Introduction

The Way of Truth; The Stuff of Life

In the beginning, an empty space. A word breaks the silence, bespeaks a universe; the world dawns. More words; nondescript space acquires shape, becomes a place for forms emerging from the dust. The stage is set. Action!

To be or not to be is not the question, nor our choice. We are "thrown into existence," says Martin Heidegger.[1] We simply find ourselves in a world. We are here, onstage, with many others. Unaided reason cannot tell us why we are here or what we are to do. For existentialist philosophers such as Heidegger, the challenge is to achieve authenticity, which in his view means constantly preparing to play one's own death scene.

Today we have more information about life, and more techniques for sustaining life, than ever before, but we remain flummoxed with regard to the question of life's meaning.[2] We have mapped the galaxy, but we are still trying to get our bearings. We have mapped the human genome, but we are still trying to determine what we are. We need guidance as we seek to play our parts, prompting as we grope for our next lines. To be sure, being cast—born—into a certain place and time (and class) provides some initial direction. We are socialized into our various identities—male or female, Christian or Muslim or New Age, American or Asian, modern or postmodern—from the time we are toddlers.

The natural and social sciences continue to vie for bragging rights over which most influences the human condition: nature or nurture; genetic determinism or social indoctrination; heredity or history. Some say our roles are hardwired by our biology; others ascribe our programming to society. Which is it? And, regardless of

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1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 321.

2. Walker Percy notes in *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983) that we have infinitely more means than ever for staying alive, but fewer reasons for doing so.

how one answers, what happens to freedom, one's capacity for self-determination? Where, in our postmodern technological age, is the Maginot Line that protects human dignity and personhood?

The very way these questions have been framed betrays their author's location on the stage of human history. They are all about me, about us; they are all anthropocentric. They have more of postmodern Western culture than the gospel about them; they evince the telltale signs of modernity's typical neuroses. Paul Tillich reads cultural history as a series of anxiety attacks: ancient civilization suffered the anxiety of death; the Middle Ages and Reformation, the anxiety of guilt; modernity, the anxiety of meaninglessness. Perhaps, had he lived longer, he might have characterized postmodernity as the anxiety of truthlessness.

Christian doctrine, the considered result of faith's search for biblical understanding, responds to each of these cultural-spiritual conditions. Employing the gospel as its primary, though not exclusive, resource for dealing with life's most persistent questions, Christian doctrine teaches us how to cope with various real-life crises. Doctrine, far from being a matter of abstract theory, is actually the stuff of real life. Real life is located in the way of Jesus Christ, and the purpose of doctrine is to lead us precisely in this way.

Theology's purpose is not merely therapeutic, of course. Rowan Williams is right to call attention to three other dimensions of theology as well. First, celebration: theology begins in worshiping God. The dogma, we might say, is the doxology. Second, communication: theology seeks to explain the meaning of God and his works to those inside the church and without. Third, criticism: theology struggles to demarcate true from false witness to God and his works.[3]

Doctrines, then, are profitable for celebrating, communicating, criticizing—and coping—provided they are used competently. The present work sets forth an account of theological competence, which involves more than academic expertise. *Theological competence is ultimately a matter of being able to make judgments that display the mind of Christ.* Individual Christians, and the church as a whole, have no more crucial task than achieving such theological competence. One of the chief means of doing so is by attending to doctrine—to its derivation from Scripture and its development in the believing community.

Doctrine helps the church understand where it has been "thrown" and what role it is to play there. The church now lives between the times (of Jesus' first and second comings), between the acts of a divine drama of redemption.[4] Each act of the play is set in motion by an act of God. The first act is creation (Genesis 1–3), the setting for everything else that follows. Act 2 (beginning from Genesis

12 and running through the rest of the Old Testament) concerns God's election, rejection, and restoration of Israel. The third, pivotal and climactic act is Jesus: God's definitive Word/Act. Act 4 begins with the risen Christ sending his Spirit to create the church. The fifth and final act is the eschaton, the consummation of all things, and the consummation of God's relationship with Israel and the church. The church lives at present between the definitive event of Jesus and the concluding event of the eschaton, poised between memory and hope.

Sound doctrine—authoritative teaching—is vital for the life of the church, and hence for the life of the world. This is hardly a truism; yet in many quarters doctrine is thought to be the problem. On the one hand, it is divisive, an obstacle to love and unity; on the other hand, it all too often appears insipid and irrelevant, maintaining no vital contact with the complications and particulars of everyday life. Unfortunately, there is more than a little truth to each of these charges. The fault lies less with sound doctrine, however, than with its mishandling, and with a misunderstanding of its nature and purpose. A false picture of doctrine has held us captive. We begin, then, by setting the stage: sound doctrine is suffering from confusion about its nature, from disagreement concerning the locus of its authority, and above all from its captivity to a debilitating dichotomy between theory and practice.

THE SETTING: THEOLOGY AND THE CULTURAL-LINGUISTIC TURN

Each new Christian generation must grapple with the question: What has the church to say and do that no other human institution can say and do?[5] Nature and society alike abhor a vacuum, and there are many ideologies and agendas waiting to rush and fill the hearts and minds of the uncommitted. Bereft of sound doctrine, the church is blown about by cultural fads and intellectual trends. Indeed, this has largely been the story of the church, and of theology, in the modern world. There has been an atrophying of theological muscle as a result of too many correlations and accommodations to philosophical and cultural trends.[6]

What the church uniquely has to say and do cannot be reduced to philosophy or politics. The church's unique responsibility is to proclaim and to practice the gospel, to witness in its speech and life to the reality of God's presence and action in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The theologian's unique responsibility is to ensure that the church's speech and action correspond to the word of God, the norm of Christian faith and practice. A number of contemporary theologians are not sure, however, whether to invoke the notion of authority or, if

3. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), xiii. Cf. David Ford's similar fourfold job description: "Theology deals with questions of meaning, truth, beauty, and practice" (*Theology: A Very Short Introduction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 17).

4. I am borrowing this image of salvation history as a drama from Tom Wright, as adapted by Samuel Wells. See N. T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 7–32; and Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 53–57.

5. John H. Leith, *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 14.

6. See Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

they do, where to locate it: in the history of Jesus Christ, in the biblical text, or in the believing community.

"Faith Seeking Understanding": Sources and Norms

Christian theology must distinguish between true and false knowledge of God, for indiscriminate talk of God is not an option for those who seek to worship in spirit and in truth. Yet the appeal to God is too powerful simply to be let loose. History affords too many illustrations of individuals and societies (and churches!) too hastily invoking God's name as a rationale for their beliefs and behaviors, or as a rationale for diverse forms of oppression, even war. It is precisely because God-talk is so easily abused that we must return again and again to the question of theology's sources and norms.

The Nature of Doctrine: Preliminaries

Doctrine, according to one of its chief historians, is easier to describe than to define.[7] Doctrine has to do with what faith seeking understanding gets when its search is successful. To be precise: *Christian doctrine is the reward that faith finds at the end of its search for the meaning of the apostolic testimony to what God was doing in the event of Jesus Christ.*[8]

Where should people of faith look to gain a better understanding of what they confess? Zophar's question to Job returns to taunt us: "Canst thou by searching find out God?" (Job 11:7, KJV). Whereas the genius-philosopher discovers only what is within the scope of one's own reason, the apostle proclaims a message, and a truth, that is not a product of his own devising: "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes . . . we declare to you" (1 John 1:1–3).[9] The challenge for those who have not themselves witnessed God's Word is that of access. Where is divine revelation now to be found? There are at least four possible candidates.[10]

1. Biblical Propositions

There is a long-standing tendency to identify divine revelation with biblical assertions or statements, considered to be the prime instances of truth-bearing lan-

7. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1.

8. By speaking of the "event" of Jesus Christ, I mean not to distinguish but to integrate what is traditionally referred to under the headings of his "person" and "work." The "event" of Jesus Christ thus refers to the saving significance of his identity and history. Accordingly, one could just as well refer to the "story" of Jesus Christ.

9. See Søren Kierkegaard, "On the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle," in Walter Lowrie and Alexander Dranda, eds., *The Present Age and Two Minor Ethico-Religious Treatises* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940).

10. The question of general revelation is beyond the scope of the present work. The focus of my investigations is Christian theology, and this means attending primarily (but not exclusively) to the word of God as it comes through Scripture and in Jesus Christ.

guage. Doctrines here function "as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities."[11] Like the Jews at Berea, many theologians—typically evangelicals congregating on the conservative end of the spectrum—studiously search the Scriptures to find out what the Bible actually teaches, "to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

Hard questions will nevertheless have to be asked of a method that appears to reduce the diverse modes of language in the Bible to the assertive and propositional. In the first place, a "propositionalism" seems inadequate given the variety of biblical texts, especially those that are concerned with aesthetic and affective qualities and not simply the cognitive. Second, to speak merely in terms of "informing" fails to do full justice to God's complex relation to Scripture. The Bible is more than divine data. Third, biblical propositionalism would seem to presuppose the quintessentially modern form of epistemology, namely, foundationalism.[12]

2. The Person of Christ

Karl Barth advances a second, more dynamic conception of the way in which God's self-revelation relates to the biblical text. Searching the Scriptures is once again the motif, not to mine them for propositions that are once true, always true but rather, in Jesus' words, because "they . . . testify on my behalf" (John 5:39). For Barth, the Bible "becomes" the Word only when God graciously condescends to make himself known by enabling readers to follow the human words to their proper reference—Jesus Christ, the living Word of God. The Bible thus "becomes" what it already "is": a witness to Jesus Christ and therefore a *form* of God's Word.

Whereas the propositional view highlights God's use of the biblical words in the past (e.g., inspiration), Barth calls attention to God's use (or not) of the biblical words in the present (e.g., illumination).[13] The question to be asked of Barth concerns the relationship of the Bible's quasi-sacramental mediation of Jesus' real presence to the verbal meaning of the text itself. While some of his early critics accused Barth of emphasizing the subjective event of revelation to the detriment of the objective text, it is surely significant that Barth expected the Spirit to use *just these words* to disclose Jesus Christ. Just as propositionalists would not want to deny the personal element in revelation, so Barth would not want to deny the role of propositions.

3. Christian Piety

Religious experience is yet a third possible locus of divine revelation. This option is qualitatively distinct from the first two because it conceives the words of

11. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 16. This is Lindbeck's description of the view, which he personally does not hold.

12. I shall return to the question of propositions and propositionalism in chapter 9.

13. See Bruce McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism," in Vincent Bacote, Laura Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 55–75.

Scripture in terms of their *human* use to express an individual's or a community's religious experience. Human subjectivity becomes the locus of a revelation that is typically immediate and nonverbal.

The classic representative of this position is Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology: "Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech."[14] The New Testament, for example, is an expression of its authors' attempt to express the felt significance of Jesus Christ. It is highly unsatisfactory, however, to give the impression that adequate theological statements should ever take the form "God *to me* is . . ." All knowledge may begin in experience, as Kant said, but if it ends there too, then we shall have no means to arbitrate conflicting views as to what God is like.[15] Christian experience on its own is too varied and unreliable to serve as the ultimate criterion for our knowledge of God.

4. Church Practices

Of late, a number of theologians have enshrined ecclesiology as "first theology," the source and norm alike of faith's search for understanding. Those who draw their theological first principles from ecclesiology have made what we may call the "cultural-linguistic turn." This turn to the church's own habits of speaking and acting is a welcome, and long overdue, change. For much of modernity, theology has been in thrall to principles drawn largely from philosophy, resulting in what we may term a kind of "Athenian" captivity of the church. To begin theologizing from the church's own language and culture is to make a radical break from the modern tendency to start with some neutral methodology.[16]

The understanding that faith seeks is, from this fourth perspective, implicit in the church's core practices. John Milbank declares that theology is a matter of "explicating Christian practice."[17] Theology articulates the "logic" inherent in the new

14. The heading of section 15 of Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 76.

15. The first line of the second edition of Immanuel Kant's famous *Critique of Pure Reason* reads: "There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience" (trans. Norman Kemp Smith [London: Macmillan, 1933], 41).

16. Prolegomena—"that which must be said before" one can do theology—became a preoccupation for moderns both because Enlightenment reason required a process of verification for claims to revelation and because Christians who agreed that Scripture was authoritative nevertheless disagreed about its meaning. The modern hope, inspired by scientific progress, was that universal agreement could be had if everyone used the same reliable methods. Theological prolegomena in modernity was all about finding a home for revelation in some neighborhood of reason. The assumption of the present work is that prolegomena itself should be properly theological, which is another way of saying that the matter of theology ought to inform its method.

17. John Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions," in Graham Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 267. Milbank espouses what I shall call "hard cultural-linguistic theology." I shall designate as "soft cultural-linguistic theology" the intratextual approach described by George Lindbeck. The point of commonality is the focus on the practices of the believing community; the main difference is that for Lindbeck the rules emerge from biblical narrative, whereas for Milbank they seem to emerge more directly from the historical life of the Christian community. See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 385–86.

communal way of life—the culture—that is the Christian church. *It is the form of the church's life and language that gives doctrines their substance and meaning.*

This option shines with postmodern promise. Proponents of this view have no need either to aspire to or to pretend to have objectivity; on the contrary, the theologian's task is to describe how things look from within a certain ecclesial perspective. This perspective has come down to us through a centuries-long dynamic process: *tradition.* In this framework, the Bible is less a textbook of divinely revealed information than an identity narrative that both acquires and exerts meaning in the interpretative community for which it functions as Scripture. Doctrines are articulations of the implicit grammatical rules that govern the community's speaking and thinking about God.[18]

Yet relevant questions remain. The most important is whether such an approach has more of sociology than of theology about it. Does doctrine refer to God, or does it merely describe how members of the Christian community talk about God? If church practices serve as both source and norm for theology, how can we ever distinguish well-formed practices from those that are *deformed*? Kathryn Tanner accurately states the problem: "[P]ostliberal talk of describing the internal logic of first-order practices strongly suggests that second-order theology does nothing more than uncover a logic internal to those practices themselves."[19] It is important to recognize that there is something in the nature of theology's subject matter—God, the gospel—that resists being designated as mere "local custom."

In each of the above cases, doctrine is a "second-order" formulation of something "first-order," be it biblical propositions, Jesus' person, Christian piety, or church practices. Doctrine thus appears parasitic; it lives on the second story, over the store as it were. However, as we have just seen, we lack agreement when it comes to deciding in just which house theology lives. Significantly enough, each of these houses has a room for the Bible.[20] To summarize the four options: the Bible is either coextensive with revelation, a witness to revelation, an expression of one's experience of revelation, or a product and condensation of the church's language and life.

The Norm of Doctrine: *Sola Scriptura* or "the Uses of Scripture"?

The location of theological authority is hardly a new issue. The church in every generation has had to wrestle with it. The usual suspects—reason, experience, Bible, tradition—have repeatedly been rounded up and pressed into theological service. What *is* new is the waning of the influence of the Enlightenment and of modernity's tendency to decide the legitimacy of all human enterprises, including exegesis and theology, on the basis of allegedly universal criteria of rationality. For

18. This is one way of describing Lindbeck's "regulative" theory of doctrine.

19. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 74. Tanner explores various problems inherent in Lindbeck's approach, not least its assumption that there is only one logic implicit in Christian practices.

20. To use David Kelsey's terms, the Bible is "analytic" in Christian theology. See *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 89.

two centuries and more, exegetes and theologians were forced to make doctrinal bricks with the mud and straw of reason and religious experience, the only two sources recognized by the modern gatekeepers of knowledge. Thanks to the critiques of sundry postmoderns, we are now able to see just how culturally relative, historically situated, and ideologically driven was the project of modernity. We have also come to see just how *secular* much of modern biblical studies and theology have been. Exegetes read the Bible "like any other book" (Benjamin Jowett); theologians, meanwhile, were busy recasting theology in terms of this or that philosophy. In short, nontheological frameworks determined the agenda for theology, with fateful results. Scripture dwindled into human history; tradition shriveled into human experience.[21]

The location of theological authority was the subject of an interesting exchange of letters between Erik Peterson and Adolf von Harnack in 1928.[22] Harnack maintained that the principle of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) could no longer be maintained responsibly.[23] Though the idea that the Bible contains divinely revealed truths solves the problem of the locus of authority, Harnack considered it theologically naive and would have no part in it. Instead of mourning the loss of the church's authority principle, Harnack reveled in it, arguing that at last the church was returning to pure religion and to the simple, nonhierarchical message of the gospel: brotherly love.

Erik Peterson, for his part, was not so sanguine: "Without any dogmatic authority there can be no church."[24] It is one thing to say, with Martin Luther, "Here I stand," but there is no point standing if one has no standpoint, no position on the crucial intellectual, social, and ethical matters of the day. Bereft of the authority of doctrine, the church becomes as weak and as arbitrary as any other human institution.

21. Gerard Loughlin, "The Basis and Authority of Doctrine," in Colin Gunton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42. See also Jowett's essay "On the Interpretation of Scripture," in his *Essays and Reviews* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1860). There are still plenty of liberals and neoliberals for whom a certain kind of experience (e.g., that which is conducive to the emancipation of women, the poor, the oppressed) serves as the criterion of legitimacy for God-talk and biblical interpretation. The main problem is that such approaches tend to make something other than the gospel of Jesus Christ normative for faith and life. The choice of such norms seems somewhat arbitrary. These criticisms notwithstanding, it does not follow that there is no role for experience in my understanding of the nature of doctrine. There is; everything depends, however, upon where one places experience in the ecology of "faith seeking understanding."

22. See Michael Hollerich, "Erik Peterson's Correspondence with Adolf von Harnack: Retrieving a Neglected Critique of Church, Theology, and Secularization in Weimar Germany," *Pro Ecclesia* 2/3 (1993): 305–32. Reinhard Hütter opens his important study on the nature of theology with a ten-page discussion of the exchange (*Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000], 5–15). See also Carl Braaten, "The Role of Dogma in Church and Theology," in Victor Pfitzner and Hilary Regans, eds., *The Task of Theology Today* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), 28–34.

23. Everything depends on what the principle *sola scriptura* really means. In this case, etymology tells only half the story. The more interesting question is how the Reformers *used* this slogan. I shall argue in chapter 7 that *sola scriptura* is, in fact, shorthand for a particular kind of *practice*.

24. Erik Peterson, "Correspondence with Harnack and an Epilogue," *Pro Ecclesia* 2/3 (1993): 334.

Harnack saw only a stark alternative to his own preference for cultivating Jesus' ethical way of life: "Either one traces Protestantism back to [Greek or Roman] Catholicism, or one grounds it on absolute biblicism."[25] In Harnack's view, each of these options had been closed off by modernity, with its keen sense of the historically conditioned (and hence culturally relative) origins of Scripture and tradition alike.

Peterson's verdict on the Protestant theology of his day—that it was largely the affair of academics, cut off from the life of the church—no doubt continues to ring true. Indeed, Peterson sounds downright contemporary in his insistence that Protestantism live off its Catholic capital: its liturgy (at least in mainstream denominations) resembles the Roman Mass; its confessions draw on the ancient creeds; its theological concepts share the same Thomistic-Aristotelian heritage. Cut off from the root that nourished it, however, there seem to be only three ways for Protestantism to resolve theological conflicts: to translate the faith into the universal truths of reason (rationalism); to appeal to a quality of religious experience (mysticism); to prove the truth in works of love and justice (activism). The problem with all these alternatives is that there is nothing distinctly Christian about them.

Significantly, neither Harnack nor Peterson thought to turn to the principle that the Reformers themselves had identified as normative: *sola scriptura.*[26] Biblical authority did not even figure among Peterson's options for Protestantism, not least because it seems inevitably to open up the Pandora's box of sectarianism where everyone (that is, every denomination or congregation) "does what is right in his own eyes." What is at stake, then, is the eclipse of the Protestant church as a plausible church "public."[27] Peterson himself voted with his feet and converted to Roman Catholicism.

Is it indeed the case that even Protestants have no real choice when it comes to the relationship of Scripture and tradition, given the all-too-glaring weaknesses of biblicism? The future of Protestantism rests on how one answers the Peterson challenge. The issue, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is "whether after separation from papal and worldly authority in the church, an authority can be established in the church and grounded solely on the word and on confession."[28]

The question Harnack and Peterson debated in modernity's prime has become even more pressing at modernity's end. The so-called linguistic turn in philosophy is well known.[29] It has to do with the "contamination" of experience and reason by language and with the concomitant loss of criteria of legitimation for

25. Cited in Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 7.

26. Peterson comments that even the Barthian version of the Scripture principle is "impossible," since it necessarily leads once again to "strict verbal inspiration" (cited in Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 6).

27. This, at least, is the moral that Hütter derives from his review of the Harnack–Peterson exchange; see *Suffering Divine Things*, 11–12.

28. Cited in Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 13.

29. See Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); and Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

knowledge and truth outside language. The net result of the linguistic turn was to remove the prestige from modernity's two privileged epistemological criteria—reason and experience—and to restore the prestige to tradition, understood as a community's habitual practices.

George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* was published in 1984 and marked the first appearance of the "cultural-linguistic" turn in theology. Though Lindbeck's postliberal proposal initially appears to swing the pendulum of authority back to the biblical text, a closer inspection shows that he relocates authority in the church, that singular "culture" within which, and only within which, the Bible is used to shape Christian identity. Lindbeck accepts Wittgenstein's insight that linguistic meaning is a function of use, and that linguistic usage varies according to the forms of life or practices—cultures—that users inhabit. Hence Lindbeck's key premise: that the experience and the reasoning of the individual human subject is always already shaped by a tradition of language use (e.g., culture).[30] The cultural-linguistic turn is postmodern, then, in its rejection of the modern premise of an autonomous knowing subject.

The underlying issue is the same now as it was in 1928: whither Protestantism? The prevailing postmodern cultural winds currently blow away from *sola scriptura* toward tradition. Now that the modern myth of universal reason (one size fits all) has been deconstructed, even philosophers have begun to speak in terms of "tradition-based rationality."[31] Postmoderns have discovered an alternative to the modern extremes of the absolute objectivity of universal reason and the absolute subjectivity of personal preference: a *relatively absolute intersubjectivity*, in a word, *the authority of communal tradition*. What criteria of legitimacy we have left are *internal* to a tradition.

One of the most interesting examples of the ambiguity of the cultural-linguistic turn in theology is the work of Hans Frei. In his *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei demonstrated, perhaps more effectively than anyone else, how biblical critics came to interpret the Bible with frameworks of meaning and criteria of truth that were derived from science, history, and philosophy rather than from Scripture and Christian faith.[32] He insisted that the Bible does not have to be repackaged or translated into some other conceptuality in order to be made intelligible. His own instincts were to let the biblical narrative mean and claim truth on its own terms.[33]

In his later work, however, Frei's thesis that the Bible means what it says received a cultural-linguistic correction. Frei apparently came to believe that

30. Lindbeck is particularly indebted to Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and to Clifford Geertz's cultural anthropology, an indebtedness that prompts one again to wonder whether, and to what extent, theological prolegomena should be properly theological.

31. See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

32. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

33. Just what "on its own terms" meant for Frei is the subject of some debate. Nicholas Wolterstorff suspects that Frei never really clarified the matter.

merely affirming "the Bible means what it says" was no longer sufficient. The difficulty lay in knowing how to "anchor" the literal sense and secure its reference to Jesus Christ as the ascriptive subject of the Gospels. It is difficult to know whether Frei believed that the fault—the insufficiency of "the Bible means what it says"—lay with the text or with the reader. In any event, Frei proposed a new way of understanding literality: "[T]he literal meaning of the text is precisely that meaning which finds the greatest degree of agreement in the use of the text in the religious community. If there is agreement in that use, then take that to be the literal sense."[34] This is as clear a cultural-linguistic hermeneutical manifesto as one could hope to find. I shall argue, however, that it is mistaken, though just where the mistake lies and how serious a mistake it is are open questions.[35] The present study aims to correct (without overreacting to) this cultural-linguistic misstep by locating authority not in the use of Scripture by the believing community but in what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls divine authorial discourse.[36]

In the present cultural-linguistic setting of theology, biblical meaning and authority alike are viewed in terms of the church's use of Scripture. David Kelsey's classic study of the uses of Scripture in contemporary theology admirably describes how various theologians employ the Bible in different ways to authorize their respective theological proposals.[37] Kelsey is surely right to call our attention to the real and legitimate difference between professing and practicing biblical authority. He displays keen insight in noting that *how* people actually use the Bible is a

34. Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 15. In context, this is the first of three "rough rules" for determining the literal sense. Frei borrows the first from Charles Wood. The second rule is that the literal sense "is the fit enactment of the intention to say what comes to be in the text" (15). Frei associated this rule with authorial discourse. The third, peculiarly "hermeneutical" rule is that there be a harmony between textual sense and textual subject matter. This rule is not altogether helpful, as the conflict of interpretations often boils down to differences as to what interpreters take to be the text's subject matter. In the present work, I explore the second of Frei's senses, which is also the one that best accords with his earlier work.

35. What I have in mind here is whether Frei opted for community use for extratextual reasons (i.e., the Wittgensteinian spirit of the times) or for properly theological reasons (i.e., the doctrine of the Holy Spirit). I shall adopt the more charitable hypothesis, namely, that the cultural-linguistic turn was pneumatologically motivated, at least in part.

36. For more on Frei's ambivalence with regard to the literal sense, see William Placher, "Introduction," in Hans Frei, ed. George Hunsinger and William Placher, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. 17–18; and Kathryn Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," in Garrett Green, ed., *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 59–75. Placher in particular notes the significance of the cultural-linguistic turn in Frei, citing one of Frei's earlier essays in which he comments that "the meaning of the text remains the same, no matter what the perspectives of succeeding generations of interpreters may be" (cited on 32). On Nicholas Wolterstorff, see his *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

37. David Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999). Kelsey explains the Bible's capacity for effective functioning by appealing to the *Holy Spirit's* use of the text. Inspiration is thus not a property of the text so much as a use to which the Spirit puts the text in order to shape Christian identity (211). Kelsey thus locates the doctrine of Scripture under the heading of God *doing* (e.g., sanctifying) rather than God *saying* (e.g., revelation), a dichotomy that I shall overturn in due course. Kelsey is typical of cultural-linguistic theologians who appeal to the Spirit's use of the biblical text rather than to the text's verbal meaning.

better indicator of what they really believe about its authority than what they profess. Yet Kelsey seems unaware of the danger of conflating biblical authority with its ecclesial use. Some uses of Scripture may be inappropriate or incorrect.[38]

Given the present authority-of-interpretative-communities climate, *sola scriptura* seems a less likely solution than ever to the problem of theological authority, and a less likely candidate for "savior" of Protestantism. Tradition, it would seem, effectively trumps Scripture. Such a judgment is, however, peremptory, for the Scripture/tradition relationship is a good deal more complicated than any one-way picture suggests. Nonetheless, the momentum in contemporary Protestant theology, particularly when the topic is authority, is clearly toward *traditions of use*.[39]

Nor are all uses of Scripture strictly doctrinal. Many acknowledge Scripture's life-giving, sacramental *power* as well: "[T]he church must come to understand Scripture as a sacramental, poetic-like word, not as propositional truths, an expression of human experience, or mere information for practical living."[40] An even happier scenario would be one in which we did not have to choose between the Bible's truth and its affective power! Indeed, it is an important assumption in the present work that the imagination is a cognitive instrument, and that Scripture, in addressing our imaginations, speaks to our minds, wills, and emotions alike. While some in the church decry using the Bible to generate doctrine, preferring to emphasize Scripture's ability to reframe "our way of seeing the world and understanding our lives,"[41] it is preferable to see doctrine itself as an indispensable cognitive and imaginative instrument for shaping the life of the church.

The Way, the Truth, and the Life: Theory versus Practice

One important contributing factor to the cultural-linguistic turn is the perception that doctrines as traditionally conceived are "theoretical" and hence unrelated to the concrete practice of the church. The deeper problem, however, is the captivating picture of the theory/practice dichotomy itself. The new emphasis on church practice in the wake of the cultural-linguistic turn rightly reminds us that theology involves a way of life, not merely a system of belief. Christian theology ultimately has to do with Jesus: "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

A New "Ugly Ditch"

Earlier generations of theologians had to cope with G. E. Lessing's "ugly ditch" between the accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason. Theo-

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38. I do not wish to minimize the difficulty in discerning "correct" from "incorrect." At the same time, I believe that the ability to reform the church largely depends on making just such discerning judgments, judgments that arise not from some humanly devised exegetical method but from a prayerful combination of attention to the Word and attention to the Spirit.

39. See my "Scripture and Tradition," in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 149–69.

40. John Burgess, *Why Scripture Matters: Reading the Bible in a Time of Church Conflict* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), xvi.

41. Ibid., 39.

logians in late modernity face another, equally ugly divide. No dichotomy is as fatal to the notion of doctrinal theology as that of theory and practice, a mortal fault line that runs through the academy and church alike. Seminaries in particular are familiar with the tension between the so-called theoretical disciplines (e.g., systematic theology, biblical studies, church history) that are oriented to knowledge and the so-called practical disciplines (e.g., pastoral theology, pastoral counseling, Christian education) that seek to develop ministerial and professional skills.

"Theory" is the darling of ancients and moderns alike. In Greek philosophy, *theoria* refers to the eternal truths that one beholds with the mind's eye (from Gk. *theōreō*: "I behold"). For modern thinkers, theory is the product of universal reason or the scientific method and has unmatched explanatory power. In the eyes of its critics, however, theory is abstract, speculative, and generally *impractical*, both in the sense that its concern is with knowledge rather than practical application and because it is based on something other than experience or practice. Postmoderns reject the universal claims of theory; the mind's eye is clouded by language, culture, race, gender, class, embodiedness.

Theory's fall from postmodern grace may be to theology's advantage. Stanley Hauerwas rightly claims that Christianity is distorted when it is treated merely as a system of beliefs.[42] The cultural-linguistic insight is that theology is connected to the life of the church. Doctrines arise not from speculative theories but from the core practices—baptism, the Eucharist, prayer, worship—that constitute the ongoing life and identity of the church.

Bridging the Ditch: The Way of Wisdom

The theory/practice distinction, together with the contrast between doctrine and life to which it gives rise, is toxic to Christian faith and to the project of faith seeking understanding. The present work seeks to move theology away from theoretical knowledge in order to reorient it toward wisdom. It is this picture of theology as wisdom that, more than anything else, enables us to traverse the ugly ditch between theory and practice.

Theological knowledge is neither merely theoretical nor instrumental; it has less to do with *scientia* than with *sapientia*: "Sapience includes correct information about God but emphasizes attachment to that knowledge. Sapience is engaged knowledge that emotionally connects the knower to the known."[43] Theology involves both theory (knowledge) and practice (life) for the sake of its pastoral function: assisting people to enjoy and glorify God.

Perhaps the best way to overcome the theory/practice dichotomy is to let the subject matter of Christian theology determine theology's task. *Jesus Christ is the word and wisdom of God, the revealer and the redeemer: the way, the truth, and*

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42. See Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

43. Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

the life. Several points follow for theology from this astounding identification. First, theology must be concerned with what each of these terms represents; it must deal with truth, with ways of living, and with the meaning of life. Second, it must keep all three in mind at once. Focusing on *truth* to the exclusion of *way* and *life* leads to a preoccupation with theory; conversely, a preoccupation with *way* and *life* can lead to pragmatism. Christian doctrine, similarly, should serve the purpose of fostering *truthful ways of living*. Faith gets understanding when it lets the history of Jesus Christ govern the meaning of "way," "truth," and "life." Finally, theology must make the way, truth, and life of Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture its primal and final norm.

The Way

The earliest name for Christianity was the "Way" (Acts 9:2).[44] To belong to a way is to follow it. Walking is a frequent biblical image for a person's lifestyle or pattern of conduct. Christians are to walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), in love (Eph. 5:2), and in wisdom (Col. 4:5). Jesus' self-designation in John 14:6 picks up imagery from the Old Testament that would have been well known to his listeners, most notably that of the two contrasting ways or walks depicted in Psalm 1. This wisdom psalm opposes the way of the righteous, which leads to life, to the way of the wicked, which leads to death. The books of Kings and Chronicles afford frequent examples of kings who "walked in the [evil] way of the kings of Israel" (2 Chr. 21:6), along with a few exceptions who "walked in . . . the way of . . . David" (2 Kgs. 22:2).

To be a Christian is to belong to Jesus' way, to be actively oriented and moving in the same direction as Jesus, toward the kingdom of God. The Johannine epistles encourage Christians to walk "in the light" (1 John 1:7), "just as he [Jesus] walked" (1 John 2:6). What is this way? The Johannine epistles define the Christian way in terms of following truth (2 John 4) and following love (2 John 6). Just as noteworthy as the designation itself is its context: persecution. Those who belong to the "Way" may expect to suffer for their life witness to the truth.[45] Augustine's comment is apt: "What is 'walking as Christ walked'? Walking upon the sea? No, it is walking in the way of righteousness. . . . Nailed fast upon the Cross, he was walking in the way—the way of charity."[46] Jesus' life, passion, and death together thus define the Christian "way."

The Truth

To confess Jesus as the truth is to affirm his way as utterly reliable—true in the sense of trustworthy. It is trustworthy because Jesus is the truth of God. Jesus

44. Other instances of the term as a designation for Christians may be found in Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22. I return to the metaphor of the way in chap. 9, in the context of theology as an exercise in "mapping" the way.
45. The church, I shall say in chap. 12, is a "theater of martyrdom."
46. Augustine, "First Homily on 1 John," in John Burnaby, ed., *Augustine: Later Works,* Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 266.

knows God the Father, corresponds to God the Father, and makes God the Father known: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Jesus' way is the way of the Father: "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Such claims lie behind what has come to be known as the scandal of particularity, the outrageous thesis that the God who is too great to be comprehended and too terrible to be seen is somehow present, hidden/revealed in the pale Palestinian: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb. 1:3, NIV). Finally, the way is trustworthy because Jesus is the truth of humanity. Following Jesus' way promotes human flourishing (*shalom*) and leads to the *summum bonum*: life, eternal and abundant.

The Life

Jesus is life, which is more than a matter of biology. Scripture depicts life as more than sheer physical existence. Life has to do with being in God's gracious, life-giving presence. The supreme covenant blessing in ancient Israel was being with God, signified by the cloud that covered the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–38). Sin, by contrast, alienates us from God and thus from the source of life. To have "life" in the theological sense is to be in a relationship of fellowship with God; to have life is to be included in the life of God. Doctrine is surely not unrelated to life in this sense. Indeed, it is precisely because doctrine is always and only about life— that vital fellowship with the triune God—that it issues in doxology.

From Theory to Theater

To the list of theology's fourfold tasks—celebrating, coping, criticizing, communicating—we may now add a fifth: *continuing.* Christian theology seeks to *continue* the way of truth and life, not by admiring it from afar but by following and embodying it. Following this way involves more than adopting a certain ethic. More basic than external conformity to a moral code is the disciples' fellowship with the one who is the way. Yet inner commitment is not the whole story either. "Following" the way ultimately requires using the imagination as well; for the way of Jesus Christ is more an embodied story than it is an embodied argument, and as we shall see, it is largely thanks to the imagination that disciples are able to relate the story of Jesus to the story of their own lives.

The Christian way is not something one can behold (*theōreō*) or contemplate with the mind's eye only. Doctrine seeks not simply to state theoretical truths but to embody truth in ways of living. There is, however, another kind of beholding, more active and self-involving, associated not with philosophy but with the theater (*theaomai*). The Christian way is fundamentally *dramatic,* involving speech and action on behalf of Jesus' truth and life. It concerns the way of living truthfully, and its claim to truth cannot be isolated from the way of life with which it is associated. For the way one lives *bodies forth* one's beliefs about the true, the good, and the beautiful, so much so that it becomes difficult "to separate the person from the thesis or argument or doctrine uttered by the

person."[47] The purpose of doctrine is to ensure that those who bear Christ's name walk in Christ's way. Far from being irrelevant to "life," then, doctrine gives shape to life "in Christ."

The metaphor of the theater involves more than theoretical beholding, and this in two ways. First, an audience is more than a group of passive (or impassive) observers. Spectators typically have more than a theoretical interest in the drama as it unfolds on the stage. One of the principal purposes of the theater, according to Aristotle, is to achieve "catharsis." There is thus a degree of emotional and imaginative investment in the kind of beholding that takes place in a theater that goes beyond the disinterested speculation of theorists. Second, and more important, theology is more than a spectator sport. To anticipate the argument of later chapters: the main purpose of doctrine is to equip Christians to understand and participate in the action of the principal players (namely, Father, Son, and Spirit). Theatrical beholding overcomes the theory/praxis dichotomy, then, when it insists on audience participation.[48]

Thinking of doctrine in dramatic rather than theoretical terms provides a wonderfully engaging and integrative model for understanding what it means to follow—with all our mind, heart, soul, and strength—the way, truth, and life embodied and enacted in Jesus Christ. As such, it does justice to the cultural-linguistic turn and the concomitant emphasis on practice, and at the same time opens up interesting new possibilities for conceiving the relationship of Scripture (the script of the gospel) and the life of the church (the performance of the gospel).

THE THESIS: THE CANONICAL-LINGUISTIC APPROACH

The cultural-linguistic turn characteristic of postliberal and other types of postmodern theology is a salient reminder that theology exists to serve the life of the church. Yet the turn to church practice seems to have come at the expense of biblical authority. The *canonical*-linguistic approach to be put forward in the present book has much in common with its cultural-linguistic cousin. Both agree that meaning and truth are crucially related to language use; however, the canonical-linguistic approach maintains that the normative use is ultimately not that of ecclesial *culture* but of the biblical *canon*.

The burden of the present work is to commend the canonical-linguistic approach to theologians for its turn to practice, for its emphasis on wisdom, and for its creative retrieval of the principle of *sola scriptura*. One of its fundamental theses is that *sola scriptura* refers not to an abstract principle but to a *concrete theological practice*: a *performance* practice, namely, the practice of corresponding in one's speech and action to the word of God. The supreme *norm* for church prac-

tice is Scripture itself: not Scripture as used by the church but Scripture as used by God, even, or perhaps especially, when such use is *over against* the church: "And the task of theology is just that: to exemplify the church facing the resistance of the gospel."[49] Canonical-linguistic theology attends both to the drama *in* the text—what God is doing in the world through Christ—and to the drama that continues in the church as God uses Scripture to address, edify, and confront its readers. Let us consider more carefully these dramatic dimensions of doctrine.

The Understanding That Faith Seeks Is Dramatic

Any discussion concerning the future of Protestant theology must reckon with Karl Barth's contention (against Harnack, among other liberals) that the subject matter of theology must determine its method. "Objectivity" in theology is a matter of attending to its matter, or rather, to its speaking and acting subject: the self-revealing God.[50] At the heart of Christianity lies a series of divine words and divine acts that culminate in Jesus Christ: the definitive divine Word/Act. The gospel—God's self-giving in his Son through the Spirit—is intrinsically *dramatic*, a matter of signs and speeches, actions and sufferings. At the same time, it is easy to see why the church has been ambivalent about the theater. The only explicit New Testament reference to a "theater" is found in Acts 19, where it was the site of a riot in Ephesus against Paul's missionary activity. Paul's friends "urg[ed] him not to venture into the theater" (Acts 19:31). Subsequent generations of Christians have been happy to follow Paul's example, eschewing not only the theater, but the dramatic imagination as well.

Yet what faith struggles to grasp is "what we have seen and heard" (1 John 1:3). Doctrine is a response to something *beheld*—beheld not theoretically but, as it were, theatrically: a *lived* performance. For the "word of life" is nothing less than the life of Jesus, the Word—a *historical* drama. "His story is the non-doctrinal basis upon which doctrine rests."[51] The gospel continues to be seen (in baptism and the Lord's Supper) and heard (in preaching); these are the means through which Christ becomes present to his people. In a real sense, therefore, *we* have seen and heard the gospel, in its twofold form of Word and sacrament. What faith seeks to understand is inherently *dramatic*.

Hans Urs von Balthasar employs the theatrical metaphor to good effect in his multivolume work *Theo-drama*.[52] The term *theo-drama* calls attention to the action of God (e.g., creation, redemption) in which the church finds itself caught

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47. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1990), 201.
48. I explore the idea of participatory theater in the final chapter.

49. John Webster, "The Church as Witnessing Community," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 21 (2003): 22.
50. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2 §23 and §24 on the formal and material tasks of dogmatic theology. See also Christoph Schwöbel, "Theology," in John Webster, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17–36.
51. Loughlin, "Basis and Authority of Doctrine," 53.
52. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vols. 1–5 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988–98).

up. The present work, while acknowledging this emphasis, focuses not simply on the dramatic nature of the *content* of Christian doctrine but, more particularly and distinctly, *on the dramatic nature of Christian doctrine itself.* Both the process and the product of faith's search for understanding are properly dramatic.

Doctrine indicates the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus Christ and directs us to step on out. Doctrine thus resembles "stage directions for the church's performance of the gospel."[53] Doctrines are less propositional statements or static rules than they are life-shaping dramatic directions: "Doctrines serve as imaginative lenses through which to view the world. Through them, one learns how to relate to other persons, how to act in community, how to make sense of truth and falsehood, and how to understand and move through the varied terrain of life's everyday challenges."[54] Doctrines are "like loose but nonetheless definitive scripts that persons of faith perform; doctrines are the drama in which we live out our lives."[55] All this is very encouraging for disciples who wish to overcome the theory/practice dichotomy in order to continue following the way.

Biblical Interpretation Is Dramatic

The drama of doctrine is rooted in Israel's history and is narrated with a high degree of literary sophistication so as to establish a worldview.[56] The biblical narrative is a three-dimensional discourse that operates with historical, literary, and ideological principles. The remembered past is rendered through a plot, which in turn renders a proposition: a possible way of viewing and living in the world.[57] The reader, thus propositioned, becomes a player in the ongoing drama of creation and redemption: "As a participant in this historical process, the reader is *spoken to* in the text."[58] Inside the story, God acts to reveal himself and to save

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53. Loughlin, "Basis and Authority of Doctrine," 54. Everything depends on where the directions come from. If doctrine is merely descriptive of what Christians typically say and do, as is the case in the cultural-linguistic approach, it will be unable to criticize and correct Christian malpractice. Loughlin's solution—to appeal to the Lordship of Christ over doctrine as exercised through the Spirit—has the net effect of making the corporate life of the church (as the locus of the Spirit's work) the final arbiter of doctrinal meaning and authority: "Thus the Bible has no real meaning for the church—has no authority over its doctrine—outside of that conversation which is finally the tradition of the church in all its diversity, in all its conversations, both intra- and extra-ecclesial" (58). I return to this question in part 3.

54. Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 16.

55. Ibid., 17.

56. This is the thesis of Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

57. Sternberg suggests that history mediates ideology and aesthetics: on the one hand, history is the locus of divine action and providence; on the other, history is shaped like a story (ibid., 45). N. T. Wright sees the same three factors—story, history, theology—at work in the New Testament (see his *The New Testament and the People of God*, part 1 [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996]). Cf. Hans Frei's remark that "theological reading is the reading of the *text*, and not the reading of a *source* which is how historians read it" (*Types of Christian Theology*, 11).

58. John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001), 77.

his people; there follow various tests of memory, gratitude, and obedience. Outside the story, the readers face the same challenge: Will they understand, remember, and respond accordingly to "what we have seen and heard" about God in and from the text? Hence the *process* of faith's search for understanding—seeing, hearing, engaging, and reflecting upon "what we have seen and heard" through reading—is itself a matter of high drama.

For better or for worse, Scripture makes "tyrannical" demands on the reader: "The Scripture stories do not, like Homer's, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels."[59] The notion that Scripture makes "demands" is likely to offend some readers, who will feel the claim as an assault on their freedom, interpretative and otherwise. The demand arises, however, from a conviction as to what reality is like ("what we have seen and heard") and from a concern to bring readers into alignment with it. The demand arises, as Barth saw with peculiar lucidity, from the requirement that theology correspond to its subject matter—the word of God—with faith and obedience.

Some literary critics have recently called attention to the connections between reading texts, gaining knowledge, and shaping character.[60] The drama of reading Scripture ultimately involves the fate of text and reader alike: Will the text succeed in establishing its worldview? Will the reader be decisively shaped through the process? There is potential for dramatic conflict not merely within the story but in the very process of reading in which the reader struggles, sometimes spiritually, with the text. It is tempting—all too tempting!—to hear one's own voice in Scripture. For example, the suggestion that "doctrinal dramas be tested in the concrete lives of women"[61] risks making a particular kind of human experience a touchstone for what is doctrinally acceptable and hence a de facto authority. Like other "advocacy theologies" that attempt to do theology from the perspective of the experience of a particular social or gender or racial group, this procedure mistakenly locates Christian identity other than where it belongs, namely, "in Christ."[62]

In sum, to speak of the "drama of doctrine" is to call attention to what is involved, and what is at stake, in doing theology. The drama stems from the clash between the ideology (read: theology) of the text and that of the reader, on the one hand, and from the conflict of disciplinary approaches, methods, and rival ways of reading the text, on the other. One goal of the present work is to model a postcritical approach to biblical interpretation that respects both the principle—or rather, practice—of *sola scriptura* and the location of the interpretative community that nevertheless results in performance knowledge and doctrinal truth.

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59. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 15.

60. See, for example, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

61. Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 18.

62. It is also possible that advocacy theologies misappropriate or misunderstand the catholicity of the church. I return to the question of doctrine and Christian identity in chap. 11.

The Theater of Exegetical Operations

The way forward is complicated by what amounts to a near consensus among biblical scholars that there is no place for doctrine in the exegetical inn. Philip Davies speaks for many biblical critics who resist reading the Bible as "Scripture": "I prefer to see theological reading as a legitimate option *among others*, and based not on a claim about the objective character of its contents but on the decision of the Church . . . to adopt this literature as a canon."[63] For Davies, the church's interpretative interest possesses no more authority than any other interpretative community. "Right reading" is a tradition-dependent, community-based notion. Those who do not want to engage in the theological interpretation of Scripture can join another game: deconstruction, structuralism, or any one of a variety of critical approaches available in the smorgasbord of contemporary criticism. Yet, if this is all biblical interpretation amounts to, if reading the Bible to meet Jesus Christ is merely one (legitimate?) option among others, can the church continue seriously to maintain that the one to whom the biblical text witnesses is the way, the truth, and the life?

When did exegetes lose interest in theology? When nontheological interests replaced theological interests, of course: "In the self-assured world of modernity people seek to make sense of the Scriptures, instead of hoping, with the aid of the Scriptures, to make some sense of themselves."[64] Biblical scholars should not be too surprised if, having cast out the "evil spirit" of dogmatic theology, seven others, more wicked still, rush in to take its place.

One is hard pressed to say which is uglier: the ditch separating theory and practice or the ditch that separates exegesis and theology. Both are unnatural, even perverse, not least because doctrine is largely a matter of exegesis, of providing "analyses of the logic of the scriptural discourse."[65] The Bible, similarly, is largely a matter of theology. The great irony of modern biblical studies, however, is that doctrinal considerations have been excluded from any significant role in the exegetical task, thus preventing exegetes fully from engaging with the primary subject matter of the biblical texts: the word of God. Biblical critics are content to use the texts as evidence for a reconstructed history of "what actually happened." However, there is "a world of difference between approaching the Bible as suspect information and as supernatural communication . . . the first approach is instrumental, the second interpretative."[66] Forms of exegesis that treat the biblical texts as data rather than as bearers of divine discourse are distinctly *undramatic*.

63. Philip Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel,"* JSOT Supplement 148, rev. ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 19n.4.
64. Nicholas Lash, "When Did Theologians Lose Interest in Theology?" in *The Beginning and the End of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 148.
65. David Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," in Stephen Fowl, ed., *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 87.
66. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 34.

Consider Jesus' "exegesis" of God the Father (John 1:18), by way of contrast. One can study the life of Jesus from a number of angles, to be sure, but if one misses *this* one—his making God the Father known—one misses what is arguably the whole point. A similar point could be made with regard to the Gospels, which are theological "exegeses" of Jesus. Again, it is possible to read the Gospels from a number of angles, and for a variety of purposes; but if one misses their theological interpretation of Jesus Christ, one misses what is arguably the whole point. Herein is the suspense of the drama of reading: Will readers find or miss "the Way"?

The Trial of Interpretation

Biblical interpretation is not only generally dramatic but resembles a courtroom drama in particular. Paul Ricoeur notes some interesting parallels between the process of textual interpretation and the process of a legal trial.[67] In a trial, the jury reaches a verdict by interpreting the evidence, the bulk of which consists of spoken or written testimony. Conversely, arguing over the interpretation of a text is like a trial in which rival attorneys seek to convince the jury that one "reading" of the case and its evidence is more plausible than the other. Our competence as readers—as witnesses who attest to "what we have seen and heard"; as jury members seeking to do justice to the evidence—is thus on trial every time we interpret the Bible. For we attest what we believe—about texts, about God, about ourselves—in each and every one of our interpretations. The trial of interpretation ultimately concerns not the text but the interpreter: Will readers respond to the word of the Lord appropriately or not?[68]

Canonical-Linguistic Theology Is Dramatic

If both the subject matter of Scripture (God in self-communicative action) and the process of interpreting it are dramatic, then so too is theology, the task of bringing one's interpretation of Scripture to bear on the life of the church in the world. *The drama of doctrine is about refining the dross of textual knowledge into the gold of Christian wisdom by putting one's understanding of the Scriptures into practice.* Like medicine, doctrinal truth is of no use unless it is appropriated. But how ought one to take doctrine? Intellectual assent is not enough; doctrine needs to capture not only the mind but the emotions and the imagination as well—what the Bible calls the "heart." We need to appropriate, embrace, even indwell doctrinal truth. *The proper end of the drama of doctrine is wisdom: lived knowledge, a performance of the truth.*

67. For Paul Ricoeur's development and defense of the analogy, see his "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," in John B. Thomason, ed., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 197–221, esp. 203–9.
68. John Webster identifies the distinct "hermeneutical situation" of the Christian reader in terms of the divine address. No other text demands to be read as the word of God. See Webster, *Word and Church*, 47–86, esp. 58.

Canonical-linguistic theology conjoins the postliberal emphasis on theology as church practice with the notion of biblical interpretation as performance in order to set forth a dramatic conception of doctrine. Doctrine is the bridge between the gospel as theo-drama and theology as gospel performance. *Canonical-linguistic theology gives scriptural direction for one's fitting participation in the drama of redemption today.* This involves taking account of the biblically scripted theo-drama together with its historical reception, as well as the stage and setting (e.g., the cultural, social, and intellectual contexts) in which new scenes are played out. What is finally at stake in the drama of doctrine is following "the Way" as the people of God enter new and uncharted intellectual and cultural territory.

Canonical Script

At the heart of the canonical-linguistic approach is the proposal that we come to know God by attending to the uses to which language of God is put in Scripture itself. Scripture's own use of Scripture is of particular interest, for the cradle of Christian theology is perhaps best located in the interpretative practice of Jesus and the apostles. It was this interpretative practice that enabled them to read the Scriptures of Israel as identifying Jesus as the "Christ." Canonical-linguistic theology therefore takes its primary bearings from the Scriptures themselves, making what we shall call *canonical practices* the norm for the church's speech and thought of God. *Sola scriptura* returns, then, not by positing the Bible as a textbook filled with propositional information but by viewing the Bible as a script that calls for faithful yet creative performance. Scripture is the norm for the Christian way, truth, and life, but only when Scripture is conceived as more than a handbook of propositional truths.[69]

Ecclesial Situation

The church, far from being marginalized by canonical-linguistic theology, is actually in the thick of the drama. It is the unique privilege and responsibility of the people of God to perform the Scriptures and continue the way. Indeed, the church constitutes a socially embodied, ongoing argument that claims God is good to and for humanity. The church's lived interpretation of Scripture inevitably partakes of both gospel and culture, however. This is one reason for not making church practices the norm for Christian theology. *Neither tradition nor practice can be the supreme norm for Christian theology, because each is susceptible to error.* Practices become deformed; traditions become corrupt.[70]

One does theology a disservice when one neglects either the canon or the community. Both have their proper place, and the burden of the present work is to give

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69. I return to a discussion of the role of propositions in chap. 10.

70. Nicholas Healy argues that one of the most important tasks for today's church is to acknowledge ecclesial sin, both failures and corruptions of the church's mission (Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 9–13). In part 2, I consider not only traditions but Tradition, together with the argument that the latter is as divinely superintended by the Spirit as the Bible itself.

an account of their proper locations and relations. Readers should not be misled by the epithet *canonical-linguistic* and (mistakenly) infer that I have no interest in the contemporary ecclesial situation. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, it is precisely out of a concern for the contemporary situation of the church that this book is written. One may rehabilitate *sola scriptura* without neglecting the church's present situation, or the other *solas* (*sola gratia, sola fide,* and *solus Christus*). Indeed, the thrust of the present argument is that the practice of *sola scriptura* is the best way to serve the church and to preserve the lordship of Christ.

Canonical Substance

What is ultimately at stake in the canon, and in Christian theology itself, is a trial of truth, namely, the capacity of human beings to recognize God and to realize his image in their lives. Accordingly, the trial motif stands as a figure for both the matter and the method of canonical-linguistic theology.

The Covenant Brief

As to the matter, the motif of the lawsuit is part of a cluster of related themes that we may ultimately trace back to God's covenant relation with Israel. On the one hand, God makes an unconditional promise to Abraham: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2–3). For their part, the children of Abraham are to express their commitment to the covenant through their gratitude and obedience. The book of Deuteronomy spells out Israel's covenant privileges and responsibilities. Both parties to the covenant promise to be faithful according to their roles as covenant Lord and covenant people, respectively. As the people of the new covenant, the church, too, has privileges and responsibilities. The drama of doctrine continues the same covenant brief in a new key.

The Covenant Lawsuit

Much of the Old Testament recounts the history of Israel's covenant faithfulness and unfaithfulness. Through the prophets, God brings quasi-legal complaints against Israel in response to its disobedience: "For the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land" (Hos. 4:1). Conversely, human beings can bring complaints or accusations against God, as in Job 23:1–7, where Job questions the justice of the divine judge. What is ultimately at stake in all these trials is not simply the people's faithfulness but the very identity of God.

Israel wonders whether Yahweh will be faithful and bring about the return of his people from exile; Yahweh wonders whether Israel will be faithful and trust him to do so. It is significant that Scripture introduces the name of God (Yahweh) in the context of a recital of his mighty acts: "the LORD brought you out of Egypt" (Exod. 13:9). The underlying issue is whether God can do what he promises—whether God keeps his word. God eventually brings a case against Israel and the nations; the nations fail to recognize God, and Israel fails in its servant role to be a light unto the nations. The trial motif is especially prominent in the contest

between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), where what is ultimately at stake is the identity of Yahweh as an agent of covenant blessing (e.g., rain). The identity of God is again at stake in Isaiah 41–45, where the issue is whether God is the ultimate agent behind the victories of King Cyrus.

The Trial of Truth

What is on trial throughout Scripture is nothing less than the truth: the truth about the identity and agency of God, about the meaning of history, about the gods and religions of the nations, about the faithfulness of Israel. God's word is the word of truth, not only because it is true but because of its power to attest truth and to expose falsehood. Hence what is ultimately on trial is not God's truth but our response to it. This becomes even more explicit when we consider the trial of Jesus as it is depicted in the Fourth Gospel.

The Fourth Gospel prefaces its account of the crucifixion with a narrative of a three-stage trial. Jesus is tried before the high priest (John 18:12–23), before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (John 18:24–27), and finally before the Roman governor Pilate (John 18:28–19:16). As commentators have pointed out, Jesus is on trial concerning his identity *throughout* the Fourth Gospel.[71] Everything that Jesus says and does is a form of "testimony" concerning his true identity. Jesus ties his own identity to that of God by attributing his miracles to the Father's power: "[T]he very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf" (John 5:36–37). These fascinating scenes indirectly address the question of God's identity by way of addressing the identity of Jesus: Does he reveal the Father or not?

The Fourth Gospel is structured so that by the end the reader, too, is drawn into the trial that has been implicit all along. Like Pilate, the reader too must render a verdict: "The Fourth Gospel is not simply about a trial; it is itself a testimony in the trial."[72] The rhetorical effect of the narrative is to force Jesus' question to his disciples—"Who do you say that I am?"—upon us, the readers. *Both the gospel and theology confront us with the need to make a judgment about the identity of God and the identity of Jesus Christ.* "Who do you say that I am?" By answering this question, we not only render our verdict concerning the identity of Christ; we identify ourselves.

The Trial of Doctrine

The first priority in the drama of doctrine, then, is correctly to identify the principal protagonists and to determine what they have done. Yahweh's case against Israel consists in a single, though utterly serious charge, namely, infidelity. This infidelity stems from incorrect theological judgments; for the distinction between true and false religion depends on correctly identifying God. One of the princi-

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71. See Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000). Lincoln notes that the trial motif is a good meeting point for literary, historical, and theological modes of inquiry into the biblical text.
72. Ibid., 170.

pal functions of doctrine is "to help protect correct reference by disciplining our manifold propensity toward idolatry. Idolatry is a matter of getting the reference wrong: of taking that to be God which is not God."[73]

Yet doctrine involves more than referring to God. Indeed, doctrinal truth has less to do with theorems or axioms than with theological judgments—with decisions about what we should say and do here and now in order to correspond to God's word.[74] Doctrine helps the people of God to participate fittingly in the drama of redemption, and so to be true and faithful witnesses to God's incarnate wisdom. *The canonical-linguistic approach to theology has as its goal the training of competent and truthful witnesses who can themselves incarnate, in a variety of situations, the wisdom of Christ gleaned from indwelling canonical practices and their ecclesial continuations.* In an increasingly complex world, the church needs members who are able to draw on cruciform wisdom to make the right judgments as to how to continue the way of Jesus Christ. Viewed against this backdrop, the church is less the cradle of Christian theology than its *crucible*: the place where the community's understanding of faith is lived, tested, and reformed.

THE VISION: A CATHOLIC-EVANGELICAL ORTHODOXY

This book is written for those who wish to be part of the ongoing conversation concerning the nature and purpose of Christian doctrine and the future of theology after modernity. It is written for those theologians (and this includes pastors and laypersons) who have not yet lost interest in theology. It is written above all for those who seek to rehabilitate Christian doctrine for the good of the church and its mission to the world. It is written, finally, for those who desire not only to proclaim the good news of the gospel but to live in its light.

An Evangelical Theology

Christian theology pertains to those deep-set convictions to which our most important canonical beliefs and catholic practices ultimately commit us. It is the project of speaking and acting with others in ways consistent with the gospel. To mention the gospel (*euangelion, evangel* = "gospel") and theology in the same breath is, of course, to raise the question of "evangelicalism." So-called Evangelicals are not, of course, the only Christians interested in the gospel.[75] Yet their

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73. Lash, *Beginning and End of Religion*, 134.
74. I return to the notion of "judgment" in part 3 under the rubric of *phronesis*. Here it only needs to be said that correct theological judgments are the result of prayerful deliberation and discernment—the fear of the Lord!—rather than of some moral or theoretical calculus.
75. I use the capitalized term *Evangelical* in a sociohistorical sense to refer to those Protestants, largely but not exclusively in Britain and North America, who trace their Christian heritage back to the revival movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I employ the lowercase term *evangelical* in the technical and more restricted sense of "pertaining or corresponding to the gospel."

self-designation signals their ambition: to be people of the gospel. It is a bold name, and one that often fits only uncomfortably. What began as a reform movement in confessional orthodoxy has become a "movement" in its own right, complete with institutions that often simply ape their surrounding secular culture.[76] Many Evangelicals have unknowingly made the cultural-linguistic turn already, though the cultures they have appropriated have not been altogether holy. Practices that owe more to managerial, therapeutic, consumerist, and entertainment cultures increasingly characterize Evangelical churches, so much so that they are in danger of becoming the de facto, if not the de jure, authority for the Evangelical way of life. Jesus himself remains popular, to be sure; his cruciform way, less so.

The present work avoids using the term *evangelical* to refer to a particular sociocultural segment of the Christian church. The intent is to reclaim the biblical-theological sense of the term over against a particular demographic designation. The hope is that we might thereby reclaim (in the dual sense of *claiming again* and *salvaging*) the epithet *evangelical* for theology. At present, we must employ this qualifier with some diffidence, painfully aware that it all too often stands more for an ambition than an achievement. Or rather, if it stands for an achievement, it is God's, not that of North American Christianity. The core "evangelical" conviction is that God has spoken and acted in Jesus Christ and that God speaks and acts in the canonical Scriptures that testify to him. In the beginning, *God*—not philosophy, not religion, not nature, not ethics, not genius, not even the church. An evangelical theology begins at the beginning, with God's speech and action.

Canonical-linguistic theology represents a way beyond the debilitating standoff between propositionalist and nonpropositionalist modes of conceiving revelation, Scripture, and theology. Evangelicals have been quick to decry the influence of modernism on liberal theology but not to see the beam of modern epistemology in their own eye. The present work articulates what an evangelical theology with a postpropositionalist Scripture principle and an ear cocked to the postmodern condition should look like. Theology may learn from postmodernity without correlating with or capitulating to it, the most important lesson being to orient theology toward the goal of practical wisdom rather than mere theoretical knowledge.[77] The hallmarks of such a theology include a christocentric focus, a canonical framework, and a catholic flavor. The aim of such a theology is performative understanding and creative fidelity. Evangelical theology is a matter of "joyful faith seeking creative understanding" of the word and act of God.

76. See Robert H. Gundry, *Jesus the Word according to John the Sectarian: A Paleofundamentalist Manifesto for Contemporary Evangelicalism, Especially Its Elites, in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).

77. See further my "Pilgrim's Digress: Christian Thinking on and about the Post/Modern Way," in Myron Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

A Catholic-Evangelical Orthodoxy

To be oriented to the gospel is to be oriented to the biblical texts, Old and New Testament alike, that provide both its context of intelligibility and its authoritative formulation. The evangelical is a person of the book only because he or she is first and foremost a person of the gospel. It is naive, however, to think that either I or my community alone know exhaustively what the Bible means. If twentieth-century hermeneutics has anything to teach us, it is that our readings and interpretations of texts are never neutral—as though we could simply step out of our skins: our place, our time, our culture, our social situation—nor exhaustive, as though we could escape our finitude. It follows that Scripture is always read from within a certain interpretative tradition.

No one period, culture, or denomination has a monopoly on the label "evangelical" in the sense of "corresponding (for all time) to the gospel." It would be most regrettable if the church everywhere and at all times had to conform to, say, 1970s North American Evangelicalism. North American Evangelicalism in any decade of the twentieth century provides only a few, limited snapshots of what the Christian faith looks like when incarnated in a specific place and period. No one reception of the gospel does full justice to its rich meaning and truth. To put it in hermeneutical terms: no one commentary on the Gospels can take the Gospels' place. A single commentary, no matter how faithful to the text, is still partial. Being *canonical* is not enough; theology must also be *catholic*.

"Catholicity" signifies the church as the whole people of God, spread out over space, across cultures, and through time. "We believe in one . . . *catholic* church." The evangelical unity of the church is compatible with a catholic diversity. To say that theology must be catholic, then, is to affirm the necessity of involving the *whole* church in the project of theology. No single denomination "owns" catholicity: catholicity is no more the exclusive domain of the Roman Church than the gospel is the private domain of evangelicals.[78] *Catholic* and *evangelical* belong together. To be precise: "catholic" qualifies "evangelical." The gospel designates a determinate word; catholicity, the scope of its reception. *"Evangelical" is the central notion, but "catholic" adds a crucial antireductionist qualifier that prohibits any one reception of the gospel from becoming paramount.*

The church in every age contains elements within its response to the gospel that are more or less faithful, which is another way of saying that its response is more or less distorting. That is precisely why no one reception of the text—neither commentary nor community—is equal to the gospel itself. Diversity can be positive and enriching unless it hardens into divergence, where instead of walking the way in a different manner, one sets out on a different way altogether. With this thought, we arrive at a major theological crossroad, and a significant problem for our study of doctrine. If the gospel is received by the church in different

78. So D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 222–23.

times and different places, under different linguistic, conceptual, and ideological conditions, in what does the *sameness* of the gospel consist? How can Christians affirm the same gospel and confess the same Jesus Christ, given the variations in social, historical, and cultural contexts? Here, too, is a parting of the conservative and liberal ways. The former treat doctrine as invariable; the latter feel free to revise. Do doctrines stretch, or do they break?

Let us recall the issue at the heart of the Harnack–Peterson correspondence. Which principle—Scripture (*sola scriptura*) or tradition (*ubi est ecclesia*)—better enables us to recognize valid forms of Christianity? Whereas there is a single (papal) voice in the Roman Catholic Church that arbitrates such disagreements, Protestantism "does not have the *structural* stability and coherence that would allow it (who?) to fix what is or is not normative or essential."[79] Given the cultural-linguistic turn, the temptation to locate criteria of legitimacy in ecclesial consensus has become nearly overpowering to many Protestants too.[80] A catholic-evangelical theology, if such a thing exists, would therefore represent a new vantage point from which to address the Scripture/tradition relationship in a nonreductive manner. For it is precisely the Scripture/tradition relationship that is ultimately at stake in searching for criteria with which to distinguish the gospel from the checkered history of its reception.

There is a connection between this catholic-evangelical theology and "generous orthodoxy."[81] Hans Frei notes that Lindbeck's proposal about the nature of doctrine is unintelligible apart from the background context of ecumenical dialogue.[82] Lindbeck's theory sets out to explain the phenomenon of doctrine reconciliation (e.g., between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on justification) without doctrinal change. Cut off from the background of that ecumenical reality, says Frei, we can "*forget [Lindbeck's] book.*"[83]

79. Daniel Raul Alvarez, "On the Impossibility of an Evangelical Theology," *Theology Today* 55 (1998): 192.

80. Kathryn Tanner helpfully suggests that church consensus may provide the formal criterion for the literal sense without being mistaken for its material specification ("Theology and the Plain Sense," 65). To cast Tanner's point in terms of the present discussion: catholicity may be a criterion for *recognizing* what is evangelical without determining its material content.

81. Douglas Ottati's image of a roundtable discussion is one way of thinking about generous orthodoxy (*Hopeful Realism: Reclaiming the Poetry of Theology* [Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999]; we may note parenthetically that George Caird uses the metaphor of the roundtable discussion to refer to the various canonical voices conversing in Scripture [*New Testament Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1–26]). Ottati resists polemical formulations of doctrine for two reasons: (1) they invariably presume a knowledge that exceeds our capacities, and (2) they usually result in reductive statements of the Christian faith. Ottati thus emphasizes the poetic nature of the "symbols" of the faith: cross, resurrection, incarnation. Words do not capture the wonder of God and God's works; the reality exceeds the rhyme. My own preferred metaphor for theology is not the roundtable but the theater in the round, in which there is not only deliberation but action and interaction.

82. Hans Frei, "Epilogue: George Lindbeck and *The Nature of Doctrine*," in Bruce Marshall, ed., *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1990), 277–78.

83. Ibid., 278.

I do not wish to forget Lindbeck's book. My chosen problematic—the Scripture/tradition relationship—will undoubtedly cast its shadow over the whole book, as the doctrine reconciliation/change problematic did Lindbeck's. Nevertheless, there is some overlap: catholic-evangelical theology is ecumenical in the sense that it aims to foster a lively dialogue among Christian voices across cultures and across centuries. However, the dialogue is not cacophonous but centered on the gospel and bounded by the canon, which is the gospel's normative specification. The aim of *evangelical* as opposed to ecumenical theology, however, is not unity (at least not initially) but truth and edification. Improbable as it may sound, *doctrine is one of the principal means God uses to build up his church.*

Orthodoxy is best described as "nonreductive" rather than "generous," and this for several reasons. First, we need to heed Alister McGrath's warning that recent accounts of the nature of doctrine, including Lindbeck's, have been skewed by a tendency to reduce phenomena "to their bare essentials, with all hints of complexity and ambiguity eliminated."[84] There is a tendency to say that doctrine is either "this" or "that": *either* a statement of how things are *or* an expression of my experience *or* a community rule for speech about God.[85] It is precisely to forestall such reductionism that this work proposes a directive notion of doctrine, which, as we shall see, is an expansive metaphor and has the capacity to preserve the cognitive, affective, and pragmatic dimensions of theology.

Orthodoxy is nonreductive in a second sense, because it resists privileging any one biblical literary form. Narrative theology is simply the most recent in a long line of theologies that tend to elevate one literary genre into the dominant interpretative framework. Examples are legion. B. B. Warfield reads all of Scripture as if it were didactic literature. At the other end of the theological spectrum, Rudolf Bultmann reads all of Scripture as if it were Wisdom literature: non-historical (mythical) expressions of human self-understanding. Wolfhart Pannenberg's eschatologically oriented theology enshrines apocalyptic as the way to understand the whole of Scripture. A nonreductive orthodoxy, by contrast, seeks to do justice to the variety of biblical literature and to respond to each literary form according to its own kind.

The canonical-linguistic approach similarly resists the tendency to reduce God's involvement with Scripture to one mode only. Kelsey convincingly demonstrates that theologians tend to "construe" the relationship of God and Scripture (and hence the nature of biblical authority) in a variety of ways (e.g., *as* history, *as* myth, *as* morality, *as* didactic teaching), each as reductive as the next. Moreover, Kelsey himself falls prey to such reductionism when he suggests that we conceive of the relationship of God to Scripture in terms of either "God saying" or

84. Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 35. For McGrath's verdict that Lindbeck's concept of doctrine is "strongly reductionist," see 34.

85. Another way of reducing doctrine would be to make one conceptual articulation of it, say, Anselm's formulation of the doctrine of the atonement, the standard for all time. I resist this form of reductionism too, as will become apparent in chap. 11.

"God doing." The model of drama opens up a way to view Scripture in the more elastic terms of God's *dialogical action*, where saying is a form of doing.

A nonreductive orthodoxy will be expansive, but not to the point of dissolution. The danger of including too many voices is that the message becomes garbled, drowned out in an unholy cacophony. Orthodoxy should be generous, but not to the point of giving away the shop. Like the universe itself, orthodoxy is poised somewhere between an infinite expansion and a "big crunch"—an instance of reductionism on the grandest scale, where everything that is gets squeezed into an infinitely dense point. In the theological counterpart to the cosmological drama, "evangelical," with its insistence on "no other gospel," refers to orthodoxy's centripetal force, while "catholic" stands for orthodoxy's centrifugal force: the church's reception of the gospel over the centuries and across cultures. Where "evangelical" reminds us that understanding is accountable to the gospel, "catholic" reminds us that the gospel is not monocultural. The *one* gospel is best understood in dialogue with the *many* saints. George Caird's comment on the love of Christ mentioned in Ephesians 3:18 is apt: "[I]t takes the combined experience of *all* Christians to *comprehend* it."[86]

In canonical-linguistic theology, the canon is the measure of *evangelical* and *catholic* alike inasmuch as it specifies both the center and the boundaries of Christian faith. What emerges from such a canonical-linguistic, catholic-evangelical theology is not a set of timeless propositions, nor an expression of religious experience, nor grammatical rules for Christian speech and thought, but rather an imagination that corresponds to and continues the gospel by making good theological judgments about what to say and do in light of the reality of Jesus Christ. By practicing the canon, we learn how best to witness to the way, how best to cultivate wisdom for living well with others, and how best to worship in all that we say and do to the glory of God. The hoped-for outcome of canonical-linguistic theology is nothing less than the missing link between right belief (orthodoxy) and wise practice (orthopraxis): *right judgment* (orthokrisis).

THE PLOT: A BRIEF SYNOPSIS

The following chapters develop the twin notions of doctrine as dramatic direction and the Christian life as performance interpretation. Aspects of these themes have been developed before. Balthasar has dealt extensively with "theo-drama," and Paul Ricoeur has produced an equally magisterial theory of textual interpretation that makes substantial use of the metaphor of performance. Neither, however, makes much of the other's leading theme. The present work therefore sets forth a theory of doctrine as *direction* as the connecting link between the gospel as theo-drama and theology as Scripture's performance.

86. George B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, New Clarendon Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 70 (his emphasis).

An important subplot concerning the Scripture/tradition relationship runs throughout the book. "Tradition" refers to the ongoing socially embodied argument into the meaning and significance of the church's foundation narratives that are gathered together in its Scriptures. This much is familiar. Reinhard Hütter's recent proposal—that the church is the soteriological locus of God's actions and that the core practices of the church are the works of the Holy Spirit—has the merit of adding a distinctly theological, and Trinitarian, qualification of tradition. What is less obvious, however, is that Scripture is itself an ongoing *canonically* embodied argument into the meaning and significance of what God was doing in Jesus Christ, that the canon too is the soteriological focus on God's actions, and that Scripture is equally the work of the Holy Spirit. To avoid opposing Spirit to Spirit, canonical-linguistic theology reconceives the Scripture/tradition relationship in terms of script and performance.

Part 1: The Drama

Part 1 presents my construal of what the "Christian thing" (to use David Kelsey's term) is all about. The gospel is "theo-dramatic"—a series of divine entrances and exits, especially as these pertain to what God has done in Jesus Christ. The gospel—both the Christ event and the canon that communicates it—thus appears as the climactic moment in the Trinitarian economy of divine self-communicative action (chap. 1). Theology responds and corresponds to God's prior word and deed; accordingly, theology itself is part of the theo-dramatic action. The mission of theology involves human speech and action, but what ultimately gives these significance is their role in the Trinitarian missions (chap. 2). This insight leads to a first statement of the *directive* theory of doctrine that lies at the heart of the present work. If theology is about the speech and action of the triune God and the church's response in word and deed, then doctrine is best viewed as direction for the church's fitting participation in the drama of redemption (chap. 3).

Part 2: The Script

Part 2 tackles a variety of issues that concern the relationship of Scripture (the canonical script) and tradition (church practices and performances) in order to address the question "Whose direction counts, and why?" This involves providing a theological account of the proper order in which the canon, tradition, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit stand in relation to one another. The canon is seen as a covenant document, the source and norm, the raconteur and provocateur, of the church's corporate identity and witness. Scripture is a *theo-dramatic* criterion that indicates how to go on following Jesus Christ (chap. 4). The overriding concern is to offer a theological (viz. theo-dramatic) description of the practices of the church, the practices of the canon, and their interrelationship. Accordingly, I contrast two ways in which the interpretative traditions of the church relate to

Scripture by distinguishing cultural-linguistic from canonical-linguistic perfor-mance interpretation (chap. 5).

The overall goal of part 2 is to reclaim the principle of *sola scriptura* while nev-ertheless recognizing the role of the Holy Spirit and the church's cultural and his-torical context in the development of doctrine (chap. 6). *Sola scriptura* is not only a principle but a *practice*. Specifically, it is the Spirit-enabled practice of partici-pating in the "canonical practices" that comprise Scripture. Canonical-linguistic theology is ultimately a matter of being apprenticed to the diverse communicative practices that make up the church's script. It is through such apprenticeship that the Spirit conforms church members to the image of God in Christ (chap. 7).

Part 3: The Dramaturge

Part 3 sets forth the contours of the canonical-linguistic approach to theology. With regard to the overarching theatrical model, the theologian is best associated not with the director (this role is reserved for the Holy Spirit and for those min-isters the Spirit gifts and equips to be assistants) but with the dramaturge, the person responsible for advising the director on how best to understand and per-form the script (chap. 8).

The next two chapters (chaps. 9, 10) develop the canonical-linguistic approach by showing how it is postliberal in its focus on communal practice yet postcon-servative in its emphasis on following an authoritative canonical script. This approach to theology builds on the reinvigorated Scripture principle and on the definition of doctrine as direction. "Faith seeking understanding" involves both coming to appreciate the meaning of the script and knowing how to perform it in new contexts. Hence theology is both an exegetical *scientia* that is faithful to the canonical text and a practical *sapientia* that is fitting to the present cultural con-text. The ultimate goal of theology is to foster creative understanding—the abil-ity to improvise what to say and do as disciples of Jesus Christ in ways that are at once faithful yet fitting to their subject matter and setting. The church continues to perform the same text in different contexts, despite the difference of centuries, cultures, and conceptual schemes, by "improvising" with a canonical script.

Part 4: The Performance

The final two chapters make explicit the pastoral, directive function of Christian doctrine by examining the role of doctrine in the life of the individual believer and in the believing community, respectively. In each case, the doctrine of atone-ment serves as an extended case study. Doctrine in general, and the doctrine of atonement in particular, clarifies our role and confirms our identity "in Christ" (chap. 11). The last chapter presents the church as the "theater of the gospel," the place where the reconciliation achieved by the cross is to be played out in scenes large and small. The church is a company of players gathered together to stage scenes of the kingdom of God for the sake of a watching world. The direction of

doctrine thus enables us, as individuals and as a church, to render the gospel pub-lic by leading lives in creative imitation of Christ.

A brief conclusion, addressed especially to pastors, rounds out the discussion. The pastor's all-important role is to lead the people of God to mount local pro-ductions of the kingdom of God. As assistants to the Spirit-director, pastors must avail themselves of the resources of church theology—creedal, confessional, and congregational—as they seek to shape the church's performance in new cultural and intellectual scenes.