarily and essentially . . . narrative or story. It is the narrative of the relation of God to specific peoples—first the Israelites/Jews and then the church of Jesus Christ.” Examples of theologians who would represent this type include George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, Stanley Hauerwas, and Clark Pinnock. The proponents of this type are often identified as the “Narrative School” of theology, or the “Yale School.” Narrative theology arose within circles that had been amenable to liberal theology but had become critical of it. For Narrative theologians, religious experience as shaped by the community of faith is far more important than the individual’s experience of God.

**Donald Bloesch**—There are four types or “options” for doing theology according to Donald Bloesch. The first option is a **Theology of Restoration**. Among the theologians Bloesch includes in this type are “Benjamin Warfield, Charles Hodge, J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., John Gerstner, Norman Geisler, R.C. Sproul, and John Warwick Montgomery.” Words that Bloesch uses to describe various examples of this option

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74 Toon, *The End of Liberal Theology*, 192.

75 Ibid., 203.


77 Ibid., 253-254.
include “rationalist,” “precritical,” “fideistic.”

Bloesch observes that those who take this position are inclined to want to return to a premodern view of theology and the world. This option has similarities both to Niebuhr’s “Christ Against Culture” Model and the “Christ of Culture” Model. This option is also, generally, similar to Toon’s “Deductive” type and Lindbeck’s “Cognitive/Propositional” type.

The second option is a **Theology of Accommodation**. Among the theologians Bloesch includes in this type are Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rosemary Reuther, Thomas Altizer, David Tracy, and John Hick. This option seeks to accommodate the Christian faith to contemporary ways of thinking. “In a theology of accommodation the paramount task is to find the underlying unity between secular and religious wisdom and thereby forge a vision of God and of the world that can elicit support from all quarters.”

This option has similarities to Niebuhr’s “Christ of Culture” Model. This option also may be loosely identified with Toon’s “Inductive” and “Reductive” types and with Lindbeck’s “Experiential/Expressive” type.

The third option is a **Theology of Correlation**. Among the theologians Bloesch includes in this type are Paul Tillich, Hans Kung, Thomas Aquinas, Karl Rahner, E.J. Carnell, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Rudolf Bultmann. This option “is a mediating theology, bringing together the creative questions of the culture and the answer of Christian revelation. The answer is not derived from human existence (as in the second approach) but lacks sufficient intelligibility apart from the probing questions that arise from the existential situation in which people find themselves.”

This option has similarities to Niebuhr’s “Christ above Culture” Model. This option also may be loosely identified with Toon’s “Inductive” and “Reductive” types and with Lindbeck’s “Experiential/Expressive” and “Hybrid” types.

The fourth option is a **Theology of Confrontation**. Among the theologians Bloesch includes in this type are John Calvin, Karl Barth, Abraham Kuyper, Emil Brunner, and

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78 Ibid., 254.
79 Ibid., 257.
80 Ibid., 260.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer. “The goal in this kind of militant theology is not synthesis or correlation but the conversion of culture and philosophy to the new values and transcendent perspective of the kingdom of God. The gospel is not added to what is already known; instead, it overturns human knowledge and calls us to break with our past orientation.”

This option has similarities to Niebuhr’s “Christ Transforming Culture” Model. Some representatives of this option may be loosely identified with some of the particulars in Toon’s “Deductive” type and with some elements in Lindbeck’s “Cognitive/Propositional” type

**Summary:**

As you have seen, there are various ways of viewing theological methodology, whether the methods are described as “types” or “options.” Fundamentally, the issue is one of starting point: Do we begin with the culture or some point of human experience? Or, do we begin with something more objective? While no single model, type, or option presented above is fully satisfactory, the Reformed tradition is generally in agreement that the starting point must be objective, namely, the Word of God, especially in the inscripturated Word. The following examples will demonstrate how two prominent Reformed theologians have attempted to do theology. These examples will be followed by a proposed model for doing Reformed systematic theology.

**Examples:**

**Charles Hodge**

Charles Hodge, the most prominent of the 19th century Princeton Theological Seminary faculty, and professor of theology, suggests there are three ways of learning. A clear understanding of these distinctions is critical to arriving at a correct theological method. First, there is the *Speculative Method*, which employs “axioms” and “deductions.” This method “assumes in an a-priori manner, certain principles, and from them undertakes to determine what is and what must be.” Second, there is the *Mystical Method* which relies on feeling or emotion. “The mystical method, in its supernatural form, assumes that God by his immediate intercourse with the soul, reveals through the feelings

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81 Ibid., 264.
82 Ibid., 262.
84 Ibid.
and by means, or in the way of intuitions, divine truth independently of the outward teaching of his Word.”\(^85\) Third, there is the *Inductive Method*, a method which Hodge argues is the only proper method for doing theology.\(^86\)

In the inductive method, facts are gathered; an hypothesis is offered; the hypothesis is confirmed. Hodge argues that theology must “be guided by the same rules in the collection of facts, as govern the man of science.”\(^87\) This assumes the legitimacy of principles set forth by Scottish Common-Sense Realism, a philosophy that permeated the faculty at Princeton in the early to mid 19\(^{th}\) century. This method also relies on the Baconian model of scientific induction, i.e., gather facts and draw conclusions. Hodge embraced the inductive method. He desired to distance himself from both 18\(^{th}\) century rationalists, who employed the speculative method, and the 19\(^{th}\) century consciousness theologians, who employed the mystical method. Hodge’s methodology also employed the theology of Francis Turrettin, a product of the period of Reformed Orthodoxy. A quick comparison of Turrettin’s *Institutes* with Calvin’s *Institutes* displays the difference between Calvin’s catechetical structure and Turrettin’s scholastic orientation.

There are a number of telling and important characteristics of Hodge’s Method. First, he attempted to avoid Subjectivism. He viewed the Bible as a source of “facts” from which inductions can be made. His method assumed the objectivity of verifiable “facts” and the primacy of the intellect. There is obviously a rationalist tendency at work here. The saving grace is that Hodge was a confessional theologian, and so did not stray far from the fold—indeed, even though his epistemology that, at times, looks more like Aquinas than Calvin. His appeal to reason betrays the Reformed belief that reason is subordinate to revelation. He errs in giving to reason the power to function as *Iudicium Contradictionis*, or the right to decide whether a thing is possible, or true. As Van Til notes, “it is Hodge’s intention to appeal to the original nature of man as it came forth from the hands of its creator. But he frequently argues as though that original nature can still be found as active in the ‘common consciousness’ of

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\(^{85}\) Ibid., 1:7.

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 1:10-11.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 11.
men.” The function of reason, for the Reformed believer, must be submitted to the authority of revelation—so that we (and our logic) are judged by the Word, and not the other way around.

Second, and related to the first, his reliance on Scottish Common Sense Realism undermined the Calvinistic notion of noetic depravity. Noetic comes from the Greek word nous, or “mind.” The great failure here is the failure to distinguish between the way in which the covenant-keeper uses reason, and the way in which the covenant-breaker uses it.

Third, Hodge’s emphasis on the importance of Scripture, and his continual reference to Scripture, is commendable. This has long been acknowledged to be one of the strengths of the inductive approach. Fourth, the use of the inductive method ignored the covenantal development of Scripture. The tendency to prooftexting often ignores the redemptive-historical context of the passage in question. Of course, Hodge wrote before the ground-breaking work of Geerhardus Vos, so this criticism must be a muted one.

To summarize the work of Hodge, we note that he attempted to avoid developing any new thoughts, but desired instead to represent the historic reformed faith. He was not altogether successful at his stated task, although he did provide a strong foundation upon which the later advances of Geerhardus Vos and Cornelius Van Til could be built. For our purposes, it is important to note that his theological methodology did not consistently affirm revelation as the starting point. This is a critical point that will be highlighted again as we look closely at Van Til and his theological method.

**Cornelius Van Til** Van Til, 1895-1987, was a 20th century Presbyterian/Reformed Apologist who taught at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Although schooled at “Old Princeton,” Van Til was decidedly influenced by another significant theological tradition, that of Dutch Calvinism. Dutch Calvinism, at the turn of the century, had been shaped significantly by Abraham Kuyper, Prime Minister of the Netherlands and founder of the Free University in Amsterdam, and Herman Bavinck, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Free University. These two, through their writings, influenced Van Til, who grew up in the Christian Reformed Church, a church of Dutch origin.

Contrary to the Princeton school, which sought to establish the reasonableness of Christianity, Van Til sought to establish a theological method that made dependence on revelation primary.

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88 Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 49.
Revelation to be its starting point. Van Til did not quibble with those who wanted to argue that there are many ways to attain knowledge. Indeed, he would accept all the proposed “ways of knowing,” provided they were not substituted for the absolute priority of God’s revelation. The presuppositions of the “self-contained God” and the “self-attesting Scripture” provide the foundation for the legitimate use of all means of knowledge. In other words, in the light of revelation, all other methods of knowing assume a certain legitimacy. But it is revelation that is prior. For it is only as God knows himself exhaustively that we, created in his image, may have the possibility of knowing him in part.

For Van Til, theology is a science, although different in some ways from the natural and social sciences. “The difference between theology and other sciences does not lie in the fact that God is any less necessary for the one than for the other, but that the difference lies only in the degree of directness with which God is brought into the knowledge situation. . . . It is true that we are more directly concerned with the Bible when we deal with theology than when we deal with the other sciences, but it is not true that in the other sciences we are not at all concerned with the Bible. Even in the study of zoology or botany the Bible is involved. The Bible sheds its indispensable light on everything we as Christians study.”

In other words, theology goes directly to the Bible, while science goes to the data of nature directly and to the Bible only indirectly. But in both situations, Van Til argues that it is the revealed Word of God that is the foundation of any possibility of knowledge.

Furthermore, Van Til’s emphasis on revelation requires us to reason by implication, not purely by deduction or induction. As he puts it, “there is both an a priori and an a posteriori aspect to the method of Christian theism.” That is, it is with God-given minds, reflecting on the data contained in a God-given world, that we reason or experiment. There is no autonomous function for reason or sensory perception. Furthermore, it is with God-given minds, subordinate to God-given revelation that we hear and understand who God is and what he requires of us. All of this is critical for theological methodology. Since we do not begin with reason or any other point in the created horizon, we must affirm that our starting point lies in the affirmation, Deus Dixit, “God has spoken.” In contrast to much of

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89 Van Til, An Introduction to Systematic Theology, 14-5.

90 Ibid., 8.
modern theology, we do not embrace some current philosophical system as the vehicle by which we will do theology. Instead, we seek to hear what God has to say and then reflect on his word and his world.

As can be seen, there is quite a contrast between Van Til’s methodology and that of Charles Hodge. Rather than beginning with the reasonableness of Christianity, Van Til begins with the affirmation that apart from the God of the Bible and his revelation, “no single fact in this universe can be known truly by man.” From this starting point, Van Til seeks to engage in all theological disciplines, not merely that of Systematic Theology. In agreement with Van Til on the starting point, and with an appreciation for the strengths and weaknesses of Charles Hodge, we now turn our attention to a proposed covenantal model for Reformed systematic theology.

**A Proposed Reformed (Evangelical) Methodology:**

We should now set forth in detail, this proposed model, and examine how it works. With Van Til, we begin by presupposing the God of the Bible. That is, we do not begin by proving the God of the Bible, for the only God we could prove would not be the Triune God who has made himself known in Scripture. This belief in God is axiomatic and presuppositional. It is foundational to all that follows and there is nothing, formally, that precedes it. Indeed, we know him because he has made himself known, not because we have reasoned our way up to him. Apart from this divine self-disclosure, much that is of greatest value in our knowledge of God would remain mysterious and unknown. But this presupposition of God reminds us that we have experienced the grace of God! In other words, there is an element of truth in those systems of theology that focus on experience. We are covenantal partners with God and we do not do theology from the outside— but from within.

Reformed systematic theologians, then, begin with the affirmation that there is a God who has spoken, *Deus Dixit*, in the Scriptures and who has made himself known to us. That is, the self-attesting Word of God, revealed to us a covenant-keepers (through the work of Christ, of course), is the foundation of all theological endeavor. The Westminster Confession of Faith says, 1:4, “The authority of the holy Scripture for which it ought to be believed, and

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91 Ibid., 14.
obeyed, dependeth . . . wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.”

**Furthermore, we trust his revelation.** “Scriptural authority comes from God. In its total extent and in all its parts Scripture is the inspired, and thus also the infallible and authoritative Word of God. What Paul says, God says.”92 In this Reformed model, *Reason* is subordinated to *Scripture*. We do not begin with any a-priori concepts regarding the nature of God or his method of dealing with his creatures. Thus, we are able to avoid the problems of the Greek antinomies, such as the One and the Many, or determinism versus indeterminism. The Triune God of the Bible is not the product of philosophical speculation, a static, emotionless, unmoved-mover. Unfortunately, much of what passes for theology proper in some circles is less dependent on Scripture than it is on some preconceived philosophical notion of what God can or cannot be.93

The complete canon of Scripture may be thought of as a sphere, a story that has fullness, shape, consistency, and contour. From the beginning in Genesis to the conclusion in Revelation, there is a story of redemption that gradually unfolds in the context of a covenanted people, in the midst of their changing historical circumstances. It is this “sphere” that provides the raw material that the Reformed systematic theologian seeks to “rework” in order to gain a different kind of material, a different “story.” Thus, we complete the loop and bring to bear all the concerns represented by the various methodologies or types of theology. **God has revealed his Word to his covenanted people in historical circumstances and called upon them to live out the requirements of that Word in faithfulness and obedience to him!** Then, in light of the redemptive story, oriented to an historical frame of reference (generally), the Reformed systematic theologian seeks to develop a logical arrangement of the parts.

Our proposed method involves a number of different disciplines and questions in its effort to reflect on the overall story of redemption and to understand individual truths and their systematic formulation. The Reformed systematic theologian begins this task by the

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92 Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 123.

93 Indeed, one of the more popular theologies of the twentieth century, that written by Paul Tillich, is so dependent upon philosophically based categories that the truly personal God of the Bible becomes the impersonal “ground of being.”

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exegesis of individual portions of Scripture, a task often described as **Historical-Grammatical Exegesis**. One may refer to such a starting point as the “exegetical point,” a point in Scripture that forms the basis for additional doctrinal development. Here, we are anxious to ask and answer the following questions: What does the text actually say? What bearing does the *analogia Scripturae* have on the text? Of course, the analogy of Scripture argues that the interpretation of a difficult or obscure portion of Scripture must always be done in such a way as to be consistent with the remaining, clearer sections of Scripture. In other words, we interpret the difficult in light of the clear. Furthermore, it is essential to ask two separate, but equally important questions. What did the text mean to its original audience? How should we apply the text today in our culture?

Ultimately, that exegetical point, along with numerous other exegetical points, will be developed or incorporated into a full biblical-theological construct, a theological formulation based on the organic development of the doctrinal seed. These **Biblical-Theological Constructs** are the next step in this proposed methodology. In other words, from an initial text, additional Scripture references are consulted and developed so that the end product is a fully-developed biblical-theological construct, sensitive to the unfolding of the particular doctrine and aware of the various stages in the redemptive historical unfolding of the doctrine. Biblical Theology, as developed by the “old Princeton” theologian, Geerhardus Vos, asks fundamental questions about the redemptive-historical flow of Scripture and its internal development of doctrine. What place does “this” text have in the history of redemption? What is the import of its teaching for the unfolding drama of redemption? Does the text stand on Old Covenant ground? Does the text say anything about the fulfillment of Old Covenant promises? Other important issues would include the relationship of the text to the coming of the Kingdom of God and the rule of Christ.

For example, one might argue that a proper understanding of the doctrine of Christ would involved the Old Testament prophecies, theophanies, and types unfolded and arranged as a historical prelude to the fulfillment contained in the Gospels, and the reflections and applications contained in the New Testament epistles. The following chart demonstrates the redemptive historical flow that results in a biblical-theological construct.
Next, these biblical-theological constructs form the foundation for **Systematic Development and Formulation**. In other words, once the Reformed systematic theologian completes the work of unfolding the various biblical theological constructs, finally, he seeks to construct a **System of Theology**.

Such a system should incorporate all the previously developed biblical-theological constructs. The system takes full advantage of the light provided by any additional truths from ancillary sciences, general revelation, etc. The resulting whole is complete, and in many ways more comprehensive than the whole also has its own intrinsic limitations, being less revelation. That is, to the extent the data has true, though artificial manner, it loses some of contained as a record of God’s covenant dealings. The Reformed systematic theologian asks, how does this truth relate to all other biblical-theological truths? It is at this point that logical relationships and synthetic developments come in to focus.

The Reformed systematic theologian does all this in light of the dynamics of covenant relationship. That is, the theologian must maintain the finely tuned balance which affirms that there is both a relationship between the Creator and creature as well as great distance between the Creator and the creature. It is this covenant relationship that leads to the employment of covenant logic in the task of doing systematic theology. That is to say, there are certain problems that arise for the non-Christian that do not arise for the Christian. The apparent inability of non-Christians to validate both reason and experience are not problems for the Christian. Likewise, the thorny problem that has occupied many of the best
philosophical minds, namely, the debate over determinism and indeterminism, is not at all a problem for the Christian. Indeed, the decree of God, which renders all things certain, instead of being a problem for human responsibility, is the only foundation and guarantee of genuine human action and choice. There is a logic of the covenant for covenant-keepers, but it is a logic that submits to the supremacy of the Word of God.

Also, the Reformed systematic theologian evaluates the results of this process of theologizing in light of the principle of catholicity. In other words, the Reformed systematic theologian will seek to interpret Scripture in light of the theology of the church, as expressed in the creeds of the early church and the confessional documents of the Reformation and Post Reformation eras. This principle may be called different things. Some speak of the consensus fidelium (“the agreement of the faithful”); some appeal to the analogi fidei (“the analogy of faith”) or the regula fidei (“rule of faith”); others make use of the Vincentian Formula, “what has been believed at all times, in all places, by all people.” In any case, what is being stated here is simply the truth that, first of all, Scripture must be interpreted in light of Scripture and is consistent with itself; second of all, that “there has been a stream of traditionary teaching flowing from the Christian Church from the day of Pentecost to the present time. This tradition is so far a rule of faith that nothing contrary to it can be true. Christians do not stand isolated, each holding his own creed. They constitute one body, having one common creed. Rejecting that creed, or any of its parts, is the rejection of the fellowship of Christians, incompatible with the communion of saints, or membership in the body of Christ.”

Thus, the still-tentative results of systematic theology must yet undergo an examination through the lens of Historical Reflection. How has the Church viewed this teaching in the past? What bearing does the common consent of the church have on the text, or the proposed doctrine, and its teaching? What current challenges or reflections are important to this teaching? In other words, the lessons of history should not be lost on the Reformed systematic theologian, but should inform the positive effort at system-building. An awareness of false starts in the past, conciliar deliberations and decisions, and theological controversy will enable the theologian to provide theological constructs that are biblically-based and confessionally sound.

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94 Hodge, Systematic Theology, 1:113-4.
As theological constructs begin to take shape, a further question must be asked: how does “this” truth (the particular truth that is currently under development and construction) relate to all other truth, from whatever source? It is this question that most pointedly gives systematic theology its uniqueness, for it underscores the synthetic character that is the essence of systematic theology. Generally, various doctrinal formulations are arranged and discussed under the rubric of “theological loci,” such as the Doctrine of God, Theological Anthropology, etc.

At the end of the process, the Reformed systematic theologian must address the issue of Practical Application. Since the goal of all doctrinal teaching is to glorify God and to live in covenantal faithfulness, it is not enough to develop doctrinal formulations in abstraction. The theologian must take the final step and ask, how does the Church faithfully live this truth today in this culture? In other words, how do we apply God’s truth to the concrete situations of covenantal living in a way that is honoring and glorifying to God? This once again demonstrates the completion of the loop. We take the Norms of God’s Word, apply them to the concrete Situations of life, asking the question, how do I glorify God by the Personal Application of his word to the world in which I find myself.

Old Princeton and our Proposed Model:

The question might arise, “How does this proposed model differ from the methodology employed by Old Princeton?” Although there is a great deal of similarity between the proposed model and that employed by Old Princeton, there are some significant differences. Some of those differences are highlighted by a leading reformed theologian, James I. Packer. Packer notes there are several ways in which the work of Benjamin B. Warfield, the last of the great Old Princeton theologians and the best representative of their theological method, needs to be “augmented.”95 Three of those are of particular importance to our discussion. First, Packer notes, there is a need to rehabilitate the notion of “mystery.”96 This is a recurring note in the work of Cornelius Van Til who reminds us that we may apprehend God, but never comprehend him. When we have said all that there is to


96 Ibid., 30.
say about God and his dealings with his creatures, we must acknowledge that there is yet much more that we are incapable of understanding. God accommodates himself to us, Calvin reminds us, as a nurse who stoops low to engage in baby-talk with an infant.

Second, there is a related tendency to ignore the analogical nature of language, and assume, *univocally*, that there is an identity of words and their meanings for God and for us.\(^97\) Packer, along with Van Til, notes that our language must always be viewed as *analogical*, thus reminding us that along with the Creator/Creature relationship, there is an equally true and equally important Creator/Creature distinction (Isaiah 55:8).

Third, Packer criticizes the Old Princeton theologian’s tendency, so well-articulated by Charles Hodge, to engage in theology as an “inductive” enterprise.\(^98\) As the 20\(^{th}\) century pressed on, Old Princeton theology was modified by the “Old School” theologians associated with Westminster Theological Seminary. Induction, the hallmark of Old Princeton, was by and large replaced by the more fruitful results provided by Biblical Theology, a discipline pioneered by Geerhardus Vos and applied to the field of Systematic Theology by the late John Murray.

In addition to Packer’s three observations, we might add a fourth and final criticism. Old Princeton, in spite of the warmth and piety cultivated there, tended to separate systematic theology from its application. In this regard they were perhaps closer to Reformed Scholasticism than either to Calvin or to the Puritans. While Old Princeton provided a needed bulwark against Schleiermacher and Ritschl, it did not hear the element of truth in their *overly* experiential form of Protestantism. To the extent that Old Princeton neglected this truth, formally, even as it fostered piety, materially, to that extent it failed to provide a sufficient basis for the integration of theology into life.

On a positive note, Old Princeton did seek to engage and speak to the culture of its day. The faculty were very much aware of theological, political, social, and scientific challenges to the Christian faith. And, they engaged in these issues, boldly setting forth what they believed to be the application of the Reformed faith to their culture and to the issues of the day.

\(^97\) Ibid., 32.

\(^98\) Ibid.
The lesson of Old Princeton is an important one. Despite the desire of Charles Hodge that “no new thoughts” would originate at Princeton Seminary, and despite the protestations of Francis Patton at Princeton’s centennial that “there never was a Princeton theology,” the truth is that there were a number of innovations in Princeton Calvinism.\footnote{See discussion in Mark Noll, “The Princeton Theology,” in David F. Wells, ed., \textit{Reformed Theology in America} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 15-35.} Simply put, just as the Westminster Assembly represents, organically, a development of Calvinism beyond Geneva’s original, even so the Princeton theology is a development beyond the Calvinism of Westminster. The lesson is that the Reformed systematic theologian must, if he will be faithful to the task at hand, seek to do theology with awareness of the culture and the issues it raises. The Reformed systematic theologian must do theology from the standpoint of his or her personal faith. And, most importantly, the Reformed systematic theologian must do theology in light of the Revelation of God in his Word. To maintain, fortress-like, past orthodoxies is not necessarily to be faithful to the theological task. The task of reformation is only successful when each generation is willing to examine, afresh, the teachings of the Reformed faith, in light of the Word of God, and apply them to the issues of the day.\footnote{The idea that the work of reformation is never completed is captured in the Latin slogan, \textit{Ecclesia reformata semper est reformanda}, “the reformed church is always reforming.”}
EXCURSUS ON
THEOLOGICAL LOCI

What is the definition of *locus*? It is a “place or topic; the crucial text or place in Scripture at the basis of a particular Christian doctrine; hence the topical discussion of the doctrine, a chapter in a theological system; . . .” Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 179.

In Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans 1996 reprint, including the old *Introduction to Systematic Theology*), all prolegomena (preliminary matters) are discussed prior to beginning the systematic treatment of the “theological loci” (loci is the plural of locus). Berkhof has exerted a significant influence in American conservative reformed thought.

Thus for Berkhof, the theological loci would be as follows:

- **Prolegomena** (including Doctrine of Revelation)
- Doctrine of God
- Doctrine of Man in Relation to God
- Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ
- Doctrine of the Application of Redemption
- Doctrine of the Church and the Means of Grace
- Doctrine of the Last Things

Among contemporary representative Reformed theologians, the theological loci are as follows:

**Wayne Grudem:** *Systematic Theology*
- Doctrine of the Word of God
- Doctrine of God
- Doctrine of Man
- Doctrines of Christ and the Holy Spirit
- Doctrine of the Application of Redemption
- Doctrine of the Church
- Doctrine of the Future

**Morton Smith,** *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols.
- Prolegomena
- Theology
- Anthropology
- Christology
- Soteriology
- Ecclesiology
- Eschatology
  - The Self-Disclosure of God
  - The Triune God
  - The Creation
  - Man
  - Jesus Christ
  - The Work of the Holy Spirit
  - God's Gracious Election
  - The Community of Jesus Christ
  - The **Kingdom of God** as the Future of the World

For older reformed theologians, the theological loci are as follows:

**Charles Hodge**, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols.
  - **Introduction** (Prolegomena)
  - Theology Proper
  - Anthropology
  - Soteriology
  - Eschatology

  - Introduction
  - Bibliology
  - Theology (proper)
  - Anthropology
  - Christology
  - Soteriology
  - Eschatology

Some other contemporary divisions of the theological loci:

**McGrath**, *Christian Theology*
  - Doctrine of **God**
  - Doctrine of the **Trinity**
  - Doctrine of the **Person of Christ**
  - **Faith and History**
  - Doctrine of **Salvation**
  - Doctrines of **Human Nature, Sin, Grace**
  - Doctrine of the **Church**
  - **Christianity and the World Religions**
  - **Last Things**

**Gore**, *Outline of Systematic Theology*
  - Introduction to Theology
  - Doctrine of **Revelation**
  - Doctrine of **God**
  - Theological **Anthropology**
  - Doctrine of **Christ**
  - Doctrine of the **Holy Spirit**
OTHER METHODS OF ARRANGING
SYSTEMS OF THEOLOGY
(see Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 73ff)

SCHOLASTIC METHODOLOGIES (Cunningham, Historical Theology, I, 413ff and Tillich, History of Christian Thought, I, 134ff)
- **Abelard**, *Sic et Non (Yes and No)*  dialectical method*
- **Lombard**, *Libri Quatuor Sententiarum (Four Books of Sentences)*
  - God (attributes, Trinity)
  - Creation (angels, men)
  - Christ (person and work of Christ, standard of moral duty)
- **Sacraments and Government of the Church**
- **Aquinas**, *Summa Theologiae (Compendium of Theology)*
  - **Nature of Theology**
  - God and His Attributes (and moral theology)
  - Trinity (person and work of Christ, sacraments, government of the Church)

*(Examples of Dialectics can be: nature/grace  reason/authority  experience/intuition)*

**TRINITARIAN METHOD** (Apostle’s Creed): Calvin, Zwingli
- God as Creator
- God as Redeemer
- God as Sanctifier +
- Church and Sacraments

**COVENANTAL METHOD** (EMPLOYED BY Cocceius, James H. Thornwell)
- God and Moral Government in its essential principles
- Moral Government as modified by the Covenant of Works
- Moral Government as modified by the Covenant of Grace

**CHRISTOLOGICAL METHOD**: H.B. Smith (American New School Presbyterian)
- Antecedents of Redemption,
- Redemption
- Consequents of Redemption

**SYNTHETIC METHOD**: Another way of describing the approach that uses the theological loci as a method of arrangement.