

THE DIVINE  
AUTHENTICITY  
OF SCRIPTURE

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RETRIEVING AN EVANGELICAL HERITAGE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to contribute to discussions about the nature and function of Scripture in evangelical Christianity.<sup>1</sup> I shall argue that, in formulating our doctrine of Scripture, we need to review both our vocabulary and our theology, in order to clarify precisely what we mean when we speak about Scripture as the Word of God. I shall also argue that the way Scripture functions in the church ought to be revisited, first, by analysing the relationship between Scripture, confessional statements and tradition, and second, by a reassessment of how Scripture is to be preached.

Christian theologians must give attention to many difficult issues, but it seems to me that none is more vital than the doctrine of Scripture. I say this because what we believe about Scripture determines what we believe about everything else. If we take the view that the Scriptures are God-given, then our views on every other subject will be determined with reference to Scripture. It stands to reason that if God has spoken and if what he said has been written down under the supervisory action of the Holy Spirit, then God speaking in

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1. Sometimes I shall use the expressions 'Scripture' and 'the Scriptures' in what follows, instead of the word 'Bible' (which simply means 'book'). But when I use these expressions I am referring to the sixty-six books gathered in the Christian Bible.

and through the Scriptures becomes the final authority for decision-making and the ultimate arbiter of truth. If, on the other hand, we believe that the Scriptures are simply an interesting record of what Jews and Christians have believed over the centuries but that these beliefs are not binding upon believers today, then we may reach quite different decisions in respect of doctrine, ethics and the life of faith.

Since the 1850s, the church has been deeply affected by types of theology that advocate this latter view of Scripture. The dramatic changes in philosophy and theology in the years since the Enlightenment have brought the doctrine of Scripture into sharp relief. There is a sense in which one of the early church Fathers, together with one of the sixteenth-century magisterial Reformers and, for example, a seventeenth-century Scottish minister, might happily have agreed on the doctrine of Scripture. That harmony and unity has all been changed by the Enlightenment, the birth of liberal theology,<sup>2</sup> the philosophical influence of existentialism and, even more so, by the recent advent of such views as postmodernism and relativism.

These movements in theology have also affected the evangelical movement. Until fairly recently, one of the clearest identifying marks of an evangelical was a 'high' view of Scripture as the Word of God. Unfortunately, it is no longer possible to take it for granted that those who call themselves 'evangelical' will hold to the same position on Scripture held by those who were described in this way even in the 1960s. Indeed, the very word 'evangelical' has lost something of its clarity and is used to refer to a range of positions. Francis Schaeffer's final book was called *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, where he argued that evangelicals had abandoned a truly evangelical view of the Bible and were giving way to other views.<sup>3</sup> In that book, Schaeffer said that an

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2. Given that certain theological terms have been used in different ways, it is important to define usage. I use the term 'liberal theology' to refer to the school of thought associated with Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Harnack, Hermann and others, which had substantially run its course by the end of the Second World War. I use the term 'neo-orthodoxy' to refer to the school of thought associated with Karl Barth, including those who have been profoundly influenced by Barth while not agreeing with him on every point. I use the term 'conservative evangelicalism' to refer to those whose position is largely defined by adherence to the set of documents known as "The Fundamentals", which I shall deal with in chapter 4.
  3. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, vol. 4: *A Christian View of The Church* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1982), pp. 301–405.

orthodox view of the Bible is the ‘Watershed of the Evangelical World’. In other words, it is a defining position, such that our view of Scripture determines whether or not we are truly evangelical. It seems to me that he was correct in this assessment.

As an evangelical, there have been many influences on my own understanding of Scripture. Naturally, the first influences were my family and church. Next was my involvement with two key organizations within the British evangelical movement, namely Scripture Union and the Inter-Varsity Fellowship.<sup>4</sup> From those earliest days, I was taught that the Bible was the Word of God and that the voice of God speaking by his Spirit through his Word is the final authority on all matters. I have never seriously questioned that commitment and do not do so today. Nevertheless, I have gradually become concerned that some ways of defining and using Scripture within evangelicalism are open to serious criticism and could do us more harm than good if we continue to maintain them in their present form. Through a failure to understand the differences between evangelicalism and fundamentalism, through a failure to engage with biblical scholarship, and sometimes through sheer obscurantist and anti-intellectual approaches, evangelicals have often damaged rather than helped the case for a high view of Scripture. We do not properly state and defend the evangelical doctrine of Scripture by retreating into an untenable ghetto mentality and ignoring genuine matters of concern. Rather, we must engage with those who take a different position and we must do so graciously. In what follows, I shall seek to address these issues and advocate a doctrine of Scripture that is truly evangelical but that avoids some of the problems and challenges rightly laid at our door by those who do not share our position.

When I first began to write this book, I had in mind a rather different project than the one that has unfolded. At the time, I was teaching a course on the doctrine of Scripture and was struggling to find a suitable textbook to cover the whole scope of the module. It seemed to me that I might usefully write such a textbook. As I studied the subject, however, I came to the conclusion that there was a more pressing issue, namely the need for me as an evangelical to clarify my own understanding of the doctrine of Scripture and to make a contribution to the debate among evangelicals regarding its significance for today. With these concerns in mind, I propose to offer some suggestions regarding the nature and use of Scripture that I hope will be theologically productive and ecclesiastically

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4. Now the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship.

useful. My proposal essentially has four parts, which will be divided up as follows.

### **The *locus* of Scripture reconsidered**

First, I shall reconsider the place of Scripture in the theological *corpus*. For a long time now, in my own Reformed tradition, it has been taken for granted that Scripture comes at the beginning of the theological system, as it does in the Westminster Confession of Faith, where the doctrine of Scripture is chapter 1. A study of this matter has led me to conclude that this is a mistake that needs to be corrected. I shall argue that the doctrine of Scripture should be relocated, in order to emphasize that it is an aspect of God's self-revelation. Hence the doctrine of Scripture will be moved to its true theological *locus* within the doctrine of God, more precisely as an aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit. Although most theologians have spoken about the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to Scripture, there has been insufficient emphasis upon this theme.

### **The vocabulary of Scripture reconsidered**

Second, I shall revisit the vocabulary of the doctrine. Words like 'inspiration' and 'illumination' have come to mean rather different things since they were first used in theological discourse and there is a question as to whether 'inspiration' was ever a good rendering of what Paul is saying in 2 Timothy 3:16. I shall argue that we should cease to use the word 'inspiration', both on exegetical grounds and because of the confusion that arises through modern English usage of the word, opting instead for 'divine spiration'. Similarly, I shall argue that we should supplement the words 'illumination' and 'perspicuity' with 'recognition' and 'comprehension', so as to underline the work of the Holy Spirit in enabling human beings both to identify the Scriptures as God's Word and to gain understanding of them.

### **The doctrine of Scripture reconsidered**

Third, I shall address the important differences between two ways in which evangelicals have traditionally sought to define their doctrine of Scripture, the 'inerrantist' position on the one hand and the 'infallibilist' position on the

other. This being a major part of my proposal, it will occupy several chapters. I shall argue that we should cease to use the word ‘inerrancy’ in relation to our doctrine of Scripture, using instead the word ‘infallibility’. I shall demonstrate that the debate in the USA between inerrantists and errantists represents a false dichotomy, which can be avoided by following several leading Reformed theologians in their advocacy of the word ‘infallibility’. In this context, I shall argue that if it was necessary for evangelicals in response to liberal theology to emphasize the divine speaking, it is time to redress the balance by saying more about the human authors of Scripture. I shall further demonstrate that, far from weakening an evangelical doctrine of Scripture, this move actually strengthens it.

### **The use of Scripture in the church reconsidered**

Fourth, believing as I do that all theology is ‘church’ theology, I shall address two ecclesial issues. First, I shall consider the relationship between Scripture and our creeds and confessions. This will include some discussion of the need for an evangelical theology of tradition. Then, finally, I shall deal with the church’s preaching of Scripture. One of the worst consequences of the classical liberal theology has been that the academy and the church have been separated. If we as evangelicals believe that the Bible is the Word of God, then we should not discuss its nature and significance without dealing with the matter of how we open up the Scriptures in the context of the life of the church.

From this brief outline, it should be clear that at least two things are not attempted in this book. First, there will be no attempt to delve deeply into issues of canonicity, although I do believe that our understanding of ‘divine spiration’ enables us to say some useful things about the final form of the text. The subject of canonicity, however, is too complex to be dealt with in passing and, in any case, a number of important books address the subject.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this book, I accept the canonical decisions of the church

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5. See e.g. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origins, Development and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987); F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988); L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders (eds.), *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002); and L. M. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission and Authority* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007).



and work with the canon as we have received it. Second, I do not attempt any sustained study of hermeneutical issues, except briefly in the context of chapter 7, on preaching Scripture. In my personal engagement with Scripture and in my preaching of Scripture, however, I am indebted to a number of books written on this subject.<sup>6</sup>

One further comment is perhaps necessary before I enter the substance of the argument. Among evangelicals in the USA, the word 'inerrancy' has become something of a sacred talisman and there is a deep sensitivity in respect of any questioning of this word. Indeed, one might reasonably expect something of a firestorm directed against any challenge to its continued usage. I would plead with my fellow evangelicals to listen carefully to the argument and to consider it on its merits rather than adopting a knee-jerk, defensive position. We might usefully recall that, at the turn of the twentieth century, the great Reformed theologians of the day were B. B. Warfield, James Orr and Abraham Kuyper. These men took different positions on the doctrine of Scripture (Warfield was an inerrantist, while Orr and Kuyper were infallibilists), but, as we shall see later, there was a recognition that their differences on the doctrine of Scripture although significant, were not sufficient to damage their fellowship in Christ. There has been a tendency in more recent days towards a less tolerant position, particularly in the American context, such that anyone who dares to challenge the use of the word 'inerrancy' is regarded as heading down the 'slippery slope' towards liberal theology. This is unfortunate and is symptomatic of the fact that evangelicals have often failed to observe the highest standards in theological debate and dialogue. My hope is that this proposal will provoke a constructive and helpful discussion within the fellowship of the evangelical community.

Finally, there are some acknowledgments I ought to make. First, I would like to express my thanks to the various bodies that cooperated to provide me with a four-month sabbatical, which enabled me to undertake some of the initial groundwork for this book. Thanks to the UHI Millennium Institute for

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6. See e.g. A. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992); Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation, Past and Present* (Leicester: IVP, 1996); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998); Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006); Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994); and Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

providing funding for three months of that sabbatical and to my own college, the Highland Theological College, for providing me with additional leave for a further month. I am grateful to the University of Aberdeen, where I hold an honorary Professorship in Reformed Doctrine, for providing me with an office for the first three months of the sabbatical and to John Webster who not only invited me to attend his weekly postgraduate seminar in systematic theology (which was a master class in how to run a seminar) but also discussed with me some of the themes on which I was working. It was an additional privilege to be able to discuss this work with Howard Marshall, one of my former teachers, whose own work on the doctrine of Scripture has been so helpful to me. Thanks also to Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, where I spent the fourth month of the sabbatical. As always, the seminary provided me with a house and an office and the gracious southern hospitality I have come to appreciate so much during my visits there over the years as an Adjunct Professor.

It is a great privilege to work in a context where academic life is set in the context of a worshipping community and where the environment is both spiritually supportive and intellectually stimulating. I am grateful for my academic colleagues who share this environment with me: Hector Morrison, Jamie Grant, Mike Bird, Innes Visagie, Nick Needham and Rob Shillaker, with whom I have discussed various aspects of this work over the past several years. I am also grateful for specific comments on this book. No work of this nature would be possible without the help of libraries and librarians, so thanks to Martin Cameron, our librarian at Highland Theological College, for his unfailing support and help in the writing of the book. He always seemed to be able to get anything I needed almost as soon as I asked for it. Thanks also to the library staff at Reformed Theological Seminary, especially Ken Elliott and John McCarty (Mac), whose help and kindness are much appreciated.

A special word of thanks to my personal assistant, Fiona Cameron, who has not only helped directly in a variety of ways but has also, when necessary, acted as a very firm doorkeeper, thus allowing me to have peace and quiet to work.

Thanks also to Howard Marshall, Paul Wells, Stephen Williams, John Webster and Alan Carter for reading sections of this book for me and for their most helpful comments. The book is in much better shape than it would otherwise have been!

I would also like to pay tribute to my family. I met my wife June in the Scripture Union group at Uddingston Grammar School in 1971 and we have been married now for over thirty years. She has been my best friend for most of my life and has lovingly and generously put up with a husband whose lifestyle has often involved working at college from early in the morning until

late into the night and who is often away for weeks at a time. Her love and support mean more than I can say. Finally, I would like to mention my three sons, Scott, David and Christopher, to whom this book is dedicated, in the hope that they will continue to build their lives on the truth that God has revealed to us by his Spirit in his Word.

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## 2. RECONSTRUCTING THE DOCTRINE

### Introduction

The argument of this chapter is that the traditional evangelical doctrine of Scripture requires some reconstruction. First, I shall argue that any understanding of Scripture must be set in the context of God's self-revelation. Second, I shall argue that the doctrine of Scripture must be viewed as an aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit and that this pneumatological focus requires us to relocate the doctrine of Scripture within the theological *corpus*. Third, I shall argue that, in order most adequately to express this pneumatological approach and to take account of certain linguistic changes, we must recast the vocabulary of the doctrine of Scripture.

### Revelation

Everything to be said in this book is based on the conviction that the God who has eternally existed in Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit has chosen to make himself known to the human beings he created in his own image. The knowledge of God that comes through this self-revelation is not merely an intellectual conviction that such a God exists but is rather a knowledge that leads to life and salvation, as we discover God's love and grace made known

to us in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and heavenly session of his eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Without God's self-revelation, we could know nothing of him.

Throughout most of Christian history, it was axiomatic that Christian theology is only possible because God has chosen to reveal himself. As John Calvin put it, 'the pious mind does not dream up for itself any god it pleases, but contemplates the one and only true God. And it does not attach to him whatever it pleases, but is content to hold him to be as he manifests himself . . .'.<sup>1</sup> This belief in God's self-revelation, taken for granted in earlier centuries, has become in modern times one of the most controverted issues in theology. There can be little doubt that it is also one of the most vital issues. As G. C. Berkouwer says, 'There is no more significant question in the whole of theology and in the whole of human life than that of the nature and reality of revelation.'<sup>2</sup> In order to understand the departure from orthodoxy that took place through the rise and ultimate dominance of classical liberal theology, we must pause and emphasize the key place revelation plays in Christian theology, noting the two constituent types of revelation, 'general revelation' and 'special revelation'. Calvin did not use these terms but wrote that there is a twofold knowledge of God: 'First, as much in the fashioning of the universe as in the general teaching of Scripture the Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator. Then in the face of Christ [cf. 2 Cor. 4:6] he shows himself the Redeemer.'<sup>3</sup>

'General revelation' is the term used to describe those ways in which God reveals himself to all humanity without exception, for example, in creation, in conscience and in history. In speaking of general revelation, however, it is important to make two things clear. First, and rather obviously, general revelation is revelation. That is to say, it is not to be confused with any kind of natural knowledge, obtainable by human reason apart from God's self-revelation. Hence I argue that the term 'natural revelation' is unhelpful, since it can so easily be confused with 'natural theology'. Second, as John Calvin argued (see below), general revelation is sufficient to render us without excuse before God but not sufficient to bring us to salvation. This was well summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith, which says, 'Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 1.2.2.
2. G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 17.
3. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.2.1.



knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation.<sup>4</sup> We can press this further, as Paul does in Romans 1, pointing out that every human being has direct and innate knowledge of God but that sinful human beings deliberately suppress that knowledge. In other words, at the very core of our being, having been made in the image of God, we know that there is a God. Calvin put it like this, ‘There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretence of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty.’<sup>5</sup> This knowledge does not bring us salvation but it does mean that no-one will be able to say on the Day of Judgment, ‘I did not know that there was a God.’

‘Special revelation’ is the term used to describe those ways in which God makes himself known more directly and more personally. We can identify several forms of special revelation: Jesus Christ (the incarnate Word), Scripture (the written Word) and preaching (the spoken Word). It should also be noted that this special revelation is necessary even for a proper understanding of general revelation. Calvin said that God’s Word is necessary because human beings, due to sin, are blind to the light of God given to them in their ‘sense of divinity’ and in creation.<sup>6</sup> He uses a much-discussed simile to explain this need for Scripture:

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognise it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.<sup>7</sup>

F. L. Battles, the editor of the 1977 Westminster edition of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, directs us to various discussions of this simile in Calvin studies.<sup>8</sup>

Although each aspect of God’s special revelation is important, the revelation that takes place in and through Christ is the heart and centre of God’s

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4. J. W. Ross (ed.), *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian, 1986), ch. 1, sect. 1.

5. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.3.1.

6. *Ibid.* 1.6.1.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.* p. 70, n. 1.

self-revelation. As the writer to the Hebrews says, ‘Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world’ (1:1–2). Both the written Word and the preached Word testify to Christ, the incarnate Word. The fact that the written Word testifies to him was affirmed by Christ himself, when he told some Jews, ‘You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life’ (John 5:39–40). It is also evident in the post-resurrection narrative of the disciples on the way to Emmaus: ‘And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself’ (Luke 24:27). The preached Word also testifies to Christ, since preaching is the declaration of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Since God supremely reveals himself in and through his Son, who is himself God, all other special revelation must stand in the proper relationship to this self-revelation.

As I indicated at the beginning, however, we must not make the mistake of imagining that revelation is simply the communication of information, as if God used prophets and apostles to communicate certain facts that human beings need to know. Rather, we must view revelation as part of the overall plan and purpose of God whereby he acts to save his people. As John Webster writes, ‘revelation is the self-presentation of the triune God, the free work of sovereign mercy in which God wills, establishes and perfects saving fellowship with himself in which humankind comes to know, love and fear him above all things’.<sup>9</sup> Notice particularly Webster’s emphasis on revelation as ‘the establishment of *saving fellowship*. Revelation is purposive. Its end is not simply divine self-display but the overcoming of human opposition, alienation and pride, and their replacement by knowledge, love and fear of God. In short: revelation is reconciliation.’<sup>10</sup>

Revelation, then, ‘is not so much an action in which God informs us of other acts of his through which we are reconciled to him; rather, revelation is a way of indicating the communicative force of God’s saving, fellowship-creating presence. God is present as saviour, and so communicatively present.’<sup>11</sup>

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9. John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 13.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

This is important because it means that revelation is ‘not simply the bridging of a noetic divide (though it includes that) but is reconciliation, salvation and therefore fellowship. The idiom of revelation is as much moral and relational as it is cognitional.’<sup>12</sup> In affirming this broadening of the term ‘revelation’ by Webster, I am not thereby accepting that revelation is pure ‘event’ and that it occurs only in the context of an existential encounter between the individual and God. It is possible to understand revelation in this wider sense, while still affirming that God has revealed himself in history and that the record of this revelation in history has been written down for us.

When we attempt to define our doctrine of Scripture, then, we must do so in the context of this self-revelation of God. But in what does this self-revelation consist? Historically, God’s self-revelation originates in the very beginning, when he speaks to our first parents, whom he made in his own image. After the fall, God’s self-revelation is directed towards an elect people from whom would ultimately come the Messiah. Then, with the incarnation, God’s self-revelation comes to believers in Christ and in the witness to him. Theologically, God’s self-revelation is centred upon Jesus Christ, who is himself God incarnate and in whom therefore all the fulness of the godhead lives in bodily form.

In the context of describing this self-revelation of God, we may say that the Scriptures are the record of the revelation that God has given to his church, often written down long after the revelatory events they describe but used of God to bring that revelation afresh to every generation. The Scriptures are vital to the life of the church because they are God’s Word to us. They have come into existence supernaturally, through a dual authorship of God and human writers and are entirely trustworthy. The Scriptures do not deceive us and infallibly achieve the purposes for which God has given them.

### **The work of the Holy Spirit**

If the Holy Spirit was once regarded as the ‘forgotten’ person of the Trinity, that is certainly no longer the case. This is illustrated by the dramatic rise of Pentecostalism out of the American ‘holiness movement’, with its early beginnings in the ‘Azusa Street’ experience of 1906, when the Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission was born. Just over fifty years later, Henry Van Dusen could

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12. Ibid.

describe Pentecostalism as the ‘Third Force’ in Christendom alongside Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, the explosion of interest in the charismatic renewal, not least in mainstream denominations, extended the discussion of the person and work of the Holy Spirit even further. Hundreds of popular books have been published since the 1970s, and the flow continues.

In the academy, however, there has been relatively little work done on the doctrine of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, although some monographs have been published.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the recent welcome resurgence of interest in trinitarian theology has produced some stimulating studies.<sup>15</sup> Overall, however, there has been a dearth of interest in the subject and we should perhaps not be surprised by this. It is undoubtedly the case that Western rationalism and secularism have affected Christian theology more than we would normally care to admit. Why is it that Western theology has tended to say so little about the Holy Spirit and about the supernatural? It is surely because many theologians have been somewhat embarrassed by such language and have been determined to demonstrate that their theological views are rational and modern, based upon sound philosophical foundations, believing that these standards are somewhat threatened by an appeal to the supernatural! They recognize that the New Testament uses supernatural concepts and language, but either they see no need to dwell on these matters or, like Bultmann, they argue that belief in a supernatural world of spirits and evil powers and so on is quite unacceptable in the modern world and that the

13. Henry Van Dusen, ‘The Third Force in Christendom’, *Life* 44 (9 June 1958), pp. 113–121.
14. See e.g. Alasdair I. C. Heron, *The Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit in the Bible, the History of Christian Thought, and Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Leicester: IVP, 1996); Donald G. Bloesch, *The Holy Spirit: Works and Gifts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000); Gary D. Badcock, *Light of Truth and Fire of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); and Graham Cole, *Engaging with the Holy Spirit* (Nottingham: Apollon, 2007).
15. See e.g. Thomas G. Weinandy, *The Father’s Spirit of Sonship* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995); Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996); Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2003); Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); and Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

Scriptures must be ‘demythologized’.<sup>16</sup> Such beliefs are attributed to the primitive nature of first-century society and the superstitious character of the people who lived at that time. With the advance of science and technology, they say, we know better. In short, most modern theologians have accepted the Enlightenment consensus, which I shall discuss in the next chapter, arguing that real knowledge must be obtained from rational reflection upon the information received through sense perception. This world is all there is. In such an environment, it is no wonder that there is little talk in the academy of the Holy Spirit and his work.

It can also be argued with some cogency that this rationalist and secularist world view has affected those who *do* affirm the Scriptures, including what they say about the supernatural, the Holy Spirit, miracles, evil spirits, Satan and so on. There are probably two reasons for this somewhat negative approach to the supernatural and to spiritual powers. First, some evangelicals in the northern hemisphere have been so determined to present themselves within the academy as intellectuals whose theology is rational, that the respect of their academic peers has become more important to them than their self-designation as evangelicals. Second, many evangelicals in the northern hemisphere, perhaps especially in my own Reformed tradition, have articulated their position in contradistinction to Pentecostalism and the charismatic movements and so have been wary of saying too much about the Holy Spirit lest they be regarded as having abandoned their cessationist position.

In Africa, Asia and much of the southern hemisphere, however, theologians take a quite different approach. Spirits, supernatural powers, exorcism and so on are part of the everyday life of the church. Indeed, the issues that confront Christianity in those places where it is a fast-growing religion are remarkably like the issues faced by the early Christians, as described in the New Testament. Is it a coincidence that the churches in the northern hemisphere are moribund, whereas the churches in the southern hemisphere are growing and are now beginning to exercise leadership in the world church? As Andrew Walls has said for many years, the centre of Christianity and Christian leadership is now very firmly in the southern hemisphere.<sup>17</sup> This

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16. See Bultmann’s essay on this subject together with a series of essays in which scholars debate with Bultmann, in Hans-Werner Bartsch, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (London: SPCK, 1972).

17. See Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996); and Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*

has been strikingly demonstrated in the recent controversies within the Anglican communion on the subject of the ordination of homosexual clergy. It is the African and other southern hemisphere bishops who are driving a biblical agenda in opposition to the pro-homosexual agenda of the northern liberal clergy, especially in North America. The fact that many episcopal churches in the USA have now rejected the oversight of their diocesan bishops and sought oversight from Nigerian and Ugandan bishops is an extraordinary example of how leadership within the Anglican communion is moving south. Attempts by liberal intellectuals in the northern hemisphere to dismiss the theologians from these developing southern hemisphere nations as primitive and uneducated sound increasingly hollow. The churches in the northern hemisphere must listen to the plea from our brothers and sisters in Africa, Asia and South America that we return to basics, recover the essence of authentic Christianity and affirm the supernatural without shame or apology.

The argument of this chapter is that such a recovery of authentic Christianity, and particularly a renewed emphasis on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, will affect our doctrine of Scripture. Clearly, if a supernatural being (God) has chosen to reveal himself to humanity by his Spirit through his Word (living, written and preached), then we cannot continue to take seriously any doctrine of Scripture that has been constructed in order to conform to the dictates of modernity. In this chapter, I shall attempt to reconstruct the doctrine of Scripture in the light of our doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

Stanley Grenz advocated this pneumatological approach to the doctrine of Scripture in his *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*.<sup>18</sup> He said that ‘our bibliography must revision the link between the Holy Spirit and Scripture’ on the grounds that ‘the purpose of Scripture is instrumental to the work of the Spirit’.<sup>19</sup> He argued that, although Reformed theology in its confessional documents advocated a pneumatological approach to Scripture, this had often been neglected or forgotten, sometimes due to the adoption of a particular theological method. ‘Consequently, the reestablishment of the

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Footnote 17 (*continues*)

(Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002). Also a recent volume in the same vein: Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

18. Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993).

19. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

integral link between Spirit and Scripture must begin methodologically through the reorientation of the doctrine of Scripture under the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

I begin that process now by considering the place we give to Scripture in our systematic theology, arguing that it must be situated in the context of the knowledge of God that comes by revelation through the Holy Spirit. Thus I seek to relocate the doctrine within the theological *corpus*, from where it has more recently been placed in Reformed theology, to be subsumed under the doctrine of God.

### *Historical survey*

In the earliest creeds and confessional statements of the Christian church, Scripture was either not mentioned at all, or came towards the end of the statement. We see this if we consider the ‘Ecumenical Symbols’, being the Apostles’ Creed, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Athanasian Creed, together with a statement of equal importance, the Chalcedonian Definition.

There is no mention of Scripture in the Apostles’ Creed, although the Scriptures provide the basic teaching the Creed affirms. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed makes only one reference to Scripture, being a quotation from 1 Corinthians 15:4, affirming that Christ ‘rose again, according to the Scriptures’. Once again, Scripture provides the content of faith, although worshippers were not required to affirm belief in any particular doctrine of Scripture. Similarly, the Athanasian Creed focuses exclusively on the Trinity and on Christology, with no mention of Scripture. The Chalcedonian Definition, given its context, is concerned primarily with Christology. The fact that Jesus Christ was both God and man having been established at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 was convened largely to explain how this was possible, concluding that Christ was one person with two natures. Once again, there is no doctrine of Scripture to be affirmed in its tenets, but it does contain a statement at the end concerning the basis for its teaching: ‘as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us’.<sup>21</sup>

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20. Ibid., p. 114.

21. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 1: *The History of the Creeds* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), pp. 62–63.



The church accepted no significant creedal or confessional statement from this early period until the sixteenth century.<sup>22</sup> The period in between produced various doctrinal statements and many a theologian produced his *summa*, but there was no universally accepted symbol, creed or confession. The doctrinal statements produced during this period, however, especially from the thirteenth century onwards, placed the doctrine of Scripture under ‘prolegomena’, rather than in the core doctrinal statement itself. As Richard Muller has said, ‘The doctrine of Scripture was, after all, not an independent *locus* or *quaestio* in the theological system until the second half of the sixteenth century, and even then it remained closely linked to its systematic place of origin, the prolegomena.’<sup>23</sup>

The earliest Protestant confessional statement, the Lutheran Augsburg Confession of 1530, begins its outline of Christian theology with the doctrine of God, and there is no statement on Scripture. This was very much in line with the Ecumenical Creeds and with the medieval pattern. Similarly, the Scots Confession of 1560 begins with the doctrine of God. It does contain a short statement on Scripture, although not until chapter 19. The Belgic Confession of 1561 also begins with a chapter on God but then immediately launches into several detailed chapters on the doctrine of Scripture. The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England of 1571 begins with five chapters on God and only then turns to deal with Scripture.

If, however, we look at some of the other confessional statements of the period we see a different pattern beginning to emerge, as more statements were produced.<sup>24</sup> A brief examination of some of the Reformation and post-Reformation confessional statements helps to demonstrate the move.<sup>25</sup>

The Genevan Confession of 1536 was a twenty-one-article confession John Calvin appended to the Catechism of Geneva, which ‘was to be binding upon all the citizens of Geneva – probably ‘the first instance of a formal pledge to a symbolical book in the history of the Reformed Church’.<sup>26</sup> The first article

22. With the possible exception of the creed of the Sixth Ecumenical Council against the Monothelites. See Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2 of *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), p. 72.

23. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), p. 3.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

25. For a more detailed analysis of these confessional statements see *ibid.*, pp. 69–86.

26. Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 2, p. 468.



of the confession is not on God but on Scripture. It is a very brief, non-technical statement, completely lacking in the detail to be seen in later statements, but its position at the beginning of the confession was instrumental in influencing other, later statements. For example, the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, written by Heinrich Bullinger, begins with a long chapter on the Scriptures as the Word of God, followed by a chapter on interpreting Scripture. Only then does it turn to speak of God. This trend is intensified when we come to the Irish Articles of 1615. This confession begins with six articles on Scripture, then includes a chapter affirming the Ecumenical Creeds, and only in article 7 does it turn to speak of God. Finally, the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 begins with a long chapter on the doctrine of Scripture, a chapter similar in form and content to that of the Irish Articles.

There were many differences between the Reformers and the Protestant orthodox in their interpretation of Scripture and in the place they gave to the *locus* of Scripture. Muller examines these in significant detail.<sup>27</sup> He notes that there is continuity and discontinuity between the medieval view and that of the Reformers and again between that of the Reformers and that of the Protestant orthodox. In particular,

we are in a position to recognize both the continuity of the scholastic view of Scripture as *principium* of theology from the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries and the discontinuity in the approach to Scripture between the late Middle Ages and the Reformation. This discontinuity, moreover, can be seen at the root of both the Reformers' kerygmatic appeal to *sola Scriptura* and the Protestant orthodox theologians' massive development of a distinctively Protestant *locus de Scriptura* separate from the prolegomena (where the medieval doctors had placed it) and far more elaborate than the discussions of Scripture available to the orthodox in medieval systems.<sup>28</sup>

In the Reformation confessions and catechisms, then, there was a gradual move towards putting the doctrine of Scripture at the beginning, with everything thereafter being deduced from that first premise. Logically, this makes perfect sense. The Reformers and those who followed in their tradition wanted to emphasize that all of their teaching was drawn from Scripture; hence they began with a strong statement on the authority, sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture before dealing with any other doctrine. In this way, they were underlining the

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27. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, pp. 96–117.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

fact that when they came to speak about God, salvation, the church or any other matter, everything they said would be drawn from the Scripture principle. Although making sense 'logically', however, this positioning of the doctrine of Scripture creates many problems when viewed 'theologically'. In fact, this positioning of Scripture at the beginning of the theological system takes the primary focus away from God.

Within my own Reformed tradition, placing Scripture as the first *locus* in our theology, after the pattern of the Westminster Confession of Faith, has long been generally accepted as the basic methodology for systematic theology. Interestingly, however, in the twentieth century there was a curious anomaly. Most Reformed seminaries in the USA and many evangelical theological colleges elsewhere used as a standard text for systematic theology Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. The problem was that Berkhof had written an earlier volume entitled *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* in which he dealt with matters of prolegomena, including the nature, history, method and *principia* of dogmatics, not least the doctrines of revelation and inspiration. This volume, however, intended by Berkhof to be read before turning to his *Systematic Theology*, gradually went out of print and so generations of theological students read only the *Systematic Theology*, which had no chapter on the doctrine of Scripture. This meant that in practice they began with the doctrine of God, while theologically they held to a different view! Only recently has the *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* been republished and bound with the *Systematic Theology* into one volume.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Scripture and the Holy Spirit***

If we accept that the scholastic approach to Scripture, as epitomized by the Westminster Confession of Faith, made sense logically but not theologically, where should we place the doctrine of Scripture in our theological formulations?

When the apostle Peter addressed himself specifically to the question of the origins of Scripture, his answer focused on the Holy Spirit. He wrote, 'knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Pet. 1:20–21). Peter is saying here that the writers of the Bible did not simply sit down one day and decide to write something for posterity. Rather, they were

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29. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

under the constraint of the Holy Spirit. They could do no other! In other words, Peter is here testifying to the divine origin of the Bible in the work of God the Holy Spirit. As we shall see later, the work of the Holy Spirit is also the key both to recognizing Scripture *as* Scripture and also to understanding its meaning and significance. The writing of Scripture, then, ought to be seen as an aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit, and this ought to be reflected in the place Scripture is given in our theological formulations. This means that Scripture ought not to be placed at the beginning of the theological system, to provide an epistemological basis for what follows, but rather ought to be placed under the doctrine of God – more specifically, under the work of the Holy Spirit. The rationale for this argument concerns the nature of Scripture itself, as part of God’s self-revelation. Thus theology proper begins with God, not with the Scriptures. It is God himself who brought the Scriptures into existence. How then can these writings have a logical or theological priority over the God who caused them to be written?

The logical argument that the Scriptures must come first in the theological system, because until we have established the authority of the Scriptures we cannot say anything about God or about anything else, does not stand up to close examination. This argument confuses two things: (1) the place of Scripture in God’s self-revelation (a theological issue) and (2) the place of Scripture in the teaching office of the church (a practical issue). No-one denies that the truths we express in our systematic theologies are to be found in the Scriptures, but to put God’s Word prior to God himself in our theological system has often led to serious errors. The most serious of these errors is to imply that the Scriptures can stand alone as a source of epistemological certainty, quite apart from the work of God the Holy Spirit. This error results in the Scriptures taking on a life of their own, whereby men and women sometimes imagine (even if they would never express it this way) that they hold in their hands the final written revelation of God that can be read, understood and applied, without any further involvement of God.

Please do not misunderstand this point. I am not arguing that the Scriptures are a dead letter that somehow ‘become’ the Word of God in a moment of revelation through the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, as some neo-orthodox have argued. These scholars, in my view, have confused the origin of the Scriptures (inspiration) with the spiritual recognition of the Scriptures (illumination). Rather, I hold that the Scriptures are objectively the Word of God, whether or not any individual has come to the place of recognizing them as such. Nevertheless, neither the origin nor the function of the Scriptures can be properly articulated outside the context of the work of God the Holy Spirit.

Within the structure of a systematic theology, the doctrine of Scripture might be expressed as follows. First, we speak of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) as a self-existent being, noting the Creator–creature distinction. Second, we speak of God’s self-revelation, as in Hebrews 1, noting that he first of all spoke through prophets and apostles but supremely in the person and work of his Son, Jesus Christ. Then third, we go on to speak of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the agent of this self-revelation, both in terms of Jesus Christ himself (conceived and empowered by the Holy Spirit) and of the Scriptures (breathed-out by the Holy Spirit). By this means, the doctrine of Scripture is placed in a solidly trinitarian context and thus in a thoroughly theological, Christological and pneumatological context. When we do this, the doctrine of Scripture can be articulated in a fresh way, liberated from the human quest for epistemological certainty and rooted in the God-centred context of revelation.

It might be thought that the location of the doctrine of Scripture is not important so long as it is included somewhere, but there is an issue here concerning the nature and content of revelation. John Webster has demonstrated that when the doctrine of Scripture ‘migrates to the beginning of the dogmatic corpus’ it then takes on the function of ‘furnishing the epistemological warrants for Christian claims’.<sup>30</sup> Webster sees this as a failure to understand the true nature of revelation and as a misunderstanding of the relationship between Scripture and revelation. In particular, he insists that

the content of revelation is God’s own proper reality. Revelation is not to be thought of as the communication of arcane information or hidden truths, as if in revelation God were lifting the veil on something other than his own self and indicating it to us. Talk of revelation is not talk of some reality separable from God’s own being, something which God as it were deposits in the world and which then becomes manipulable. Revelation is divine *self*-presentation; its content is identical with God.<sup>31</sup>

It is vital, then, that Scripture be set in the wider context of revelation and that revelation be firmly rooted within the doctrine of God. As Webster says, ‘The doctrinal under-determination and mislocation of the idea of revelation can only be overcome by its reintegration into the comprehensive structure of Christian doctrine, and most especially the Christian doctrine of God.’<sup>32</sup> The

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30. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 12.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

case being made in this chapter is that, within the doctrine of God, the proper place to discuss Scripture is as an aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit.

### *Scripture and epistemology*

The argument that Scripture ought not to be placed as the first head in a theological system should not be taken to mean that epistemological concerns are to be ignored. Indeed, it is vital that we explain the way in which our epistemology relates to our doctrine of Scripture. In 1962, during a visit to America where he lectured at Princeton Theological Seminary and at the Chicago Divinity School, a reporter asked Karl Barth to sum up the teaching of his *Church Dogmatics*. Barth quoted the children's hymn 'Jesus loves me, this I know/ for the Bible tells me so'. In one sense, this was a media 'sound bite', long before such things became the normal currency of debate. In another sense, it was a profound epistemological statement of the relationship between Scripture and our knowledge of God. Barth was arguing that our knowledge of the love of God in Christ comes to us through the voice of God speaking in the Scriptures.

Christians have always believed that the Bible is the Word of God, meaning that it has its origins in the revelatory activity of the personal God of whom it speaks, and that it is a means by which he communicates with the creatures he has made. This God, eternally existing in Trinity as Father, Son and Spirit, creator of all things and yet distinct from creation, has chosen to make himself known and communicates with human beings by his Spirit through his Word. Now to declare that the Bible is God-given and therefore different from all other books would not have seemed a remarkable claim for Christians to make during the first millennium and a half of Christian history. Today, however, in the prevailing intellectual climate, it requires some justification and explanation. On what basis do Christians believe that the Bible ought to be received as having its origin in a personal, speaking God? The answer is that we believe the Bible to be the Word of God because God the Holy Spirit, working in our hearts and minds, persuades and assures us that this is the case. As Herman Bavinck puts it:

Holy Scripture is self-attested (αυτοπιστος) and therefore the final ground of faith. No deeper ground can be advanced. To the question 'Why do you believe Scripture?' the only answer is: 'Because it is the word of God.' But if the next question is 'Why do you believe that Holy Scripture is the word of God?' a Christian cannot answer.<sup>33</sup>

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33. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 589.

This is not to say that Christian belief is irrational or consists in a blind fideism: quite the reverse is the case. This has been best argued by Cornelius Van Til<sup>34</sup> through his presuppositional theology and his transcendental argument.<sup>35</sup> As Van Til argued, we cannot prove the existence of God or the truth of the Bible. Indeed, we can come to accept the Bible only through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This being the case, we must begin with the Bible, assuming it to be true, and work everything out from that starting point. His opponents said that this was a circular argument, but Van Til insisted that for a human being this was the only kind of argument. In recognizing that we are creatures of God, we must also recognize that God has the right to speak to us. If we try to judge whether or not the Bible has come to us from God, the question then becomes ‘By what standard or criterion can we make such a judgment?’ If we reply ‘reason’ or ‘logic’ or ‘evidence’, then we are setting these things as a higher authority than the voice of God speaking in Scripture. We must argue, rather, that reason, logic and evidence have their place in our thinking only because we live in a world God has created, which is therefore inherently rational. If we do not assume that God has created and sustains all things, then why should we expect to find any kind of rationality, structure or consistent form in our world? It is only when, by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, we accept the Bible as God’s Word, that we can understand the nature and purpose of all created reality.

There has been a long Christian tradition of ‘evidentialism’, which stands in marked contrast to Van Til’s ‘presuppositionalism’. This traditional method of apologetics was developed in the early history of the Christian church and given classic form in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. It remains today the position of most Roman Catholic and most Protestant theologians. This method of defending Christian belief involves two stages. In the first stage, the task is to prove that there is a god, using the various proofs that have been developed over the centuries, such as the ontological, teleological and moral

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34. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976); and Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969).
35. For two different but sympathetic analyses of Van Til’s thought see Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998); and John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til – An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995).

arguments. In the second stage, the task is to describe this god and call people to faith in this god. In practice, Christian theologians have normally laid out the arguments for the existence of God and then gone to the Bible to describe what this God is like.

There are four significant problems with this traditional method of apologetics. First, no-one has ever developed a compelling and conclusive proof capable of demonstrating, without reasonable doubt, that God exists. The proofs have more often served as helpful confirmations to the faith of those who already believe. To this degree, we must not reject the importance of evidence. Van Til himself never rejected the value of evidence in this sense.<sup>36</sup> Nor does John Frame, perhaps the leading presuppositionalist of our day, who is not only a critical and constructive expositor of Van Til's theological perspective<sup>37</sup> but a careful dialogue partner with evidentialists and others.<sup>38</sup> Van Til and Frame are simply demonstrating themselves to be good Reformed theologians in affirming that our 'full persuasion and assurance' of the Bible's truth and authority comes from the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, while at the same time recognizing, with the Westminster Confession of Faith, that there are many factors that would support this belief and help to strengthen this conviction.<sup>39</sup>

The second problem with evidentialism is that it involves a logical leap at the connecting point between the two stages of the traditional apologetic. In other words, having demonstrated (at least to his own satisfaction) that there is a god, the evidentialist theologian has traditionally gone on to use the Bible

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36. Thom Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980).

37. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*.

38. John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994).

39. 'We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts' (ch. 1, sect. 5).



to describe this god. There is, however, no clear logical step from proving the existence of ‘a’ god to then speaking about ‘the’ God described in the Bible. How do we know that the ‘god’ thus proven is the God who has revealed himself in and through the person of Jesus Christ?

The third problem with evidentialism is its support for a ‘natural theology’, which precedes a ‘revealed theology’. This problem is compounded by the fact that even among theologians who believe in natural theology there are major differences of view. For example, the Roman Catholic view of natural theology is based on the conviction that human beings are able, by unaided reason alone, to come to real knowledge of God. G. C. Berkouwer describes those who hold to this position and says of their version of natural theology that it seeks a way to God ‘via the *undisturbed natural reason* and it assigns to special revelation an *augmenting* function’.<sup>40</sup> The evangelical evidentialist method known as the Ligonier Apologetic, developed by R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner and Arthur Lindsley, also holds that a natural theology is possible. It does not, however, accept the view of Roman Catholic theology regarding human nature. All of the Ligonier scholars regard human beings as totally depraved, in the sense that every aspect of their human nature is tainted by sin. They are, however, convinced that there is common ground between the believer and the unbeliever and that this common ground is ‘where believer and unbeliever can stand on equal terms and engage in meaningful discourse’.<sup>41</sup> They identify three ‘common assumptions’ that ‘are held by theists and nontheists alike’.<sup>42</sup> These are as follows:

1. The validity of the law of non-contradiction.
2. The validity of the law of causality.
3. The basic reliability of sense perception.<sup>43</sup>

The key point in such discussions becomes the ‘point of contact’ with the unregenerate human being. In other words, if all human beings are sinners and their minds are affected by sin, how can the gospel penetrate their darkness? Emil Brunner, who also believed in natural theology, said that the point of

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40. Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, p. 329.

41. R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 70.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

43. The Ligonier apologists dedicated their book to Van Til, despite disagreeing with his position, such had been his influence upon them.



contact was the image of God in man, which is twofold: the *formal* image (man as a responsible subject to whom God can speak), and the *material* image (every part affected by sin). For Brunner, the formal image is untouched by the fall and is the point of contact for redeeming grace.

One of the most significant critics of natural theology was Karl Barth, who engaged in a debate on the subject with Emil Brunner.<sup>44</sup> Barth so wanted to stress the uniqueness of the revelation found in Jesus Christ that he would allow no other source of knowledge of God to stand alongside that. Hence he denied the possibility of natural theology. Van Til was also opposed to natural theology due to his fundamental commitment to the notion that, because of the transcendence of God and the noetic effects of sin on the human mind, we can only know God when he reveals himself.

This leads naturally on to the fourth objection to evidentialism, as spelled out by Van Til, namely that evidentialism allowed human beings to judge the truth or falsehood of Christian claims. In other words, it allowed sinners to put God into the balance and make a decision as to whether or not he existed and, if he did, whether or not what he said was true. By doing this, it concedes the Enlightenment view that human beings are autonomous and are the reference point against which everything must be judged. In contrast to this, Van Til insisted that the natural man cannot be seen as an independent being with free will who is able to weigh up the arguments without prejudice or bias. On the contrary, the sinner is a covenant-breaker who has a vested interest in disproving God. He is in rebellion against God and is in no position to act without bias. Van Til was effectively calling for consistency, since we cannot speak about human beings in one way when we do our theology (sinners whose every faculty has been tainted and corrupted by our fallenness) and in another way when we do our apologetics (neutral thinkers who can impartially weigh up the truth).

For Van Til, the ultimate reference point is God (the ontological Trinity) and not man. The key text he used was the fall of humanity in Genesis 3. The first two chapters of the book tell us that God created everything (out of nothing) and that the whole creation was perfectly good but that then the first human beings, Adam and Eve, made a deliberate decision to disobey God. They chose to listen to the voice of the serpent rather than to the voice of God. In making this decision, they asserted their own independence and self-sufficiency. They

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44. Peter Fraenkel (ed.), *Natural Theology: Comprising 'Nature and Grace' by Professor Dr Emil Brunner and the Reply 'No!' by Dr Karl Barth* (London: Geoffrey Bles: Centenary, 1946).

were saying, in effect, that all of their decisions from that point on would be made on the basis of what *they* wanted, rather than on the basis of what God said. That is to say, they were now looking at the world as if it revolved around them, instead of thinking out of a centre in God. To 'think out of a centre in God' means to have a view of the world which recognizes that God is the creator and sustainer of the whole universe and that everything comes from him and is responsible to him. It is to see everything from God's perspective as revealed to us and to be completely obedient to what he says. This is the way it was in the beginning, as described in the first two chapters of Genesis.

The new situation our first parents created was completely different. They chose to listen not only to God but also to Satan. Having done so, they weighed up what God had said and what Satan had said and then made a decision. In doing so, they were saying something very important. They were saying that God's Word was an opinion they would consider, rather than the final authority in all decision-making. In short, they were saying that human beings were capable of deciding whether or not to believe what God said. This was catastrophic for humanity. The creatures had become so full of their own importance that they felt they could put the Creator in his place! Immediately, everything changed. The relationship between God and humanity was broken, Adam and Eve were banished from the presence of God, and God's judgment fell upon them. Because he was the representative of the human race the judgment also fell upon every human being born from then until now – except Jesus Christ, whose birth by a virgin sets him apart from those who are 'in Adam'.

For Van Til, the key point was that Eve weighed up the claim and counterclaim of God and the devil and decided she could judge on the basis of facts rather than being. The issue of 'facts' brings us very close to a true understanding of Van Til. He is quite clear that there are no such things as 'brute facts'; rather, every fact is God-created and God-interpreted. Unbelievers may possess a certain number of facts, but they have no principle of interpretation and therefore no real knowledge. Only when the believer takes the facts do they make sense. Van Til describes the 'facts' possessed by an unbeliever as being like a string of beads that has broken and where you cannot find either end of the string to reconnect them. Thus you have many beads but no way of making them into a necklace. Similarly, unbelievers have many facts but no means of connecting these facts into a coherent world view, because they lack the one piece of information that unites these facts, namely the existence of God and the distinction between the Creator and creation. Unbelievers simply cannot fully comprehend the facts in their possession (1 Cor. 2:14); hence the simplest believer has more real knowledge than the most educated unbeliever!

From that point on until the present, humans have been warped creatures. They have ceased to be truly human because, having been designed to live in fellowship with God, they can find true significance and real meaning only in the context of that relationship. The problem is that, instead of living in total dependence upon God, they have now declared themselves to be independent of him. Humankind was never intended to live like this, and is not equipped to do so.

It is my conviction that, although there is much to be learned from some of the evidentialist writings, Van Til is substantially correct in his analysis of the human condition and in the need to affirm the primacy of God as the one who supernaturally makes himself known, breaking through, by his Spirit, the sinful intransigence and wilful blindness of human beings.

There is a third method of stating and defending the Christian faith that shares some elements of both evidentialism and presuppositionalism. It has come to be known as 'Reformed apologetics' and is associated with the names of two of the most important Christian philosophers of our day, Alvin Plantinga<sup>45</sup> and Nicholas Wolterstorff.<sup>46</sup> This view is based on the notion of 'warranted beliefs' and has significant similarities at points with Scottish common sense realism, developed by Thomas Reid in the late eighteenth century in opposition to the atheistic philosophy of David Hume. This 'Scottish philosophy' had a remarkable influence on the early Princeton theology, through the advocacy of John Witherspoon. The strength of the position advocated by Plantinga and Wolterstorff is that there are certain truths about which there ought to be no dispute and on which all reasonable people are agreed. In other words, there are certain things we know to be true and that simply do not require evidence or argument. It is also argued that evidence from sense perception, which has had such a dominant place in the thinking of post-Enlightenment scholars, is not the only source of true information and knowledge. Indeed, Plantinga follows Calvin in asserting that each human being has a *sensus divinitas*, which brings real knowledge of God and is to be accepted as a warranted belief alongside the evidence from our senses.

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45. See e.g. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

46. See e.g. Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Nicholas P. Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga (eds.), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

There are strengths in this approach, but most of these strengths fit comfortably with a Van Tilian perspective. In general, I would share the analysis of Reformed apologetics given by John Frame and also Frame's hope of a continuing dialogue between the two positions.<sup>47</sup>

### Reconstructing the vocabulary

I have argued, then, that the doctrine of Scripture must be relocated within the theological system, to emphasize that it is an aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit in the context of God's self-revelation. I have further argued that Van Til's presuppositionalist apologetics sits comfortably with this relocation and enables us to answer some of the difficult epistemological questions. We must now move on to consider the vocabulary of this reconstructed doctrine of Scripture.

In spelling out a pneumatological approach to the doctrine of Scripture, I find myself developing a careful vocabulary for the doctrine. First, I affirm that the Holy Spirit is the one responsible for the origin of the Scriptures. He is the one who enabled men to 'speak from God' as he carried them along (2 Pet. 1:21) and he is the one who breathed-out the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16). This I call 'divine spiration'. Second, I affirm that the Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to identify the Scriptures as the Word of God, as Calvin expressed it in his notion of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. This I call 'recognition'. Third, I affirm that it is the Holy Spirit who gives us understanding of the meaning and significance of the Scriptures, and this I call 'comprehension'. Fourth, I affirm the truth and authority of the Scriptures as this is impressed upon us by the Holy Spirit. In other words, God the Holy Spirit does not simply enable us to recognize the Scriptures and give us understanding of them but also persuades us that in them we hear the authentic voice of God speaking to us; hence they are reliable. For this, I use the word 'infallibility'.

#### *Divine spiration*

Since the publication in 1611 of the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible, the most famous and enduring of the English translations, the word 'inspiration' has generally been used as a translation of the Greek word *theopneustos*, found in 2 Timothy 3:16. The English word 'inspiration' is drawn from

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47. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of The Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), pp. 382–400.

the Latin word *inspirata*, which was used in the Vulgate translation of the 2 Timothy passage.<sup>48</sup> ‘Inspiration’ has also become a standard term in theological discussions regarding Scripture. It is very difficult to dislodge a word that has so embedded itself in our theological language and has been invested with such theological content, but the word is problematic and an attempt must be made to do so.

The use of the word ‘inspiration’ in relation to Scripture is problematic for two reasons. The first problem is that, as a translation of the Greek word *theopneustos*, it is exegetically inaccurate. Following the Authorized (King James) Version, almost all of our English language translations of 2 Timothy 3:16 have routinely rendered *theopneustos* as ‘inspired’, whereas it literally means ‘God-breathed’ or ‘God-spirited’, and the word ‘inspiration’ (certainly in the modern era) does not adequately and clearly convey this meaning. It was only with the publication of the New International Version of the Bible that ‘God-breathed’ was used as a translation. This conveys more of the real sense of the term, which is ‘expiration’ rather than ‘inspiration’.

The second reason for saying that the word ‘inspiration’ is problematic is related to modern English usage. Today, when people say that a poet, an author, a musician or a painter was ‘inspired’, they mean that there took place a remarkable heightening of that artist’s natural powers, enabling the completion of a work of genius. They are rarely suggesting that some kind of divine intervention occurred.<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately, there is a tendency among those who write on the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture to assume precisely the same meaning when speaking about the authors of Scripture, that is, to think in terms of the writers of Scripture as persons invested with a particular genius, or heightened religious sensitivity or something of the kind. Over against this, we must affirm exegetically that *theopneustos* is not speaking primarily about the authors of Scripture but about the Scriptures themselves. In other words, the claim is not being made that the authors were ‘inspired’ but rather that the Scriptures were ‘God-breathed’. Clearly, these claims are related but are, nevertheless, distinct.

The confusion that has sometimes existed on this matter is exemplified in the writings of William Abraham. Although he has written a great deal on the

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48. B. B. Warfield says that “The word “inspire” and its derivatives seem to have come into Middle English from the French’ (B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948], p. 131).

49. See e.g. Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

doctrine of Scripture, much of it profound and helpful, I must take issue with him on this matter of inspiration. Abraham identifies what he perceives to be the problem with some evangelical views on inspiration:

If there is one mistake in recent theories of inspiration which deserves to be singled out for special attention, that mistake is at root conceptual. Rather than pause to reflect on divine inspiration, Evangelical theologians have built their theories around the idea of divine speaking. This is simply a basic category mistake. It is essential to identify and remove this mistake if there is to be progress or hope for any future account of inspiration.<sup>50</sup>

If inspiration has nothing to do with divine speaking, then how are we to establish what it does mean? Abraham's answer is to begin with the human agent. He argues that many evangelical theologians (especially in the Warfield tradition) have made the mistake of trying to understand inspiration by focusing on God and in particular by focusing on God's speech. This, he argues, is entirely the wrong way to begin.<sup>51</sup> Instead, Abraham looks at the way inspiration is used in human language so that he can then later by analogy determine what it means when God is said to inspire. The problem here is that this is precisely the opposite of good exegesis! Indeed, it may well be a model for how *not* to do theology. Instead of asking what the term means in its original Greek form and in the context in which it appears, Abraham wants to take the modern meaning of the word and then read that back into 2 Timothy. By using this approach, Abraham fails to deal properly with what 2 Timothy 3:16 actually says and means. When Paul says that Scripture is God-breathed, he does not mean that its writers were 'inspired' in the common English use of the term. Abraham uses the illustration of a good teacher inspiring his students and then goes back into the New Testament to 2 Timothy 3:16 and interprets *theopneustos* accordingly, but this is an unacceptable procedure. This becomes obvious when you reach his conclusion:

What I am suggesting with respect to inspiration is simply this. It is through his revelatory and saving acts as well as through his personal dealings with individuals and groups that God inspired his people to write and collate what we now know as the Bible. Inspiration is not an activity that should be experientially separated

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50. William J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 58.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

from these other acts that God has performed in the past. As a matter of logic, inspiration is a unique activity of God that cannot be defined in terms of his other acts or activity, but as a matter of fact he inspires in, with, and through his special revelatory acts and through his personal guidance of those who wrote and put together the various parts of the Bible. This is the heart of my positive proposal.<sup>52</sup>

To avoid confusion of this kind, I propose that the word ‘inspiration’ be replaced. The initial thought was that we might use the word ‘expiration’, since it clearly has the connotation of ‘breathing out’. Unfortunately, as a colleague, Dr Alistair Wilson, pointed out, it also has the connotation of a *final* breathing out, indeed a terminal breathing out! The decision to opt for the word ‘spiration’ was helpfully supported by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, where the word ‘spiration’ is defined as ‘The creative function of the deity conceived as the action of breathing.’<sup>53</sup> Professor David Wright later expressed the view that an adjective was needed<sup>54</sup> and so I shall use the expression ‘divine spiration’.<sup>55</sup> This is, of course, not a novel suggestion, since the word ‘spiration’ has long been recognized by scholars as a good translation. B. B. Warfield, for example, argued that this was the best translation for *theopneustos*,<sup>56</sup> although he subsequently (like all of the others who have advocated spiration) went on to use ‘inspiration’ because it was the common currency.

Quite apart from any discussion of the correct English translation for *theopneustos*, however, we must ask what this word conveys (and does not

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52. Ibid., p. 67.

53. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959).

54. In private correspondence, following discussion at the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society conference.

55. I am still pondering the interesting suggestion of my colleague Dr Nick Needham, who says that this expression might have other beneficial consequences by anchoring the work of the Spirit in relation to Scripture in a trinitarian ontology. In trinitarian theology, ‘spiration’ refers to the action of the Father, who eternally spirates – breathes forth – the Spirit. Could one say that the spiration of Scripture is also an action of the Father through the Spirit? E.g. when we breathe, breath (spirit) is not necessarily all that comes out. Our breath can also form a word. Could it be that the Father breathes out (spirates) the Word through the Breath (Spirit)?

56. Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, p. 133.



convey) to the reader. To some extent this depends upon the translation and exegesis of the whole sentence from 2 Timothy 3:16. For example, one possible translation is, 'All inspired Scripture is profitable for . . .' (New English Bible), which could be exegeted to mean that not all Scripture is inspired. Most commentators, however, opt for a translation such as, 'All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for . . .'<sup>57</sup> This translation would suggest that the Scriptures have come into existence through the supernatural action of God and that the documents so produced have been given by God for the good of his church in various ways. That still leaves unanswered one further question, namely the composition and extent of the 'Scripture' referred to in the text. There can surely be little doubt that the apostles who wrote the New Testament believed that the Old Testament was the Word of God written (Acts 4:25; 28:25) and that therefore Paul was referring to the Old Testament Scriptures. Given that he has enunciated a principle, however, 'All Scripture is inspired by God', surely the Scriptures then being written by the apostles would also be regarded as inspired? Certainly, Peter does not hesitate to identify the letters of Paul alongside the 'other Scriptures' (2 Pet. 3:16).

It remains a fact, however, that Paul does not explain what he means by his use of the word *theopneustos*. Indeed, it has been argued that he may have coined the word himself, since it does not appear anywhere else in Scripture and the earliest references beyond Scripture are in the second century.<sup>58</sup> How then are we to understand the meaning and significance of this divine spiration of Scripture? B. B. Warfield said that Paul's use of this language conveys the idea that the Scriptures are 'the product of the creative breath of God', albeit, 'without any indication of how God has operated in producing them'.<sup>59</sup> In order to get some indication of how God operated, clearly we must go elsewhere, namely to 2 Peter 1.

In the first eleven verses of 2 Peter 1, the apostle gives a tremendous summary of the key elements of the Christian faith. He speaks of righteousness, faith, grace and peace. He describes Jesus Christ as our God and our Saviour. He speaks about knowledge of God, God's power, God's promises,

57. See e.g. I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), pp. 792–793; and Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 585–588.

58. Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, p. 589.

59. Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, p. 133.



the Christian life, forgiveness of sins, calling, election, God's eternal kingdom and so on. In verses 12–15, the apostle says that he wants to remind his readers of these matters, although they already know them. He says that he wants to refresh their memories and do everything he possibly can to ensure that the message of the gospel will be firmly planted in their hearts and minds even after he himself has gone. Then, in verses 16–21, he defends his right to speak about these matters with such authority. In particular, he mentions two things: first, the authority he had as an eyewitness of what happened on the mount of transfiguration; second, the authority of the Scriptures whose prophecies foretold Christ. It is in this context, as we saw earlier, that Peter comments on the authors of Scripture, saying that 'men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Pet. 1:21).

If we combine, then, what Paul says about the Scriptures (they have been breathed out by God) with what Peter says about the human authors of Scripture (they spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit), then we can move to a definition: 'The doctrine of divine spiration (inspiration) is the affirmation that at certain times and in certain places, God the Holy Spirit caused men to write books and his supervisory action was such that although these books are truly the work of human beings, they are also the Word of God. The church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, ultimately came to recognize that there are sixty-six books that God caused to be written in this way over a long period of time.'

This was precisely what the apostolic authors claimed for themselves. They knew that they had received revelation from God. In Galatians 1:11–12, Paul says this: 'For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.' Whatever else this verse means, it surely teaches that the Christian gospel does not have a human origin but a divine origin. In other words, it comes from God. Now it follows from all of this that the Bible has authority. If the people who wrote it were 'carried along' by the Holy Spirit and if it was 'God-breathed', then we must say that it has a unique authority. In order to avoid misunderstanding, however, it is better to reside the authority in God rather than in the Scriptures themselves. We might speak, then, of the authority of God speaking by his Spirit in and through the Scriptures.

### *Recognition*

This brings us to the second suggestion for new vocabulary, namely that we supplement and interpret the word 'illumination' by use of the word 'recognition'. I make this suggestion because the word 'illumination' has sometimes

been used in such a way as to imply that the Scriptures need to have light shed upon them before they can be understood. The problem, however, is in the human mind and not in the Scriptures. The Scriptures do not need to be illuminated but rather the human mind, which has been damaged by the noetic effects of sin, needs to be given understanding. Only when the Holy Spirit enables can these spiritual words and spiritual truths be identified as Scripture and properly understood.

It is important that we explain this problem regarding the human mind. If we consider the true condition of humanity, then we shall see the need for the Holy Spirit to enable us to recognize the Scriptures. For example, in Romans 1:18–25, Paul says some startling things. He says that every human being possesses true knowledge of God and that this knowledge is of such clarity that human beings have absolutely no excuse if they deny that they know God. Indeed, he goes so far as to argue that human beings deliberately suppress this knowledge and this truth, because of the innate sinfulness of all fallen creatures. The result of this, he says, is that human beings have exchanged truth for lies and their thinking has become futile. To put it bluntly: they are fools.

The implications of this teaching are of considerable importance. We are being told that all human beings have a true knowledge of God at some level of their being but that they deliberately suppress this knowledge because of their sinful condition. That sinful condition originated in Genesis 3 when our first parents opted to live self-centred rather than God-centred lives. The minds of unregenerate human beings, then, are twisted and perverted. Instead of holding to the truth, they deliberately suppress it, and instead of worshipping and serving God, prefer lies and foolishness. There is, then, according to Paul, a difference between believers and unbelievers when it comes to the mind. Elsewhere, Paul expresses it like this:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. (Rom. 8:5–7)

That is to say, unbelievers have a 'mindset' opposed to God, which is why Paul can say that 'the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (2 Cor. 4:4). Only if we recognize the true condition of the human mind can we then properly understand the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the mind and to the discovery of truth.

One way to approach this more directly is to ask a question about the process by which someone becomes a Christian, in order to see the significance of the mind and the need for it to be acted upon by the Holy Spirit. We can usefully deal with this question with special reference to Colossians 1. Four things in particular in this chapter help us here. First, in verse 5, the gospel is described as ‘the word of the truth’. Now that is very significant because it means that the gospel (or good news) is not simply a description of historical events (concerning Jesus of Nazareth), nor is it simply an appeal to believe: it is first and foremost a word of truth.<sup>60</sup> The second thing to notice is in verse 6. Paul tells how the gospel is producing fruit and growing all over the world just as it has also been doing among the Colossians since the day they ‘heard it and understood the grace of God in truth’. Paul is saying that the gospel began to do its work among these Colossians when they heard and understood the truth of the gospel. Whatever else we might understand by these words, one thing is clear: in responding to the gospel, we use our minds. The third point follows on directly, at the beginning of verse 7. Speaking of the gospel, Paul says that they ‘learned it’ from Epaphras. Now that is a somewhat strange way to speak. We often speak about people ‘hearing’ the gospel, but how often have we ever spoken about someone ‘learning’ the gospel? Indeed, in some evangelical circles you will hear people say, ‘The gospel is caught not taught.’ On the basis of this verse in Colossians, we can say that this is not true. The fourth point is found in verse 21. Speaking of what the Colossians were like before they became Christians, Paul says that they were ‘alienated’ from God and ‘hostile in mind’.

When we take these four points together, we may sum them up like this. The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is a word of truth that comes to men and women who are enemies of God in their minds. This gospel of truth becomes effectual when it is understood and learned. Thus we can answer the question about the means by which we become Christians by saying that this happens as a direct result of truth being applied to the mind by the Holy Spirit. There are various other passages in the Bible that would support this interpretation of Colossians 1. Most important in this context is Romans 12:2: ‘be transformed by the renewal of your mind’. That is the first point of change. Indeed, we can go so far as to say that once the mind has been ‘reset’ in a Godward direction, it cannot be undone. Thereafter the task is to bring our ‘flesh’ and our emotions into accord with that new mindset, as Paul implies in Romans 7:25.

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60. The gospel is also described as ‘the word of truth’ in Eph. 1:13 and Jas 1:18.

There is a tendency in some Christian circles today to imagine that men and women become Christians as a result of emotional experiences, or because they have been influenced and moved by a testimony, or because they have enjoyed a piece of Christian music, or for one of a hundred other reasons. Ultimately, however, whatever experiences of this nature we might have, to become a Christian it is necessary that truth be applied to the mind. At some point it is necessary that we learn the message of the gospel, understand it, and be persuaded by it. In the last analysis, it is *truth*, not emotion, that makes us Christians. However, none of this argument is intended to suggest that only clever people can become Christians, or that people who have a good mind have a better chance of becoming Christians. In fact, the opposite is probably true, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2. The point being made here is that the human mind has been damaged by sin's noetic effects and only when the Holy Spirit acts to renew the mind, enabling us to recognize the truth of God, will we truly become Christians. In other words, it is not the Scriptures that need to be 'illuminated'; it is our fallen human minds that need to be renewed by the Holy Spirit to enable us to 'recognize' what is already there in Scripture. The problem lies with us and not with anything lacking in the Scriptures themselves.

Now I must say that the best writers on the doctrine of illumination have always taken this position and emphasized that the problem of incomprehension relates to the human mind and not to the Scriptures, but many others have not.<sup>61</sup> It would seem reasonable to argue that if we use the word 'recognition', we can deal with some of the confusion and ambiguity that can arise from the word 'illumination'. In order to see the value of the proposal, we must ask the most significant question of all, namely on what basis do we believe that the Scriptures are the Word of God? The answer, following Calvin, is that such belief is possible only by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the Holy Spirit enables us to 'recognize' the Scriptures as the Word of God.

### ***Comprehension***

This brings us to the third suggestion for additional vocabulary, namely that we supplement and interpret the word 'perspicuity' by use of the word 'comprehension'.

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61. In my view, much of the difficulty posed by Karl Barth's doctrine of Scripture arises out of a confusion between *theopneustos* and illumination.

62. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.1–5.

If illumination as traditionally understood has to do with recognizing the Scriptures as the Word of God, perspicuity has to do with understanding what the Scriptures mean. The problem with the concept of ‘perspicuity’ is that it can be understood to imply an access to the Scriptures that is entirely human and natural. Now those who first used the expression were making the important point that the Scriptures can be read with profit by any human being, without requiring the aid of a priest or other ‘specialist’ and that although there is much that is difficult to understand and may require the help of those who have studied the original languages and are trained in exegesis, nevertheless, there is a sense in which the simplest person who can read will be able to discern the gospel in the Scriptures and so find salvation and peace with God. With this use of the word ‘perspicuity’ I have no problem and my advocacy of the word ‘comprehension’ is not intended to undermine this core point in any way. Rather, my intention in using ‘comprehension’ is to underline the fact that only God the Holy Spirit can give us understanding (comprehension) of the Scriptures.

The same Holy Spirit who gives us ‘recognition’ that the Scriptures are what they claim to be, also communicates the meaning of the Scriptures to us, such that we have ‘comprehension’. In this way, God the Holy Spirit enables us to understand the meaning of the Scriptures, through the enlightening of our minds. This notion of the human mind receiving enlightening from the Holy Spirit is found in many places. For example, this is precisely the point Paul was making in 1 Corinthians 2:11–16:

For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ‘For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.

This is a remarkable passage that has important implications for theology and for theologians. It teaches us that understanding the things of God is a God-given ability and not a natural human ability. The same idea is found in Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question as to why he spoke in parables. He replied:

To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. (Matt. 13:11–13)

Many attempts have been made to undermine the clear meaning of this text because the common wisdom is that Jesus spoke in parables in order to make himself clear, to be more easily understood. It is pointed out that people can understand stories better than long propositional narratives and so Jesus used this as an educational tool. This, however, is not what Jesus actually said! He said that he spoke in parables to conceal (and not to reveal) his message. Only if we have a theology that gives a significant place to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in providing ‘comprehension’ of the Scriptures shall we be comfortable with these words of Jesus.

There is no doubt that someone who is not a Christian can read and intellectually engage with the words of Scripture, but it is also true that such a person cannot properly understand the Scriptures without the work of the Holy Spirit. That is why, at Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus asked his disciples who they believed him to be and Peter identified him as ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God’, Jesus immediately said, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven’ (Matt. 16:16–17). Similarly, when Paul and his companions shared the gospel with Lydia outside the town of Philippi, Luke tells us that ‘The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul’ (Acts 16:14). In other words, it was not simply a matter of human acceptance of the message; it was necessary that God the Holy Spirit should ‘open her heart’. There is also the interesting occasion when Paul and Barnabas were preaching the gospel and some of the Gentiles became Christians. Luke tells us, ‘and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed’ (Acts 13:48). Notice, it is not simply those who believed but those who were ‘appointed’, surely emphasizing that God the Holy Spirit, who effectually calls, gives comprehension.

### *Infallibility*

The final suggestion in respect of vocabulary is that we should opt for the word ‘infallibility’ as over against the word ‘inerrancy’. This is not new language, because the word ‘infallibility’ has regularly been used in speaking of the Scriptures. In recent years, however, there has been a growing dominance of the use of the word ‘inerrancy’ (a word rarely used in Europe) and this, in some of its forms, has represented a turn towards a somewhat mechanical and even

rationalistic approach to Scripture, basing its authority on a set of inerrant manuscripts. The argument for ‘infallibility’ is that the final authority for the Christian is the authority of God speaking in and through his Word and that the Holy Spirit infallibly uses God’s Word to achieve all he intends to achieve. It is, therefore, a more dynamic (or organic) and less mechanical view of authority. It also avoids a number of serious problems related to the word ‘inerrancy’, as we shall see.

In choosing ‘infallibility’ over against ‘inerrancy’, I am advocating an equally ‘high’ but yet somewhat different theology of Scripture. Since this is one of the principal objectives of the book, I shall devote the next three chapters to the subject. In the next chapter, I shall explain the development of liberal theology out of its roots in the Enlightenment and also note the main opponents of this theological perspective. Then, in the next chapter, I shall trace the origins of the inerrantist position. I shall then go on in the following chapter to offer a European alternative to the American inerrantist position.