

## CHAPTER 1

# The Primacy of the Gospel

*This chapter considers the distinctive features of Christian theology as a discipline that starts in faith. It does so by moving from the critique of epistemology implied by the starting point of faith to the primacy of the gospel as a narrative through which God gives Himself in a promise to faith. Such gospel narrative constitutes the discourse of Christian theology. This chapter concludes by indicating what is meant by the corresponding trinitarian revision of metaphysics and the task of kataphatic theology as critical dogmatics.*

## Augustinian Critique of Epistemology

Epistemology is a discourse that wants first to ground knowledge by a theory of itself. It claims to establish a knowledge of knowledge before any content of knowledge can be entertained. The circularity is evident. But theology as a method or discipline turns entirely on the *theos*, or deity, it serves and seeks to understand. Christian theology is the cognitive discipline of the Spirit of Jesus and His Father. As such, it thinks to participate in God's own self-knowledge as imparted in Christ by the Spirit through the gospel. The term *theology* denotes *knowledge* of God. But if, as both prophets of Israel and critical philosophers in the tradition of Plato teach, only the eternal God knows God, Christian theology is possible only as a *sacred* discipline that "thinks after" God's saving self-impartation (*sola gratia*), as Christians believe, teach, and confess, through *Christ alone* (*solus Christus*). The "exclusive particle" (*solus*,

“only,” see the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, IV:73) makes theology the work of faith (*sola fide*) in Jesus Christ, where faith itself is understood not as human opinion but as divine self-impartment by the Spirit’s repetition in believers of Jesus’ own obedience of faith—not then an opinion about Jesus but Jesus’ own belief for us in His Father, in us by His own Spirit.

As such an ecstatic form of human reason grasped by its content, faithful Christian theology critically tests the coherence of beliefs in the church (1) against God’s self-donation, (2) with each another, and (3) in relation to other forms of human reason in the world. The knowledge of God ultimately consists in a *coherent and comprehensive system of belief* (still in process of discernment and formation) that awaits eschatological verification. In the interim, the God of the gospel is identified “from faith [that is, from the canonical prophets and apostles as handed on in the church catholic] for faith [that is, for worship, fellowship, and service in each new time and place] and so, in the process, critically distinguished from fantasies and superstitions, idols and demons, deviations (heresies) as also other possible eternities (that is, other religions or worldviews). “In earnest invocation of God it is necessary to consider what one wants to address, what God is, how he is known, where and how he has revealed himself, and both if and why he hears our pleas and cries . . . [lest one] fall into the error of addressing as God things which are not God.”<sup>1</sup> Such a procedure has its content, before it ever reflects on formal modes of knowing, “this true God who revealed himself to his people with sure testimonies.” Just so, its method consists merely in not letting its “thoughts waver and wander after other gods.”<sup>2</sup>

“Our Father, who art in heaven.” As the invocation of God in Christianity is communal, the theological identification of the God of the gospel under the foregoing terms thus constitutes the church’s doctrinal unity, as this originated in the primitive triadic confession of the baptized and developed into the *regula fidei* (rule of faith). “Our Father” is ours through His own Son who invites us into His own relation with Him by their own Spirit. Christian theology, so understood, is both *evangelical and catholic*; that is, this theology springs from the contingent fact of the gospel’s coming (so the need of initiation in baptism) but just so brings the knowledge of God that is held everywhere, at all times, by all (even if only tacitly or confusedly) in the church as the fellowship of the baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Baptism too has its origin. The church’s knowledge of God arises from the Easter narration of a paradox: the coming of Jesus as the Lord’s anointed and His fateful end in ignominious defeat on the cross are, paradoxically, the Father’s saving deed of merciful identification with those lost to him in the person of His Son. This paradox is not logical nonsense; it does not assert a contradiction. Rather the paradox resolves in that this Crucified One was raised from death and so vindicated and revealed the Son of God in power. At the far depth of

the Son's coming into the world, then, is the *harrowing of hell* on account of that godforsaken death on the cross. Reckoning with so daunting a paradox at its very center, no system of Christian theology short of the eschaton achieves the perfect coherence of theology in glory. Theology on the earth and in time is and only can be the stumbling, struggling, sighing theology of the cross that cannot say all things at once but must honor instead the subversive rhetoric of the paradox in a dialectic of *sic et non*.

Theology consequently is and always will be a conflicted discipline that is in dispute about what it is and ought to do, since other constructions of the deity of God than Jesus' "our Father" contend for our prayers. The reason for this, as we have just elaborated, is that theology as a method or discipline turns entirely on the *theos*, or deity, it serves and seeks to understand. Within classical Christian theology, this conflict plays out preeminently in the question of whether the deity of God will be known by Jesus who was born of a woman, under the law, and crucified in the flesh under Pontius Pilate. In subsequent chapters, this book accordingly traces out the rise of credal Christianity from its origins in the Easter kerygma to the full formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity at the Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 381. As I shall tell it, however, this is almost entirely a story transpiring in the Greek-speaking Eastern half of the ancient Roman Empire. Western theology, denoting that which arose in the Latin-speaking half of the Empire, is dominated by the towering figure of Augustine, who already received this trinitarian faith from the East as an accomplished fact. This root dependency of Western theology creates several kinds of interpretive problems for a book like this, stemming out of Western traditions like Reformation theology and historical criticism. For a pertinent example, an influential thesis has been that unlike the Eastern approach to the doctrine of God, which begins with the three of the gospel narrative and discovers their oneness, Western theology since Augustine has begun with a metaphysical notion of oneness as divine simplicity and used it to minimize, even efface, the distinctiveness of the three.<sup>3</sup> Recent scholarship has rightly sought to qualify this broad characterization,<sup>4</sup> but the unsettling question then surfaces: How do we understand the unity of God who is Jesus, His Father, and their Spirit? What (unexamined) notions of divine nature do we bring with us to the task of Christian theology? How do we decide what is, and is not, fittingly said of the presumably unique entity "God"? Is the classical notion of divine simplicity—that divine being is not composite or compounded, thus incapable of coming apart and disintegrating—apt to this task, if central to the identity of the God in question is the creation of a world other than God, with the incarnation of the Son and the sending of the Spirit into it? Might not *complexity* rather better characterize the God of the gospel?

God's *oneness* in philosophical monotheism is not in any case, as I will show in what follows, the simple equivalent of the *radical or exclusive monotheism* of

the biblical narrative, which tells of the unique being of the creator of all reality in the one history of salvation that, when heard with faith, requires exclusive allegiance and total conversion. The idea in philosophical monotheism is that a divine nature is *simple*, in that it is not compounded out of anything else, and that this natural *simplicity* tells how it transcends everything else that exists materially in the form of compounds. Divine nature has no internal differentiations or relations that would threaten it, so to say, with instability or dissolution. Unlike mortals who have their contingent being in becoming, God is not a composite. Being “one,” God cannot come apart, disintegrate, fall to pieces under duress. As divine being is the eternally self-identical act of thought thinking itself, it exists at one with itself and is therefore changeless, indestructible, eternal. This is what it means to be divine, to exist as the one worthy, so to say, of complete satisfaction with self, unaffected by any other, never then motivated to change or be changed. This notion of the divinity of God as pure, timeless, intellectual self-identity provides the standard of what is worthy or fitting to say about God. Negative theology aims both to protect the unknowable and ineffable divine essence from profanation and yet to ascend to it by the progressive transcending of all inadequate representations.

Augustine’s position on such questions is disputable,<sup>5</sup> not least because there is a definite development in his thought from his early Platonism toward increasingly pronounced Paulinism. We can hardly even raise the question here without going far afield. In what follows it is rather a matter of bringing certain Augustinian presuppositions of the Western tradition to critical awareness. Happily, we can do that by following Augustine’s doctrine of the *initium fidei*, the starting point of faith, as a critique of the epistemology that dominates secular Western thought since Descartes and even Protestant theology since Kant. I cite here the argument of a British theologian of a generation ago, Alan Richardson, who, focusing on what I am calling the critique of epistemology, called Augustine’s *De civitate dei* “the outstanding example of a Christian apologetics directed toward the interpretation of the historical situation of a particular age.” Augustine’s endeavor “possesses an enduring interest for every generation of Christians because it shows how the biblical-prophetic insights can become the key-categories of a total philosophy of history.”<sup>6</sup> Richardson sharply attacked the rationalistic “idea of an impartial abstract reason.” He called this idea of reason “a mirage, a notable illustration of man’s perennial temptation to exalt himself among the gods, knowing good and evil,” as if “human reason is, in virtue of its own inherent perfection, a competent and impartial judge of truth and falsehood in all matters.”<sup>7</sup>

Modern philosophy since Descartes has largely recapitulated the course of ancient philosophy and has ended in the same skepticism and disillusion. The time has surely come for Christian philosophy to be frankly

Augustinian again and to call in Christian faith to liberate reason from the toils of rationalism and its corollary, skepticism. Rationalism loves to represent the issue between itself and Christian philosophy as one of reason versus “belief” or “mere opinion”; it does this by concealing its own faith principle. . . . [But] there is no key of universal understanding that is, or can be made, evident to all rational beings . . . it is only by the creatively imaginative act of boldly grasping a faith-principle as a key of understanding that a great and noble system of philosophy can be built. . . . Faith, then, is necessarily bound up with reason, and neither reason nor faith can be understood without the other. . . . Our knowledge of God in this life is essentially a rational knowing made possible by faith in the biblical revelation . . . mediated by the word, that is by the address of God as of one rational being to other rational beings. . . . No wordless knowledge of God or immediate apprehension of Him is claimed as a result of Christian faith. Faith is not a mystical but a rational activity. . . . Our knowledge of God is a mediated knowledge, and the One Mediator is Christ the Word.<sup>8</sup>

The critical statement in the foregoing excerpt is this: “There is no key of universal understanding that is, or can be made, evident to all rational beings.” In other words, there is no such thing as One Universal Human Rationality, as Kantianism imagined its “tribunal of Reason.” There is only, for example, Confucian rationality, or Marxist rationality, or Christian rationality, or Scientific rationality, or some other particular rationality, all of which are based on some original act of faith that is socially mediated to us by a particular tradition. “Reason cannot work until it first makes an act of faith, and it does not work correctly—that is, rationally—unless it makes the right act of faith, unless it has faith in the Truth itself.”<sup>9</sup> As a result, the theologian today, Richardson writes, is “freed from the temptation of trying to come to terms with the reigning thought-system of the day and consequently of subordinating the distinctive faith principle of Christianity to that of an alien philosophy.”<sup>10</sup> He rejects the claim of “rationalists or ‘liberals,’ who maintain that the human mind is capable of laying aside the prejudices of social conditioning and proceed by reason, whether deductively or inductively, to an impartial or objective verdict upon religious, philosophical and historical questions.”<sup>11</sup>

Richardson tried to expose “the elaborate rationalizations which conceal the initial act of faith” upon which any worldview, including secularism, is based and which in turn blinds it to the coercive mechanisms it deploys.<sup>12</sup> The result of this Augustinian critique of epistemology is that competing “gospels” (fascism, Marxism, liberalism) are all placed on a level playing field as partisan acts of faith in the objectivity of value (except nihilism, which Richardson regarded as an illogical, that is, self-contradictory faith in the nonobjectivity of

value). No such act of faith possesses as a given some evident foundation, for then it would cease to be an act of faith and become an act of comprehending the evidence before one's own eyes. What is reasonable for human creatures who seek to understand the meaning of life is rather to make such basic acts of faith. These reasonable acts of faith provide the actual "foundations" of (various kinds of) rationality. All reason is reasoning on the basis of such an act of "initial faith." The real and difficult question then is how these particular acts of faith are rationally to be warranted. Is the "revelation" that elicits faith a true revelation or a demonic deception? Is the salvation it offers intelligible as a real salvation? Believers themselves must rationally "test the spirits" and "give an account of their hope." But how?

Richardson's account of human knowledge as "founded" on risky though reasonable human acts of faith (and thus not "rationally" founded on simple, obvious, universally accessible truth) exposed the situation to which post-Enlightenment, Euro-American culture has come with the breakdown of rationalism: "The Marxist, the secular humanist, and the Christian all wear their own spectacles and therefore cannot see the truth that the others see. Each inhabits his own universe of discourse and cannot understand the others' language. Here for the Christian (as for the others) arises the supreme difficulty in the task of evangelization, that of making real contact with those for whom the very language one uses has no meaning because their thought-forms have been shaped by such widely differing assumptions."<sup>13</sup> The result of this analysis is to place contemporary Christianity back into the world of competing gospels, just like in early Christianity, no longer privileged but also no longer ghettoized in the gilded chancel of official establishment. *Such critique of epistemology today is the Augustinian move.* The situation of the church today resembles most the church's social-cultural location in the year 410 AD, when Rome had fallen at the hand of the Goths and "Christ and his church" were blamed. Our recent century has witnessed in Hitlerism, in Stalinism, and in the colonial, ecological, and atomic crimes of liberal capitalism the repeated failure of the modern dream of secular, enlightened culture. These twentieth-century secular crimes, which by an inexpressible magnitude eclipse whatever sins a misguided medieval Christianity once committed in inquisition and crusade, are crimes against humanity. They have their express roots in the repudiation of Christianity. Yet bizarrely the Christian faith is blamed for these evils. Today, a tough-minded apologetic must once again refute those "who hold Christ responsible for the evils they deservedly suffer for their wicked lives" (Augustine). Thus reads Alan Richardson's near-contemporary account of a renewed Augustinianism as a critique of epistemology.

In my preferred reading, it is not so much that Augustine, or Luther in his footsteps, utterly denied natural theology, as famously did Karl Barth who regarded it as a Trojan horse sneaking in the monster deity of the philosophers.<sup>14</sup>

Rather they executed a critique of epistemology in the name of faith that might correlate with the “natural theology” of skeptical (but not dogmatic) Platonism, while at the same time pressing the argument against skepticism as most significant of all.<sup>15</sup> Luther famously did so in his diatribe against Erasmus; but he had come to this Augustinian position much earlier: “It is certainly true that the law of nature is known to all men and that our reason does speak for the best things, but what best things? It speaks for the best things not according to God but according to us, that is, for things that are good in an evil way. For it seeks itself and its own in all things but not in God. This only faith does in love. Hence knowledge and virtue and whatever good things are desired, sought, and found by natural capacity are good in an evil way.”<sup>16</sup> Likewise Luther, following Augustine, elaborated a corresponding revision of metaphysics in the name of faith’s object, the triune God. Again, in Luther’s early words, commenting on Romans 8:19: “The apostle philosophizes and thinks about things in a different way than the philosophers and metaphysicians do. For the philosophers so direct their gaze at the present state of things that they speculate only about what things are and what quality they have, but the apostle calls our attention away from a consideration of the present and from the essence and accidents of things and directs us to their future state . . . Look how we esteem the study of the essences and actions and inactions of things, and the things themselves reject and groan over their own essences and actions and inactions! We praise and glorify the knowledge of that very thing that is sad about itself and is displeased with itself . . . Wise men and theologians, infected by this same ‘prudence of the flesh’ . . . derive a happy science out of a sad creation, and from the sighings they laughingly gather their knowledge with marvelous display of power.”<sup>17</sup>

In a compelling account of Luther’s theology, Oswald Bayer accordingly writes, “The deepest conflict with Greek metaphysics and ontology must of necessity come at the point where the biblical texts are taken with utter seriousness. What is ontologically unthinkable is described in Hosea 11:7-11, which ancient metaphysics would reject as mythology: an ‘overthrow,’ a change within God himself—God is not the one who is identical with himself, who corresponds to himself: ‘My heart has changed within me; my remorse grows powerfully. I will not execute my fierce anger. I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God, not a human being’ (Hos 11:8-9).”<sup>18</sup> God surpasses God and so establishes His deity—that is the gospel’s revision of metaphysics.

## The Primacy of the Gospel

In the earliest years of the Reformation, just before the schism of the Western church became definitive with Luther’s official condemnation as a heretic, the Wittenberg professor tried to answer a critical objection to his Bible-based

critique of the sale of indulgences: By what right do you contradict customary teachings and practices of the church and presume to correct or purify them? Luther famously appealed to the Word of God and offered straightforward exegetical arguments from the Bible about the meaning of texts to justify reformatory teachings, namely, (1) that repentance, or turning to God, concerns the whole life of the believer, (2) that divine mercy cannot be bought or sold but only received in faith as a free gift, and (3) that therefore the true treasure of the church is the gospel of the grace and glory of God in the crucified and risen Christ, which should be openly exhibited, freely offered, and purely explained for the sake of the penitent.<sup>19</sup>

Luther quickly discovered, however, that opponents could challenge his interpretations of Scripture by construing texts differently, questioning his selection of texts, or pointing to contradictions in the Bible leading to endless disputation that could only be settled in turn by the teaching authority invested in the papacy.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, in the course of the controversy, the question was refined. The opponents came to ask: How can you appeal to *the* Word of God when they are so *many* words of God? To this more nuanced question, Luther replied: I am speaking of the word of God that first of all speaks to us Gentiles making us people of God, namely (citing Rom. 1:3), “the gospel concerning his Son.”<sup>21</sup> The gospel provides epistemic access to the region of theology by claiming auditors with God’s own self-imparting word and effecting, as the Spirit pleases, faith in them to receive this royal and merciful claim.

With this Luther undertook to follow Paul the Apostle in the Epistle to the Romans in asserting *real primacy* in theology (not, be it noted, for the Epistle to the Romans) for the *gospel concerning the Son*—this is the power of God, which effects the new situation in which Christian theology arises.<sup>22</sup> This proclamation of the divine deed both authors and authorizes the new life of the Christian community, which is precisely the holy community in the world that holds these gospel beliefs in turn as epistemically primary.<sup>23</sup> Epistemic primacy is an important notion recently introduced into theology by Bruce Marshall. It denies that any beliefs are primary that are able to be abandoned or even revisable when they conflict with other beliefs on which the continued existence of a community depends. Primary beliefs are rather those on which the community’s very existence depends, that cannot be sacrificed without the community’s disintegration. If we follow Luther, then (but also the Lutheran–Roman Catholic dialogue today, which has lifted up this precise terminology<sup>24</sup>), the gospel articulates such primary belief since it tells believers who and what they are in God’s sight and provides as well God’s justification for this judgment about them in the cross and resurrection of His Son. So it both authors and authorizes.

In this effective action the gospel reveals God as God who gives not merely all temporal gifts but God’s very self in time and for eternity. The gospel is

not then merely the first item to be consulted on a checklist, or the teaching that must always be honored before we go on to other things along other lines. Rather in its very enunciation, the gospel is abidingly the powerful word of God to make a new beginning in human affairs that is always effectively primary, especially in the cognitive work of theology as the work of critical dogmatics in the life of the church in its mission in the world. It is the access by which knowledge of God is imparted, such that any other approach to theology is speculation that reduces, on careful, critical examination, to alternative narratives. The gospel indeed gains theological primacy not least by framing the very question to which it will provide the answer and so refusing to be co-opted as an answer to some other set of questions deriving from some other narrative than the gospel's. It demands: What is our true need and plight that we should need *this* incarnation of God, *this* revelation of the justice of God, *this* Christ *crucified* for our sins and *raised from that godforsaken death* to make us right again with God (Gal 2:21)? Posing *this* question, the gospel will not then be hijacked by other projects, retooled as religious ideology dressing up preexisting human ideas about our problems and prospects. But God speaks a unilateral promise to those so questioned in the story of Christ that questions all our questions and answers (Phil 3:4-14) in order to speak an unsurpassable divine *yes!* both radical and transformative: "If anyone is in Christ, new creation!" (2 Cor 5:11).<sup>25</sup>

In making this reformatory theological appeal to the *primacy* of the gospel concerning Christ, however, Luther by no means intended to found a new church on a new basis. If so, he would have had to assume that the gospel had actually been silenced by recent papal error or that the gospel was in need of his own scholarly work to bring it to life and make it speak. To think in such ways would have undermined the very primacy of the gospel as the efficacious power of God in His word that Luther sought to lift up to new theological clarity. Luther in his best moments knew better.<sup>26</sup> His initial aim accordingly was to call the Latin-speaking church of the West (part of which would become the confessionalized Roman Catholic Church subsequent to the Western schism) back to her first love and to do so by no other means than lifting up afresh—with the notable help of the "blessed Augustine"—what had recently been obscured from view by certain medieval penitential practices (underpinned theologically by the modernist-naturalist theological philosophy of Scotus, Occam, and Biel).<sup>27</sup> That is why he could take up and exposit the traditional doctrinal standard of the West—the Apostles' Creed—in his catechisms and do so (it is surprising perhaps to learn of this) without ever even mentioning by name his allegedly indispensable doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Such a move was possible for Luther because what later became the confessional Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone, "the article by which the church stands and falls," is not primary theology but belongs to a second order of reflective theology. As such, it provided a rule about the true sharing of the

gospel, in the way that grammar provides rules for proper speaking of a language (but is not the speaking itself).<sup>28</sup> This second-order doctrine of justification was, as Robert Jenson has urged, an instruction to preachers: Tell the story of Jesus in such a way that He with His blessings of peace with God is ours in the mere surrender of penitent faith to His merciful promise.<sup>29</sup> Just as effective English can be spoken by people knowing little theoretically of grammar, this gospel gift can be effectively spoken and its story be rightly told even when people do not explicitly know or understand justification by faith as a doctrinal rule (or even oppose what they mistakenly take this rule to be saying). Indeed, the gospel somehow has been spoken truly enough all along, for otherwise *ex hypothesi* there would be no church to reform. In light of just such clarifications today about the confessional Lutheran doctrine's regulative function, Lutherans and Catholics have converged in joint teaching on the (second-order) doctrine of justification.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time it is important to recall that the second-order, reflective doctrine of justification as a rule for correct gospel speaking arises from the primary theology of the gospel narrative that in turn it seeks to clarify. Here the "justice" in justification by faith is of a piece with the first-order language about the faith/faithfulness (or "righteousness" or "obedience," Rom 5:18) of Jesus Christ in the advent of God's reign, as portrayed in the gospel narrative and proclaimed by the Apostle. The gospel story sets before us this remarkable justice of the gracious reign of God advancing to us in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, which gives saving righteousness in exchange for lethal sin. On this primary level, the Reformation teaching about justification is a sample of the traditional New Testament and patristic rhetoric of the *admirabile commercium* (wonderful transaction) of the gospel narrative: "O marvel at the loving-kindness of the Word, that for our sakes he is dishonored, that we may be brought to honor" (Athanasius).<sup>31</sup> In Luther's idiom, this tradition became the celebrated "joyful exchange": "For it is sufficient that our sin displeases us, even though we do not get entirely rid of it. For Christ carries all sins, if only they are displeasing to us, and thus they are no longer ours but His, and His righteousness in turn is ours."<sup>32</sup> This narrative understanding of Christ giving what is His by assuming what is ours is the primary, constant, and indeed "catholic" element in Luther's understanding of the reformatory gospel.<sup>33</sup>

In primary theology, *justification designates this concrete, historical exchange of a remarkable justice that comes on the scene with the crucified and risen Christ, giving what is not deserved in place of what is*. This is a justice then that reveals its author as true God and creator in the very act of the redemption and in prospect of the creature's fulfillment. It is precisely *not* the primacy of the gospel, then, if such telling of Jesus' story is short-circuited or even replaced by the boring, if not (performatively speaking) *legalistic*, reiteration of abstract ideas (even true ones, like "God is love" or that we are saved by "grace alone")—even

though this is how later Lutheranism, mutating into liberal Protestantism, began to think. Dietrich Bonhoeffer attacked this latter in the opening salvo of *The Cost of Discipleship*: “Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means the forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian ‘conception’ of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be itself sufficient to secure remission of sins. The church that upholds the correct doctrine of grace has, it is supposed, ipso facto a part in that grace. In such a church the world finds a cheap covering for its sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin. Cheap grace therefore amounts to a denial of the living word of God, in fact, a denial of the incarnation of the word of God.”<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer’s polemic here is directed against the teaching of modern German theology stemming from Schleiermacher and Ritschl, for which the narrative of the Son of God’s “journey into the far country” (Barth) had been reduced to the inspiring example of the human Jesus’ filial faith in God’s “fatherly goodness” (Harnack)<sup>35</sup>—one of those boring, abstract ideas now taking the place of Christian dogma.

A proper sense for the primacy of the gospel as narrative of God’s self-involvement with human woe would never quite wholly be extinguished in later Protestantism. Yet it is safe to say that its eclipse was sealed already not by the later liberals but by the early confessionalists, with their polemical scheme of Protestant Scripture versus Catholic tradition, now in a savage irony put forward as epistemology, as the miracle of the Bible’s self-validating inerrancy rather than as the gospel’s critique of epistemology. It is mandatory today to overcome this polemical antithesis, which misleads in every direction, since in it Luther’s crucial clarification about *which* word of God bears authority in the life of the church was obscured.<sup>36</sup> In its place, both sides of the Protestant-Catholic divide succumbed to a juridical mentality where legalistic proof-texting replaced dramatic interpretation of scriptural narrative (the latter is materially the content of critical-dogmatic theology as we are defining it). On the Protestant side, a miraculous, inerrant, and infallible book (which happens to contain the gospel alongside other things) telling about everything under the sun was set up as the primary authority over against the allegedly miraculous, inerrant, infallible teaching office of the Roman papacy. The question provoked by the gospel—What authorizes specific practices that gather the church by repentance and faith in the name of Jesus?—was displaced by the question, What authorizes the Protestant or Catholic confession in opposition to the other? In the process, the gospel was eclipsed as primary; it lost the kind of primacy in theology that Luther at his best wanted for it, that is, the power to frame the basic questions we ask in theology to probe the churches for fidelity to their author and authorization. The epistemological question of early modernity (the Cartesian quest for indubitability) instead became primary in Protestant theology in the form of whether the Bible was credible or verifiable

as the supernatural basis for revealed knowledge of geography, geology, and other secular matters. Embracing Kant's critical epistemology, liberal theology arose to disown that hopeless position of Protestant Orthodoxy. In either case, with disastrous results for divided modern Christianity, the "gospel" then became a polemical slogan, a confessionalized epithet.

For other reasons as well, theology in Europe and North America today is profoundly conflicted. The issue is whether biblical canon with its creedal interpretation is to be taken merely as a historical marker forming a (disputable) *precedent* for contemporary speculative thought (so-called constructive theology) or instead is to be taken to demarcate (definite) *boundaries*, "the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which alone is the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged."<sup>37</sup> In the former approach, theology is a constructive discipline in harmony with the modern, Cartesian-Kantian "turn to the subject," which constructs reality up to and including images and conceptions of deity. In the latter approach, theology is an autonomous, nonspeculative, and communal tradition-discourse that reflects upon reality as revealed by God's self-expression through the gospel. Between these approaches there seems simply to be a choice inasmuch as there is no dogmatically neutral, narrative-free conception of theology as a discipline by which to adjudicate the alternatives these represent. Clearly siding in this contemporary conflict with Luther's definition of theology as "the new language of the Spirit," this book perhaps quixotically aspires to make a case rather than to demand a choice. In fact, every definition of Christian theology entails some account of classic Christian doctrine along the fault-line of canon with its creedal interpretation. An account of this origin and coming and course is internal to the practice of theology and constitutes the "prolegomena to dogmatics" needed in the present situation in the West. The present claim is that Christian theology arises as reflection *on* the contingent event of the coming of the gospel of God *from* the Scriptures *in* the church *for* the world.

Primary theology is narrowly the gospel's narrative of the Son's death and resurrection and broadly the biblical narrative, understood as promissory.<sup>38</sup> The gospel is a story to be told, which in the telling draws us in and refashions us by means of the transaction between Christ and the believer that comes about by the former's unilateral promise. As Luther wrote in his introduction to the New Testament: "Thus this gospel of God or New Testament is a good story and report, sounded forth into all the world by the apostles, telling of a true David who strove with sin, death, and the devil, and overcame them, and thereby rescued all those who were captive in sin, afflicted with death, and overpowered by the devil. Without any merit of their own he made them righteous, gave them life, and saved them, so that they were given peace and brought back to God. For this they sing, and thank and praise God, and are glad forever, if only they believe firmly and remain steadfast in faith."<sup>39</sup> Robert

Jenson comments: "The message of faith, the 'gospel,' is a narrative . . . It is the story of Jesus told as that story from which the hearer may hear their destiny, hear what life is for. For the gospel is the story of Jesus told as the story of the last future, as a message of hope. It says: the story of life-out-of-death and love-out-of-hatred that is enacted in the events of this man's life will be the conclusion of your life also. Thus the gospel is a proclamation of a future hope with a narrative content."<sup>40</sup>

For purposes of pedagogy, we can descriptively sketch the canonical gospel as follows, with elaborations and warrants provided in the footnotes:<sup>41</sup>

*The gospel is the Easter message<sup>42</sup> of the God of Israel,<sup>43</sup> whom Jesus<sup>44</sup> had addressed as Abba, Father.<sup>45</sup> This word from God concerns the same Jesus who appeared to Israel prophetically announcing the imminence of His Father's reign but was crucified as a messianic pretender, the would-be "king of the Jews"<sup>46</sup> on the outskirts of Jerusalem by the Roman imperial governor Pontius Pilate. He had proclaimed and inaugurated the reign of God by making fellowship in God's name with the outcast, sinful, and diseased.<sup>47</sup> Paradoxically,<sup>48</sup> in obedience to God, Jesus lived on behalf of and died in solidarity with these lost sheep of the house of Israel, as the one most truly forsaken by God.<sup>49</sup> As such He descended into hell.<sup>50</sup> By the resurrection<sup>51</sup> of the crucified, God effected and announced Jesus' victory of love on behalf of those for whom He lived and died and so exalted Him as coming Judge of the world, who sends His Spirit to anticipate this paradoxical judgment in repentance, forgiveness, and the imparting of new resurrection life to all who believe.<sup>52</sup> Thus penitents<sup>53</sup> from all nations, called out to faith by this good news<sup>54</sup> and designated children of God by baptism, are united in eucharistic worship<sup>55</sup> and empowered by the same Spirit<sup>56</sup> to form that earthly body that lives His crucified and risen life<sup>57</sup> to the glory of God the Father, now and forever.<sup>58</sup> In this way, the reign of God comes.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, the gospel has a history<sup>60</sup> in the world that is itself theologically relevant, that is, relevant to the knowledge of the God of the gospel.<sup>61</sup> This doctrine (doctrina evangelii) is both given as this primary, promissory narrative and developed by means of rules (regula fidei) in the course of its earthly career, which are irreversible and cumulative decisions within the universal community of faith about the gospel's interpretation that have been required if the story is to continue to be told as God's merciful promise of inclusion to the lost and perishing.*

Note first that the basic fact or datum of Christian theology is a narrative that makes a promise, "the gospel of God." This primary theology is "the medium in which God's own act of promising may intelligibly be said to occur. . . . Faith is present whenever the proclamation of the gospel is heard as God's first person, present indicative promise to us."<sup>62</sup> The term *gospel* has roots in Second Isaiah, Paul, and Mark. It denotes news of a history-making event that is not true by reference to "what already or antecedently is experientially present." "Consider not the former things, nor remember the things of old," says the Lord according to the second Isaiah. "Behold, I am doing a new thing." Gospel

“is not of the same logical type as a symbol that articulates and lifts to the level of conscious referentiality some prelinguistic or formerly unconscious state of being.”<sup>63</sup> Gospel is not a “revelation” of what is always and everywhere the case. But the gospel is revelatory of the divine agent who acts in this event to promise Himself to others for a common future, that is, the one who is who He is by speaking and acting in just this self-involving way: “I am yours and you are Mine.” “The objectivity of God is to be understood as that of a promisor’s active commitment to others in the present for a future. . . . Whether ‘God’ indeed does so act can only be proven in forthcoming events.”<sup>64</sup>

Consequent to this logic of promise, all the doctrinal beliefs listed or implied in the preceding narrative summary are to be understood as articulations of God’s self-involving gospel promise; they cohere as elements of the promissory narrative and cannot be understood apart from their place in it. Their truth as beliefs is not determined by any other frame of reference than the promised future of God that they convey, and this truth is not settled by anything other than its fulfillment (or its falsity settled by its non-fulfillment). Both faith and *disbelief* live in this tension.

Second, the gospel message decisively derives from the New Testament claim that Jesus who was crucified nevertheless lives and reigns. Something unprecedented and beyond the reach of all human power, wisdom, and goodness has happened that expresses an ultimate, unsurpassable judgment about Jesus. He who died godforsaken on the cross is nevertheless vindicated as God’s own Son. Just so, however, He is now seen to have died then “according to the Scriptures,” that is, in accordance with God’s eternal plan to justify the ungodly. Thus this “good news” from all eternity had been preached ahead of time in the promises given to Abraham and his descendents, the people of Israel, and onward up to the proclamation made by this same Jesus in His own lifetime. Indeed, the gospel expresses the eternal decree and self-determination of the triune God.

Third, the narrative structure of this gospel event is trinitarian—not, of course, in the sense of the fully developed conceptual distinctions of the one essence and three persons that arrived at Constantinople in 381. But in the gospel we meet three distinct figures—Jesus, His Father, and their Spirit—and it is in following their narrative interaction that we come to understand these three as the one and indivisible God who creates, redeems, and fulfills the one world. The developed trinitarian doctrine just mentioned comes about later on in the course of the gospel’s history, due to a crisis in interpretation on which the continued telling of the story turned (as we shall study in detail in this book’s final chapter).

Fourth, human repentance-and-faith comes about by the Spirit as real participation in Jesus’ very own, historically particular trust and obedience; that is, it is the obedience of faith in God’s free favor, active in self-giving love of others, an ecstatic existence in the Spirit who anticipates the new creation. Faith decenters the old self of its previous incurvation and recenters it outside

of itself in trust in God, love for the other, and hope for the world. As such, faith is not in any way the initiative or act of this old self-centered being, which rather in conversion dies spiritually by abandoning its old identity. Faith is never the old Adam's cognition, valuation, choice, decision, emotional discharge. Faith is new being in Christ, who is the New Adam; it is the Spirit's repetition in believers of Jesus' own faithfulness: trust in God, love for neighbors, hope for the earth. As such, the faith that comes from hearing the gospel is not an instantiation of a general human inclination to trust something greater than themselves, which is rather the idolatry of collective egoism. Faith rather consists in lifelong repentance or conversion, turning from sin and turning to God. Faith without repentance, not to mention the works of love and hope, is dead, fictitious, illusory, just as it cheapens grace blasphemously.

Fifth, this faith-participation in Jesus' life is oriented to the eschatological glorification of God. The gospel-promised fulfillment of life is the joyful praise of God in God through God. Worship is the final horizon of this way of life, just as the truth of the gospel turns on the fulfillment of the eschatological promise—the resurrection of the dead. In the interim, this future hope of glory is anticipated in the eucharistic worship of the church, by which the Lord's death is proclaimed until He comes again, as the gathered faithful offer their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in union with the Son.

In sum, in primary Christian theology as *doctrina evangelii* (doctrine of the gospel) we are not talking about a heap of unrelated ideas, historical facts, myths, worldviews, dogmas, and beliefs behind which we might discover a historical Jesus or an anthropological need. Rather the doctrine of the gospel brings *a coherent though continually revised apprehension of reality as sinful humanity and the redeeming God in Jesus Christ, generated by the very progress of this gospel through time and space*. As doctrine of the gospel, theology has considered many distinct beliefs—creation out of nothing, original sin, the Incarnation, and so on—as articulations of the one, primary promissory narrative. Strictly speaking, however, there is only the *one* cognitive proposition involved here, that is, in the *region* of theology, which is the area or field of possible eternities: God the almighty Father is determined to redeem the creation through His Son, Jesus Christ, and bring it to fulfillment in His Spirit. The gospel proposition is a genuinely *synthetic* statement—God's eternal self-determination is God's free choice; it could have been otherwise—that correspondingly must be verified eschatologically, or, in absence of that verification, falsified. In the interim, its cognitive power is tested by its interpretive power in the region of theology, that is, as opposed to other claimants of possible eternities. Correspondingly the multitude of human conceptions of the sovereign power that determines all things is not to be identified willy-nilly with this God of the gospel, nor *must* the Trinity's turn to include humanity in its

own divine life through Jesus Christ be understood as any kind of necessary unfolding of divine being, however “fitting” it may appear to be in retrospect.

Primary Christian theology issues in critical dogmatics (that is, not the confessional apologetics of the divided church). This endeavor to state the coherence of Christian beliefs as identifying God who justifies the ungodly—and so also humanity as the justified sinner—opens up the possibility and reality of newness of life. *Fiducia*, or personal trust, as we heard, occurs when this gospel proposition is heard and believed as the Trinity’s own promise *pro me*. Then the believer acquires the assured faith in every affliction that nothing can separate from the love of Christ, since the God of the gospel is known in faith as determined also to redeem *me* and to bring *me* to His kingdom. Just as clearly, however, the latter conviction of personal trust entails the church’s knowledge of Christ in His love. Morse makes the point this way: “Revelation discloses both self-involvement and propositional content, that is, both a thou and a coming kingdom, both a ‘someone’ and a ‘something.’”<sup>65</sup> Reinhardt Hütter has written, “The locutionary content and the illocutionary role of what is narrated (or stated) are inseparably connected, albeit in the quite specific logical sequence that makes the illocutionary character of what is narrated completely dependent on its object. . . . The gospel is a doctrine (*doctrina evangelii*) stating who Jesus Christ is and what he did and suffered . . . properly speaking about who Jesus Christ is, what he said, did, and suffered necessarily also—qua object—issues a promise, a *promissio*, to those listening. The illocutionary quality, however, depends entirely on the locutionary content, namely, who Jesus is.”<sup>66</sup> Why this is so, as Bonhoeffer contended<sup>67</sup>—why Christology precedes soteriology, why the mere “Jesus of history” is ambiguous and so becomes a helpless cipher at the mercy of salvation-sellers new and old<sup>68</sup>—is a fundamental question; it is a version of the perennial question about the role of natural theology in what we are calling the critical dogmatics of Christianity, where the primacy of the gospel as critique of epistemology holds sway. But if soteriology is permitted to govern Christology, then any given natural self-understanding, with its own account of human need or aspiration, is granted epistemic primacy. If Christology rather has the right and power to expose and construct the human need or aspiration that it meets, then epistemic primacy is accorded to God’s Easter decision to recognize the crucified, dead, and buried Jesus as truly His own beloved Son. If God can in turn be coherently understood so to “decide,” however, antecedent notions of divine simplicity come under scrutiny and a revision of metaphysics is under way.

## Natural Theology? Divine Simplicity?

“Natural theology” is not natural, in the sense of arising spontaneously from experience, once freed from the imprisonment of human artifice in tradition or custom. It is a definite tradition of Western philosophy, originating in Plato’s

critique of the poets for their unseemly representations of the gods. Writing in reference to the seminal Platonic dialogue, *Euthyphro*, Drozdek states, "The divine should be purged of attributes unworthy of the gods, even of men . . . [and] include only lofty, spiritual characteristics that befit God. There will be thus one essence of divinity to which all the gods are subsumed . . . conceptually by being manifestations of one concept."<sup>69</sup> As such, natural theology has to be understood historically. The problem natural theology faces is one of social peace. Representations of the divine are notoriously at variance with one another, but social peace seems to depend on mutual toleration in matters of religion. Hence the crucial move of natural theology is *apophatic*: to transcend the "human, all-too-human" representations of the divine by appeal to an essence beyond image, beyond language, beyond thought, beyond being. In the Western, Latin tradition, Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* was a foundational text of critical reflection along these lines. Arguably, the great Kant found his agnostic and Pelagian philosophy of religion anticipated in it. Writing in the fateful times of the end of the Roman republic and the transition to dictatorship and imperialism, Cicero undertook natural or philosophical theology as a way out from the situation of polytheistic conflict in and among the religions, just as Kant too sought new foundation for culture after the post-Reformation wars of religion. Thus a brief consideration of this classic of natural theology well merits our attention here.

The dialogue between an Epicurean, a Stoic, and an Academic Skeptic at one point considers the argument that if the "the true gods are those whom we worship by tradition, then why not include Isis and Orsis in their number? If we do this, why repudiate the gods of other races? Then we shall be making gods of oxen, horses, ibises, falcons, asps, crocodiles, fishes, dogs, wolves, cats, and all manner of beasts."<sup>70</sup> Following a survey of the cults known to the disputants, the conclusion is drawn: "All this and much more of the same kind may be gathered from the ancient legends of the Greeks, and you will see that such fables must be discredited, if religion itself is not to be brought into confusion and disrepute."<sup>71</sup> The theological way out is to resolve the diversity of concrete but misleading and contradictory images of divine being by the way of negation. This way to the knowledge of God excludes the imperfections of being in time; so the mind step by step arises to the notion of impersonal, ineffable transcendence. Therein, however, lies a difficulty: "Your argument was such that in trying to define the nature of the gods, you only succeeded in showing that they do not exist at all. You pointed out how difficult it is for us to think otherwise than through visual images. Then you said that as there could be nothing more excellent than God, the universe itself must be God, as there was nothing more excellent than the whole scheme of things. If only we could think of it as a conscious being. . . . But what do you mean by 'perfect?' If you

mean 'beautiful,' I agree. If you mean 'fitted to our needs,' I agree again. But if you mean there is nothing wiser than the universe, then I do not agree at all."

The reason for dissent becomes clear. The cosmos, even as a totality, is a body or bodily system, but in it is "no immortal body, no individual atom that cannot be split and pulled apart. Every living thing is therefore in its nature vulnerable. There is none that can escape external influences. All must endure the rigor of necessity: and all must feel and suffer. But if every living thing must suffer, none can be immortal."<sup>72</sup> The procedure culminates in articulating the dilemma of the doctrine of *impassibility*: true God is the God beyond the gods, whose perfection consists in the so-called alpha-privatives (the Greek *alpha* being the prefix of negation, as in English un- or in-): *unchanging, invisible, incorporeal, immeasurable, infinite*, and so on. Yet such an *impassible* being is nothing living, not even something existing (since even the atoms can be split!), something then utterly inconceivable: "a being that feels neither pleasure nor pain cannot be alive at all."<sup>73</sup> So the damning result is reached: By the way of negation, you have "only succeeded in showing that the gods do not exist at all." What actually follows is that the "divine Providence" moving all things in the cosmos works rather like an algorithm, "either unaware of its own powers or . . . indifferent to human life. Or else it is unable to judge what is best."<sup>74</sup> Divine providence thus lacks both wisdom and values; as such it can provide no ethical direction to human seekers: "There can be no divine guidance of human affairs if the gods make no distinction between good and evil." It might seem that this line of argument "plays into the hands of the criminal." Thankfully, however, Cicero's natural theologian, just like his latter-day follower Kant, is able to resort to the autonomous conscience of humanity: "And so it would [play into the hands of the criminal], if virtue and vice were not deep matters of our own conscience, quite apart from any gift of reason from the gods. If conscience goes, then everything collapses around us."<sup>75</sup> At the end of natural theology, "conscience" comes on the stage as a veritable *deus ex machina*—the dethroning of the gods gives way to the deification of conscience. The irony of Ciceronian natural theology is that to save the gods from idolatrous representation, they must be denatured. Denatured, however, they can give humanity no direction. Not to worry, though—conscience may now reign in place of the gods.

An even greater irony, however, ought to be seen in the endeavor by Christian theologians to use such philosophical construction of *impassible* and *ineffable* perfection—a veritably Nietzschean divinization of Unlife or Nonbeing—as a foundation for their talk about God as opposed, say, to revealed theology's own disclosure of divine nature in the perception of the dynamic harmony of power and wisdom in the divine *passion* of love. The division of labor had critical philosophy, or natural theology, telling us what the divine is (really, what it is *not*) and then revealed theology telling us Who this What, rather this Not, is and how it relates itself to us.

But if theology is the knowledge of the God of the gospel, the Trinity is not one topic alongside others but the very structure of theological knowledge.<sup>76</sup> Faith knows God as the Father with Jesus His Son in the free favor of their Spirit's love such that what may or may not be deemed "fitting" to the divine nature is something to be learned from the revelation, not imposed upon it from the outside. Christian faith knows God in the very same good pleasure that He now takes in those baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection, pouring love into their hearts by the Holy Spirit: first comes the gracious movement of *katabasis*, or condescension, of free and loving favor; just the same and inseparably, faith, hope, and love follow, knowing God in the newness of life returned in this same love, now following Jesus, carrying the cross in service of the needy to glorify the Father—the *anabasis*, or ascent, of the Christian life.

The descent and ascent of grace in this sequence mark the self-giving movements of the divine and triune life, actualized in time-space in the ministry, Easter vindication, and final triumph of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. Such participation is imparted to believers in repentance and faith. Trinity is not then revealed frosting superficially plastered on the cake of metaphysical construction of perfect being that provides the real, operative knowledge of divinity. Trinity is itself the divine life revealed in dazzling conjunctions of perfect power, wisdom, and love. Theology as cognition occurs within these movements: "In the word the Holy Spirit brings to human hearts God's love, which has been revealed in the cross and resurrection of Christ. The Holy Spirit brings us into community with God. But in Christ himself the church is already established. When Christ comes "into" us through the Holy Spirit, the church comes "into" us. The Holy Spirit, however, moves us by putting Christ into our hearts, creating faith and hope. But this faith in Christ generated by the Holy Spirit includes faith in the church-community in which Christ reigns; love, however, as the love of the heart of Christ in us, is given to us as a new heart, as will for good. Faith acknowledges God's rule and embraces it; love actualizes the Realm of God."<sup>77</sup> Bonhoeffer's back-and-forth in this passage between the act of the Son and the call of the Spirit locates the theological life of the church within the very movements of God's triune being as something implicating human believers in the here and now. To think "God" this way today entails disentangling the fateful but peculiar alliance of Christian theology with the cosmo-theological scheme of Greek metaphysical theology (thinking of God as the highest link or supreme cause *within* the cosmic great chain of being), and more insidiously by means of the Platonic "axiom of impassibility" (God is not what everything else is), otherwise known as the doctrine of divine simplicity (taken not as a rule for reverent speech but as an insight into the being of God).

This is a complex and still uncompleted task. For it is true, notwithstanding all that has been just argued, that Christian theology made and can continue

to make common cause with *critical* Platonism's critique of myth and sacrificial cult. The fact that natural theology is soteriologically idle in the light of revelation, indeed positively misleading apart from the light of revelation, does not mean that natural theology is simply illusory, as for example Nietzsche thought. Rather it becomes useful in an unanticipated and surprising way in the light of revelation, which retools its own critique of myth into a corresponding critique of metaphysics. The highly controverted passage of Romans 1:19-20 adopted ideas from the best available philosophical theology: "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." But the context of this statement is Paul's apocalyptic discourse about the revelation from heaven of the wrath of God. What Paul accordingly sees is a pervasive human idolatry that in turn somehow presupposes among the idolaters a *sensus divinitatis*: "God in his invisibility, and in the [deity] that distinguishes him from cosmic being . . . is eternal, perpetual power."<sup>78</sup> So the early Luther, following Augustine's seminal interpretation of the sin of idolatry in using God for human purposes,<sup>79</sup> explicated the text: "All those who set up idols and worship them and call them 'gods' or even 'God,' believing that God is immortal, that is, eternal, powerful, and able to render help, clearly indicate that they have a knowledge of divinity in their hearts . . . calling upon him, worshipping and adoring him . . . It follows most surely that they had a knowledge or notion of divinity which undoubtedly came to them from God, as our text tells us. This was their error, that they did not worship this divinity untouched but changed and adjusted it to their desires and needs."<sup>80</sup>

It is important to discern here that Luther does not locate the error of natural theology in the mere fact of its sublime representation of the divine as transcendent causality but rather in the use of this idea to capture God for human purposes. It is the function of representation, crude and polytheistic or sublime and monotheistic, to turn God to the purposes of the worshipper; this is criticized as idolatrous, not the representation of God as cosmic cause as such.<sup>81</sup> The acknowledgment of the truth of God in thanksgiving would presumably be the act that turns the creature to the creator's purpose, ascribing to Him alone all power, wisdom, and love. Presumably there could be a true representation of the God whose eternal deity and power are to give gifts up to and including a share in His own divine life. But by an act of exchange, the truth of God as the One to be thanked, not used, is suppressed, rendering humanity guilty and subject to the wrath of God. Thus Paul, as Käsemann tells, "does not here explain, prove, defend, or seek a point of contact. He accuses, reduces Hellenistic motifs to a minimum, characterizes God's deity as a power that encounters us, concentrates it in lordship, and perceives human guilt, not in ignorance, but in revolt against the known Lord."<sup>82</sup> What Paul

offers in Romans 1:19-20 then is not a Stoic natural theology but a theology of nature, that is, an interpretation of antecedent religiosity and its own best critical theology in the light of the gospel. "Since [Paul] based his proclamation on God's ever-present work, it was impossible for him to find this work only in himself and in his churches. Believing in the presence of God means to affirm it in every event. Paul's God was the creator to whom they all belong. Where the word of Jesus is, God's righteousness becomes evident because that is where faith arises; for where the word of Jesus is not, there is not the absence of God but wrath that becomes effective, because that is where all kinds of godlessness and injustice are found."<sup>83</sup>

One might of course respond that an analogical knowledge of God's being as eternal, omnipotent, and divine, seen and understood in relation to the cosmos as a whole like the cause of an effect within the world, should be possible on Paul's very logic. *Insofar as human beings know themselves as creatures*, that is, in accord with the teaching of Genesis 1:26 that humankind is made in the image and likeness of God, should they not understand themselves and all else as caused by God in the same way that they, intelligent agents in the world, refashion the little world around them according to their own causality? On the basis of this special relationship to God, human beings would be justified in drawing the causal analogy, since they would be able to reckon not only with divine power (the argument from effect to cause) but also with divine truthfulness, wisdom, and love. God, being good and wise and truthful, would not, like Descartes' demon, make a world that is a grand and cruel deception.

Yet for Paul this hypothetical world sounds like a long-forgotten dream. When called to mind, it makes sense of the universal practice of idolatry. But in fact, as Paul immediately goes on to write, human beings do not acknowledge themselves as the creatures of God by giving thanks and worshipping the Creator. Instead they actively exchange that worship for a peculiar form of self-glorification (Rom 1:21) and degradation, idolizing their own corrupt desires in the representations they construct of the God they know to be causer, never caused. The point is epistemic. Whatever the fallen creation under the power of sin knows of God will be used idolatrously, religion putting God to use for human purposes rather than human beings to service in God's reign.

Knowing oneself as the creature of God is no general or neutral presupposition of the gospel's revealed theology but rather what it accomplishes in and for us for our salvation. It is a recognition discovered though salvation in Christ, the new and true Adam, something to be learned in the act of living in Christ to the eschatological denouement. The knowledge of God the creator in Paul's theology is concretely the knowledge of faith told by the gospel, which comes from hearing (Rom 10:17) of the genuinely contingent event of the resurrection of the Crucified, by which action of His Spirit God has freely given Himself to be known in His Son (Rom 4:19-20). Creation, in other words, is not only or even

chiefly the act of origin but comprehends eschatologically all of reality in Christ on the way to the consummation. Just so, Christ is the image and analogue of God. As this free divine self-giving comes to be understood as the *fitting*, though *not necessary*, expression of God's own divine life in space-time, it challenges and ultimately revises all hitherto prevailing human conceptions of the sovereign power holding sway. It is grace that finally determines what is "natural" in the very act of the "redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23) through union with Christ's death and resurrection. The perfection of nature is likewise eschatological (Rom 8:18-25), just as God is really asserted and believed to be the almighty Father who is determined to redeem the world through Jesus Christ and bring it to fulfillment in His Spirit. The ongoing revision of the world's antecedent natural theologies is Christian theology's most fundamental but still uncompleted task in the work of critical dogmatics.

### **Kataphatic Theology**

The dogmatic theology of the classical Christian tradition is *kataphatic*. As such, it has within its own way an apophatic moment: "No one has ever seen God," we are told in John 1:18 (RSV). Yet the text immediately continues: "The only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." Divine simplicity may be taken accordingly as a rule qualifying all Christian discourse about God as discourse regarding a singularity that lives in unapproachable light. Yet the point of the rule is not to disqualify but rather to qualify the coming forth from this unapproachable light of the light that shines in the darkness in the glory of Jesus Christ, in whom the grace and truth of God are manifest here and now in space and time. In Christianity, the apophatic moment is observed in service of the kataphatic, which tells of God in the act of His being in the necessarily complex ways noted in the Christian dogma of the Trinity, the personal union of the divine and human natures in Christ, and the justification of the ungodly by grace through faith active in love and sustained by the hope for the redemption of our bodies. We thus conclude this opening chapter by asking how the primary Christian theology of gospel narrative produces in the course of its history certain such truths—dogmas—that must be affirmed along with it if the story is to continue to be told truly.

The gospel narrative in the course of its history has indeed yielded doctrines: that "crucified Jesus is the Son of God"; that the one God is nevertheless three; that sinful human beings enter into Jesus' relationship with God by the grace of the Spirit, not by the merit of their own initiatives; that the gospel may be truly narrated in visual images or musical sequences or sacramental ceremonies just as it may be truly articulated in human words and theological concepts. What kind of logical or conceptual status do these characteristic

Christian theological ideas of the post–New Testament development possess? Are they propositional truths embedded in the story, to be extracted then like nuggets of gold from the coarse ore? Arranged in a systematic display as the hard kernels of essential truth liberated from all the husk of poetry? Following Lindbeck we will suggest in the end of the next chapter that for the most part such doctrines emerge as rules for speaking correctly the primary theology of promissory narrative, in that dogmas are *analytic* of the story. The developed doctrine of the Trinity, for example, of “three persons in one essence,” emerges first as a practical rule for telling of the three distinct *personae* of the gospel narrative: Jesus, His Father, and their Spirit as one in the divine decision to create the world, redeem it, and bring it to fulfillment. And so the three are one in a free act, and so eternally one capable of a free act. The truth of the doctrine is not in the first place the formula—three persons in one essence—taken as a proposition that corresponds to an object, but rather the formula taken as indicating the right speaking of the word “God” in Christian discourse, where “speaking” is and must be as performative as ostensive.

Such a pragmatic reading of primitive Christian doctrinal beliefs has the strength of avoiding the abstraction of Christian truth into a system that takes on a life of its own on account of the conceptual framework that will be borrowed from elsewhere to organize the abstractions systematically. In this way, the doctrines become less and less related to the promissory narrative that they actually arose to serve. Such arid and speculative forms of theology have occurred time and again in Christian history, eclipsing the drama of biblical narrative telling of the three who are one in the decision to create, redeem, and fill the world. The pragmatic account also has the virtue of corresponding historically to the actual rise of creedal Christianity, which generally did not ask how the Bible could be true (what is the ontological import of its presumed propositions) but rather asked what is the truth of the Bible (what is the soteriological import of the story it tells). In the latter perspective, dogmas arise as acts of interpretive clarification that resolve real dilemmas about how rightly to read and tell the gospel conveyed in the Scriptures as truly good news. If Jesus is only creature like me and you, for example, He needs God as savior just like you and me and cannot be our savior (so Athanasius, as we shall see in detail in chapter 6). Therefore speak of Jesus the creature in such a way that He is indiscernibly one person in the world with God the eternal Son, who “for us and for our salvation came down from heaven and was made man.” This is how the Nicene Creed’s famous (or notorious) *homoousios* (of the same being as the Father) works, taken as a rule.

But of course, such rules are also formulations of tacit beliefs brought to us by the gospel. Thus, even after taking due note of the rise of dogmas in the interpretive praxis of the missionary church as rules for overcoming dilemmas and obstacles in the way of continuing to tell the gospel story, we shall have to

ask whether or how such dogmas may be understood to be true to their divine object—God—as Dennis Bielfeldt has rightly insisted.<sup>84</sup> How could the apparent contradiction—this man is God—ever be understood to be true to divine reality, which is creator not creature? The question is neither idle nor avoidable. First, dogmatic rules acquire validity and can function to rule the performance of speech in Christianity just because they contain beliefs about reality that, like any beliefs, are in principle questionable and so must be warranted. We can no more make up our own rules than we can make up our own facts. Dogma does not license dogmatism. Theology is a critical discipline. Critical dogmatics explores such difficulties in belief. A more sophisticated theological pragmatism will not beg this question of ontological import, then, but will press beyond the rule theory's reticence to account for the claim to correspond to divine reality embedded in dogmatic rules of Christian belief. Second, certain (in principle questionable) beliefs elevated to the rank of dogmas and functioning as rules can do so because they are and must be held as true (as corresponding to divine reality). Just as a promise without its fulfillment would be null and void, so also an essential belief without its corresponding object would be null and void. As such, these beliefs, lifted up as rules and claiming to correspond to divine reality, come to share in the epistemic primacy of the gospel itself, promising us nothing less than God.

How are they justified then as beliefs? A belief is justified, according to pragmatism, not because we can see its immediate correspondence with its object but insofar as it coheres with other beliefs we hold true or at least does not fatally contradict them. Pragmatist philosophy, reflecting its idealistic and Protestant Christian roots, posited an eschaton of knowledge at the end of inquiry in which perfect consensus would emerge, reconciling all beliefs. Correspondence with reality was attributed to this final state of knowledge. Theology can reclaim the Christian insight embedded in this secularization of its own thought. Dogmas arise pragmatically, to keep the reading and telling of the gospel story going with its promise of salvation. They are tested along the way for coherence with all the other beliefs we hold true. But they will be reconciled with reality, purified and judged, only when the object to which they point—the living God in the coming of His Kingdom—reveals His reign in fullness and power. Such final correspondence with reality in the eschaton has import for ordering Christian beliefs along the way. All such rules or dogmas systematically cohere in *one fundamental proposition* in the region of theology (possible eternities): *God is determined to redeem the world through Christ and bring it to fulfillment in His Spirit.* This proposition is *caused* by the resurrection of the Crucified, when the sense of resurrection is rendered by the story it comes to tell of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the gospel narrative, that one of the Trinity became incarnate and suffered for our redemption. That kataphatic claim to ultimate truth is at stake in the rise of creedal Christianity, to which we now turn.