

A CHRISTOCENTRIC THEOLOGICAL METHOD

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Dr. Gerardo Alfaro

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Billy Marsh

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### Introduction

Theology is always an interpretive enterprise. The categorization of scriptural truths into a systematic theology is the natural result of moving beyond determining simply what God has *said* in the biblical text to discerning what God is *saying*. Moreover, the interpretive task must not cease at the exegetical level, but should find resolution in exposition. Although systematic theology has been criticized for being too confessional, and thus, too biased and dogmatic in order to be objective, the propositional and prescriptive nature of God's self-revelation in the written Word inherently testifies to the need for it to be actualized.<sup>1</sup> Thus, developing a method for coming to terms with theology is not an unsubstantiated claim with respect to the absolutist character of the Scriptures. The biblical text not only contains truth which is capable of being known, but also truth which must necessarily be objective and consistent. Therefore, reasoning behind constructing a theological method presupposes the ability to determine the truth and meaning of God's special revelation in his written Word.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Systematic Theology," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 773-74.

<sup>2</sup>Stephen J. Wellum, "Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, eds. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 194. Wellum points out that reclamation of the authority of Scripture as being divinely inspired by its divine author should be the foremost concern among contemporary proposals of a Christian theological method. He posits that Christian theology is based on a "revelational epistemology" which, not to the exclusion of general revelation, is understood primarily as the knowledge of God and his

The proposal of a sound theological method is not a violation of the nature of the Scriptures. At its base level, a method for doing theology can be defined as the process of discerning and organizing the truth and meaning of the biblical witness in its canonical form into a rational, interpretive, and communicative framework.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the purpose of this paper is to argue for a Christocentric theological method by which theology that desires to be distinctively “Christian” ought to be performed. The paper will accomplish this task in three main ways. First, the paper will seek to demonstrate that the Scriptures are to be interpreted from a Christ-centered approach. Second, the person of Christ will be set forth as the point of reference by which Scripture is able to have meaning. And third, this paper will seek to define Christian theology and argue for it as the only true theology which rightly represents the meaning of the Scriptures.

### **Christ-Centered Interpretation**

A “Christocentric” method for doing theology in today’s world consists of relating the results of theological study directly and finally to the person and work of Jesus Christ. As understood in Stiver’s definition, theological method also takes into account certain presuppositions which inform the interpretive task. Therefore, the approach set forth in this paper in no way poses as being unbiased or neutral in any way. However, desiring to labor through the various modes of theology (i.e. biblical, historical,

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redemptive plan made known by means of his special revelation contained in Scripture.

<sup>3</sup>Dan R. Stiver, “Method,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 510. Stiver gives a fuller form of this definition in his article on methodology stating, “Whether in biblical interpretation per se or in systematic theology, method concerns both the basic rational procedure for yielding and arranging results and, importantly, the presuppositions and conceptual framework that one brings to the task.”

and systematic theology) with a Christ-centered model is not an ideal which is placed upon the text from outside of the text. But rather, the method is based off of the hermeneutical principles which Jesus himself both taught and demonstrated.

Immediately, one recognizes the unavoidable circumstance of what is often termed “the hermeneutical circle” or “the hermeneutical spiral”.<sup>4</sup> This concept seeks to explain the role and necessity of presuppositions in discovering the original, authorial meaning of a given text. In addition, “the hermeneutical spiral” represents the process of understanding the parts of a text in light of the whole.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in order to come to terms with the “whole,” the “parts” must be interpreted. Yet, the “parts” cannot be comprehended apart from certain presuppositions or a pre-understanding of the “whole”. Thus, each category plays a reciprocal role in permitting the reader to locate the authorial intention. However, this dynamic also occurs beyond the exegesis of a text. At the level of practice, the “spiral” appears in developing a fuller grasp of how to emulate the significance of a text’s meaning.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, “the hermeneutical spiral” exists in a

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<sup>4</sup>Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 22. Osborne prefers the term “spiral” over “circle” with reference to the cycle one makes in discerning the author’s intended meaning. He posits, “A spiral is a better metaphor because it is not a closed circle but rather an open-ended movement from the horizon of the text to the horizon of the reader. I am not going round and round a closed circle that can never detect the true meaning but am spiraling nearer and nearer to the text’s intended meaning as I refine my hypotheses and allow the text to continue to challenge and correct those alternative interpretations, then to guide my delineation of its significance for my situation today.” The term “spiral” is also the preferred choice of this author.

<sup>5</sup>Anthony C. Thiselton, “Hermeneutical Circle,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 281. In his article, Thiselton gives a very informative description and brief analysis of the two versions of “the hermeneutical spiral” and their respective treatments in history. Towards the end of his sketch of this concept, Thiselton recognizes that there is opportunity in the second version, which deals with pre-understanding as opposed to meaning, to elevate the experience of the individual in shaping his or her presuppositions above the text’s authority. Osborne also sees this tendency, and thus vies for the “spiral” metaphor in response (Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 22).

<sup>6</sup>Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 32. Osborne teaches that “the hermeneutical spiral”

Christocentric theological method because the “Christ-centered” lens that is used to better interpret the “parts” of Scripture comes from a pre-understanding of the meaning and purpose of the biblical canon. However, as will be shown below, this particular view of the Bible as a “whole” is derived from looking at the individual verses and texts of God’s Word and coming to terms with their specific meaning. This aspect of interpretation is unavoidable, and therefore, should not to be seen as an objection to this paper’s proposal for a theological method that is qualified as “Christocentric”.

In his brief essay, “Meditation in a Toolshed,” C. S. Lewis uses various illustrations to distinguish the difference between looking *at* something and looking *along* something.<sup>7</sup> Lewis tells how standing in a toolshed illuminated by a single ray of light caused him to see only dust particles and the beam of light itself. His range of vision was limited due to only looking *at* the incoming light; however, when he pointed his gaze into the small hole that was channeling the light into the toolshed, he looked *along* the light beam and saw green leaves, trees, and “90 million miles away, the sun”.<sup>8</sup> In the same way, instead of merely looking *at* the Bible and becoming consumed by various critical methodologies, one must look *along* the Bible allowing God’s Word to be the lamp that lights the path that leads and points to Jesus Christ (cf. Ps 119:105).<sup>9</sup>

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involves text and context. The spiraling action which the interpreter takes is one that seeks to further grasp the meaning of a text and then learns more fully how to apply the meaning. He observes, “The ‘hermeneutical spiral’ takes place not only at the level of original intended meaning, as our understanding spirals upward . . . to the intended meaning of a passage, but also at the level of contextualization, as our application spirals upward . . . to a proper understanding of the significance of the passage for Christian life today.”

<sup>7</sup>C. S. Lewis, “Meditation in a Toolshed,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), 212.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Vanhoozer also shares Lewis’ literary insight in the preliminary essay of his book of collected

This method of studying the Scriptures was in fact the same lesson that the resurrected Lord personally taught both the two men on the road to Emmaus and the disciples in Luke 24. First, in Luke 24:25-27, Jesus rebukes the Emmaus road disciples for their misunderstandings of the totality of the Old Testament. In despair, the men lament the empty tomb, but Jesus, before revealing himself, seeks to restore their faith by showing that the comprehensive perspective of God's promise in the OT pointed towards a suffering, dying, resurrected, and exalted Messiah.<sup>10</sup> This text appropriately supports a Christocentric theological method insofar as it speaks towards a holistic interpretation of God's special revelation that is supremely centered on the God-Man, Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Second, in Luke 24:44-47, Jesus again explains the nature of God's Word and its relationship to himself. In the previous passage, when Jesus sets out to describe the manner in which the Scriptures point to him, Luke says that his discourse began with "Moses and all the Prophets" and then transitioned to a broader scope, thereby evidencing his fulfillment of the OT's prophecies and promises "in all the Scriptures" (Lk 24:27). Though he initially undertakes this interpretive task starting with "Moses and all the

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articles on biblical interpretation and theological method: Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "First Theology: Meditations in a Postmodern Toolshed," in *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 17-19.

<sup>10</sup>Lk 24:25-27 says, "And he said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

<sup>11</sup>Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, eds. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 6. In his commentary on Luke's gospel, Green remarks on the misguided pursuit of tracking down specific verses that Jesus may have been referencing stating, "Which Scriptures portend messianic suffering and resurrection? One would be hard-pressed to locate specific texts that make these prognostications explicitly. Even to attempt to do so would be wrongheaded, however. The point of Jesus' words is not that such-and-such a verse has now come true, but that the truth to which all of the Scriptures point has now

Prophets”, he ends with expounding upon how *all* of the Scriptures correlate to his messianic role. However, in the later account when Jesus reappears to the eleven disciples, Luke records that Jesus added to “Moses and all the Prophets” the “Psalms”.<sup>12</sup> Yet, as before, Luke interjects a commentary note which further widens the range of Scriptures from which Jesus taught concerning himself in Lk 24:45, which states, “Then he opened their minds to understand *the Scriptures* . . . (emphasis added).” Thus, by adding the “Psalms” to the list of large portions of the Hebrew Bible from which he interprets in view of himself and his Christological role, in essence Jesus is putting forth a holistic proposition which reflects his understanding of the overall message of God’s Word. Furthermore, Darrell L. Bock in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke agrees declaring that “Jesus is the topic of Scripture. The events of his life are thus no surprise; they are in continuity with what God revealed throughout Scripture.”<sup>13</sup>

Elsewhere in the Gospels, in John 5 the Apostle John recounts a similar episode. Whereas before in Luke 24, Jesus teaches the meaning of the Scriptures to his followers, here in John’s narrative, Jesus corrects the Pharisees and their misreading of

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been realized!”

<sup>12</sup>Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Moises Silva, vol. 3b (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1937. In Lk 24:44, Jesus teaches saying, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in *the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms* must be fulfilled (emphasis added).” Bock suggests that there is textual uncertainty as to whether or not the inclusion of the “Psalms” serves as a marker for the rest of the OT writings outside of the Pentateuch and the prophets. The title could just as easily refer back to the Book of Psalms, which in itself is a major contribution to the overall material and messianic expectation of the Hebrew Bible. However, in light of the discussion concerning how Christ began with Moses and the prophets, but then moved on into all of the Scriptures in Lk 24:27, this appears to be the case again in Lk 24:44-45. It seems likely that Jesus is using this three-fold division to represent the totality of the OT. This conception then merits the comprehensive textual note of Luke in Lk 24:45, which summarizes that Jesus’ intention was to impart to the disciples a Christocentric understanding of the entirety of the Scriptures; not just isolated parts, but rather the whole.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 1936.

the OT. Jesus makes the profound statement in John 5:39-40, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.” Here is a clear example of Jesus demonstrating that the totality of the Scriptures are inspired and authored with the intention of pointing to him as the embodiment of the messianic promise. D. A. Carson has described this concept as “a comprehensive hermeneutical key.”<sup>14</sup> By neglecting to uphold this interpretive presupposition when approaching theological method, one will be misconceived in his or her perverted conclusions insofar as they will inevitably betray the divine authorial intention of the Scriptures.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, binding oneself to this understanding will guard the interpreter from bibliolatry. The Bible is not an end in itself. Furthermore, a Christocentric theological method will find its proper end in the person of Jesus Christ, whose gospel word alone can save souls (cf. Rom 10:17; Jas 1:18, 21).

As Jesus rightly rebukes the Pharisees, the Scriptures themselves do not impart eternal life, but rather they reveal and direct people towards the one in whom salvation is found. Therefore, interpreters ought to take heed to Lewis’ insightful wisdom and not

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<sup>14</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Gospel of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 263. Carson further explains how this notion functions as “a comprehensive hermeneutical key” intimating, “By predictive prophecy, by type, by revelatory event and by anticipatory statute, what we call the Old Testament is understood to point to Christ, his ministry, his teaching, his death and resurrection.” See Carson’s excellent discussion with respect to this issue in Jn 5:39-47 on pp. 263-66.

<sup>15</sup>The usage of a Christocentric theological method seeks to retain Christ as the center of interpretation and systematic theology. However, at the lower level of biblical studies, the model is not a proponent of attempting to discover Christ under every syntactical, grammatical, historical, and exegetical rock. Poythress is in favor of a Christ-centered approach for making sense of the biblical canon, but warns, “We do not want simply to force a Christological message onto a text in an artificial way. That would not be ‘understanding’ the scriptural text in question, but simply imposing a meaning from some other (New Testament) text. But neither do we want to avoid taking up the challenge that Luke 24 offers. The alternative to a Christocentric understanding of the Old Testament is not understanding it rightly—not understanding it as Christ desired.” Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1999), 60.

simply look *at* the Bible, but instead look *along* it so that one's gaze and affection may be set upon the radiance of God's glory in Jesus Christ (Heb 1:1-3).<sup>16</sup>

### **Christocentrism**

A Christ-centered approach to theological method corresponds to the essence of the Scriptures insofar as they are meant to reveal Christ who in turn discloses God the Father (Col 1:15; Heb 1:1-3; 1 Jn 2:23). For one to desire to do theology that is specifically derived from the biblical canon, yet neglects to correlate the findings to Christology in effect surrenders the ability to come to the Scriptures on its own terms. Thus, objective theological truth is founded upon Jesus as its primary reference point.<sup>17</sup>

In his book on postmodern hermeneutics and literary theory, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer defends the accuracy of and belief in *logocentrism* against the deconstructionist linguistic approach which has characterized the interpretive campaign of the age of postmodernity led by thinkers such as the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. Vanhoozer defines *logocentrism* as “the belief that there is some stable point *outside* language—reason, revelation, Platonic ideas—from which one can ensure that one's words, as well as the whole system of distinctions that order our experience, correspond to the world.”<sup>18</sup> In essence, *logocentrism* is the view that there must be something external to the text which ensures that what is being said in fact has objective meaning and value. This thought is equivalent to the argument that man, who is

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<sup>16</sup>For further textual support of a Christ-centered approach to the Scriptures see also Matt 5:17-20; 11:13; Jn 1:45; 2:22; 3:10; 20:9; Acts 26:22-23; 28:23; Rom 10:4.

<sup>17</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 86.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 53.

finite, in order to have true purpose and significance in the universe, must have an “infinite reference point,” namely the infinite-personal Triune God.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the language of the Bible must also be supported by an all-sufficient reference point, that is, God in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 4:4-6; Col 1:17; 2 Tim 3:16). Therefore, in connection to what was explained in the previous section, not only is Christ the central message of the biblical text, but he also is the central “stable point” outside of the text which enables the Scriptures to contain realism and objective truth.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, not only should the literary theory of *logocentrism* be upheld when seeking to discover meaning in the Bible, but also one may adopt the term *Christocentrism* in order to reveal and identify just exactly *who*, as opposed to *what*, it is that fulfills the role of the external source who guarantees that language and the written Word corresponds to truth and reality.

This point continues to find scriptural support with the understanding that Christ is the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5; cf. Heb 9:24; 12:24). Jesus himself functions as the divine link between God and his people in terms of fulfilling and embodying the definitive “Word” which the Father has spoken to mankind (cf. Jn 1:1; Heb 1:1-3). So, not only does Christ mediate salvation on man’s behalf, but also meaning on God’s behalf. Christ is that gospel word which the Father has delivered to sinners contained in the Scriptures, thus, any interpretation that is devoid of relegating the truths

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<sup>19</sup>Francis A. Schaeffer, *He is There and He is not Silent*, rev ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2001), 19. Schaeffer argues that man in himself as a finite creature has no sufficient reference point; thus, without something existing infinitely and externally from himself, man is “meaningless and absurd.”

<sup>20</sup>Most naturally, Jesus, who is the Incarnate Word, would function as the guarantor of scriptural truth, which is inspired “talk” about reality, not meaningless word symbols and unreliable communicative acts of objectivity. Vanhoozer writes, “The belief in Jesus as the Logos, therefore, seems to be a prime instance of what Derrida attacks as ‘logocentrism.’ Jesus Christ is the referent of the biblical texts, as Jesus himself explained to his disciples at Emmaus (Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 86).”

of the Bible back to Christ, whose person and work is the central and overarching message of the biblical canon, has attempted to bypass the “one mediator” who alone can communicate the Father’s word.<sup>21</sup>

Because of Christ’s supreme mediation between God and man, the gospel itself becomes the norm for theological interpretation that is derived from the Scriptures. Furthermore, Christ functions as the external point of reference for Scripture, guaranteeing and ensuring that the written Word of God has objective truth and meaning; but also, he fulfills this same role for all of reality. Therefore, the Bible contains realism inasmuch as all of creation ought to be understood in terms of the person and work of Christ with respect to his role in creation (Col 1:15-16), his role in sustaining all things (Col 1:17), his role in having all things united unto himself (Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:17), his role as the head of the church (Col 1:18), and his role in the age to come (cf. Rev 11:15; 20:6).<sup>22</sup> *Christocentrism* compliments a Christocentric theological method inasmuch as it presupposes Jesus as the primary source responsible for securing definite and absolute theological meaning to the written Word of God and all of life.

### **Christian Theology as True Theology**

Towards the end of his timeless autobiography, Lewis recalls kneeling and praying at Oxford during the Trinity Term of 1929, and admitting that “God was God.”<sup>23</sup> However, he readily distinguished between this monumental step in his journey to

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<sup>21</sup>Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 62.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>23</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt Inc, 1955), 228.

Christianity from his actual conversion which occurred at a later time. Lewis reflected on this event explaining, “. . . the conversion . . . was only to Theism, pure and simple, not to Christianity. I knew nothing yet about the Incarnation. The God to whom I surrendered was sheerly nonhuman.”<sup>24</sup> Subsequently, during his recollection of his true conversion to Christianity, Lewis identified belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God as the distinguishing element between his form of theology and real Christian theology.<sup>25</sup>

In Lewis’ case, the transition from atheism to theism was not sufficient means for salvation. In other words, ceasing merely at the belief in and study of God leaves the theological task incomplete, especially in light of a Christocentric understanding of the purpose and meaning of the biblical text. Therefore, Christian theology must be appropriately defined and postulated as the only true theology which corresponds and communicates knowledge of the only true God.

### **Defining Christian Theology**

Theology is a broad field of study in which not all of its many versions relate back to the Triune God of the Bible. Moreover, not all perceptions and studies of God which are labeled theology are squarely founded upon the biblical text either. Therefore, it is imperative to qualify theology in a manner which denotes it as not only objective and true, but also distinctively Christian. Alister E. McGrath submits a definition of theology in which he admittedly presupposes that the one and only true God is the Christian God,

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 230.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 237.

and thus, “theology is reflection upon the God whom Christians worship and adore.”<sup>26</sup> However, the equivocation of doing theology as merely “reflection” does not seem to capture the essence of the implications of being eternally accountable to God’s special revelation embedded in the Scriptures.

Perhaps McGrath’s definition suffers from a lack of specific categorization such as connoted in the fields of biblical theology or historical theology. In particular, systematic theology, in this paper, is the ultimate goal of a Christocentric theological method. This aim, of course, presupposes the work of both biblical and historical theology. Yet, systematic theology is reserved for the final collaboration of an interpretive framework in which the various doctrines of Scripture may be set and readily accessible in order to determine what the Bible says as a whole. Therefore, Christian theology may be defined as the study of Scripture in its canonical form which enables people to know, love, and worship God in spirit and truth by means of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 4:24; Matt 22:37-40; Rom 15:16).<sup>27</sup>

A Christocentric theological method will produce a Christian theology which relates the results of theological study to its proper relationship in Jesus Christ and the

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<sup>26</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 137. McGrath, from a historical approach, agrees that there must be a separation of theology from actual Christian theology. From his research, he supports this idea as one which has been a part of the Christian church since its early beginnings. He tells, “Yet Christianity came into existence in a polytheistic world, where belief in the existence of many gods was commonplace. Part of the task of the earliest Christian writers appears to have been to distinguish the Christian god from other gods in the religious marketplace. At some point, it had to be asked which god Christians were talking about, . . .”

<sup>27</sup>This definition partially reflects Clark’s proposed thesis for systematic theology where the core content is the gospel and the sole end is to know and love God. This point is made apparent also as it overtly mirrors the title of his recent book on evangelical theological method. David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), xxiii-xxiv.

gospel message which is the summarized content of his life, ministry, and teachings. In order for theology to be correctly executed, the epistemology of God can only be truly known through Jesus Christ. Hence, a Christocentric theological method presupposes Jesus as the central figure and message of God's special revelation and that he is the image of the invisible God thereby entailing that sound Christian theology must be derived and discerned from the divinely authored and inspired Scriptures (Lk 24; Col 1:15; 2 Tim 3:16-17; Heb 1:1-3).<sup>28</sup> Christian theology determines how the entirety of the Bible's truth corresponds to Christ; and a Christocentric theological method, in turn, determines how Christian theology corresponds to all of reality.

### **For Christians Only?**

The next question is then obvious: Is it possible for anyone to do theology? Perhaps yes in some respects, but what about Christian theology? Paul tells his readers in the letter to the Colossians his deep desire for them to "reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, *in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Col 2:2b-3; emphasis added)." If Christ is the pinnacle of the revelation of God and the supreme source for wisdom and knowledge, then how does one truly do theology apart from Christ taking up residence in that person, which Paul certainly does seem to presuppose (Col 1:27-28)? Here, a Christocentric theological method must be understood as Christ-centered for more reasons than simply that it is a system used to codify biblical information.

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<sup>28</sup>J. I. Packer, "Is Systematic Theology a Mirage? An Introductory Discussion," in *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, eds. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 22.

First, the definition of Christian theology must be taken into account.

However, that definition does not stand alone, but rather rests firmly upon the understood nature and intention of the Scriptures. Therefore, the force of the biblical canon informs the nature of Christian theology and its purpose. As noted earlier with reference to Clark's definition of systematic theology, the ultimate end of Christian theology is namely, knowing and loving God. Clark goes on to say in his work that the primary task of systematic theology is "to articulate the *content* of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the *context* of a particular culture."<sup>29</sup> This definition alone entails that the one who is doing theology in a Christian context with the intention of communicating that same message to others, must in fact be a Christian with a pre-understanding and loyal commitment to the regenerating and transforming efficacy of the gospel of God (Mk 1:14; Rom 15:16).

One of the main factors which creates the dividing line between theology and Christian theology has to do with the goal of biblical knowledge. Christian theology is reserved for and limited to Christians insofar as derived content from the biblical text is intended not only for information, but also for performance. Vanhoozer, in his recent book on Christian theology, *The Drama of Doctrine*, gives a refreshing meaning to the role of theology in his statement, ". . . theology [is] the task of bringing one's interpretation of Scripture to bear on the life of the church in the world."<sup>30</sup> In this brief quote, one may immediately recognize that theology is not truly Christian theology until

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<sup>29</sup>Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 33.

<sup>30</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 21. Vanhoozer continues to explain this understanding of what he terms "dramatic" theology when he eloquently writes, "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. . . . The proper end of the drama of doctrine is wisdom: lived knowledge, a performance of the truth."

knowledge has made its way into practice. Here is where the defense for the propositional nature of revelation in the Scriptures must move beyond the mere acknowledgment that the Bible contains facts. Instead, Christian theology must communicate the knowledge of God and his will, as contained and disclosed in the biblical canon, in a way that summons the Christian reader to put it into action in reality.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, a sound Christocentric theological method can only be properly upheld by someone who is capable of believing and doing what the Scripture says in loving obedience towards God and for the glory of his name.

Second, now that Christian theology has been shown to be understood in terms of more than just the collection of theoretical data, the issue of whether or not an unbeliever is even able to truly comprehend the Scriptures and their intended meaning must be raised. The Apostle Paul speaks of this idea in 1 Cor 2:14 when he declares, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” In this instance, Paul is not directly commenting on the interpretation of the written Word; however, he is arguing that the non-Christian is unable to make sense of the “wisdom of God” or rather “the word of the cross” which is the gospel message encapsulated in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Moreover, this same saving Word of God is the supreme central message and proclamation of the Scriptures, and therefore, Paul submits that

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<sup>31</sup>Vanhoozer does not deny propositional revelation, but rather submits a nuanced version of its definition and conception. Furthermore, he rightly asserts, “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. 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.” Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 25. See also his discussions on propositional truth on pp. 265-78; in addition, Vanhoozer has written extensively on the role of literary theory and speech-acts which are germane to this topic in his work, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*.

without the indwelling Spirit of God, one will not attain to the full truth of God's special revelation.<sup>32</sup> What must be noted is that Paul is not saying that the non-Christian is incapable of reading Scripture and having true knowledge of it. Instead, the unbeliever, devoid of the illumination of the Holy Spirit, is unable to fully discover and apply the divinely inspired meaning of the text since Scripture communicates much more than merely facts to its intended audience.<sup>33</sup> Those who attempt to develop a theological understanding of the Bible apart from the guiding and interpretive work of the Holy Spirit will invariably arrive at an incomplete and misdirected knowledge of God.<sup>34</sup> This point is purely a mark of a metaphysical inability rather than a cognitive deficiency which can be humanly resolved.<sup>35</sup> Theology cannot effectively be executed nor accomplished until it is

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<sup>32</sup>D. A. Carson, "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," in *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, eds. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 70.

<sup>33</sup>Concerning 1 Cor 2:14 and 2 Cor 4:4, Osborne argues that these types of texts "do not state that unbelievers cannot understand the *meaning* of the text but rather that they will reject the *implications* of it (Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 437)." Here is where the dichotomy ought not to exist in defining authorial intention. Although there should be a clear distinction between "meaning" and "implication", the pursuit of authorial intention must include both categories as a unified form which prevents a compartmentalized understanding of the biblical text. Admittedly, the unbeliever is capable of comprehending the truth statements of a text, but until he or she realizes the further significance of that text and its application, he or she has not *truly* grasped the passage's meaning. A recovery of defining authorial intention as a unified whole which does not easily separate "meaning" from "implication" is necessary for averting theology that poses as comprehensive yet fails to entail the Christ-centered implications thereof. For a classic discussion on "meaning" and "implication" see E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 24-67.

<sup>34</sup>It is only logical that the Holy Spirit would play such a prominent role in discerning theology and applying it to one's life in the world. Before the Spirit had been given at Pentecost, in Lk 24:31, 45, Luke speaks of Jesus as being the one who not only interpreted and clarified the true meaning of the Scriptures to his followers, but also the one who opened their eyes and hearts to see him and understand the biblical canon. Later, this work is passed on to the Holy Spirit. In Jn 15:26, Jesus promises the coming Holy Spirit, whom he names the "Spirit of truth," and that the Spirit's work will be characterized by bearing witness to him. Thus, it follows that the Holy Spirit's role in the interpretive process would be in congruence with correlating theological truth back to Jesus Christ and thereby instituting theology as distinctively Christian, or rather, Christocentric. Furthermore, in this case, Vanhoozer is correct in calling the Spirit "the minister of the Word" (Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 415).

<sup>35</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the

accepted and believed to be Christian theology, and this event will occur when hearts are opened, scales fall off of eyes, and ears hear what the Spirit is saying (cf. Rev 2:7; 3:6).

Third, the Bible, though read and interpreted by believer and non-believer alike, appears to be written with a certain reader in mind, namely the Christian. The OT was most certainly God's Word to his chosen people, and therefore, will not be contested in this paper. Clearly, from the discussion on Luke 24, the Scriptures were intended to be read by those who would recognize Christ as the long-expected, suffering and resurrected Messiah. The NT as well demonstrates that it was precisely written with the believer as the implied reader.<sup>36</sup> The manner in which the NT is authored reveals that its readers have a personal attachment to the content of its message. Hence, Christian theology is inseparable from daily practice inasmuch as the NT directly speaks to its implied reader with the intention of informing, teaching, instructing, rebuking, encouraging, and so forth and so on (2 Tim 3:16-17; 4:2). Thus, J. I. Packer is correct when he states that theological method must be "conscientiously Bible-based, Christ-centered, and church-oriented, with a sustained life-changing and world-changing interest."<sup>37</sup> The tone and atmosphere of the NT is conveyed as one that is knowingly being delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3).<sup>38</sup> Therefore, a Christocentric theological method assumes that Christians are

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New Testament, eds. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 118.

<sup>36</sup>Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*, Studies in Theological Interpretation, eds. Craig G. Bartholomew, Joel B. Green, and Christopher R. Seitz (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 68-69.

<sup>37</sup>Packer, "Is Systematic Theology a Mirage?," 23.

<sup>38</sup>Bockmuehl posits, "More specifically, the implied reader has undergone a religious, moral, and intellectual conversion to the gospel of which the documents speak. Regardless of whether the texts, narrate, or reprove, they implicitly assume that the readers share a stance of the Christian faith, that they look to the Christian gospel as both formative and normative in their lives, and that they accept a Christian

in fact the ones commissioned to do sound and God-honoring theology. For the non-believer to stake claim on the biblical text is just as inappropriate as a man telling a woman what it personally feels like to be pregnant and to give birth. There is a metaphysical and spiritual line that the non-Christian is utterly unable to cross which is of absolute necessity in doing sound Christian theology that demonstrates fidelity to the divine authorial intention of the canon. Immediately, one is made aware of the major gaps that will forever be present in a non-Christian's theological conclusions, to the point that it will be the same as in the instance with the Pharisees, that is, he or she never really understood the Scriptures at all.

This fact being the case, one is not surprised when Vanhoozer speaks of the ethics of interpretation.<sup>39</sup> In essence, the non-believer is violating the text and the author's intention by failing to submit to Christ for salvation and thereby knowing and loving God (Matt 22:34-40). The reader must come in the manner of obedience and humility to the text. Vanhoozer intimates, "Consequently, though real readers are active, their activity is limited to performing a prescribed role laid down in the text."<sup>40</sup> Jeannine K. Brown agrees in her book, *Scripture as Communication*, stating, "So as real readers, we pursue the goal to take on the role of the implied reader—to do what the author wants us to do in thought, word, and deed."<sup>41</sup> This theory proceeds from the idea that the Bible

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way of thinking about God, the world, and themselves (Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, 70)." See the rest of Bockmuehl's intriguing and excellent discussion on the implied reader of the NT located in pp. 68-99.

<sup>39</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Reader at the Well: Responding to John 4," in *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 242.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 243.

<sup>41</sup>Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 129.

summons the interpreter to read in a certain way. Therefore, a reader must come to the text and handle it responsibly as dictated by the authorial intention.<sup>42</sup> This approach calls for the interpreter to make sense of the biblical text's meaning before prematurely and inaccurately putting what he or she believes to be the communicated intention into practice.<sup>43</sup> In a Christocentric theological method, in order for the results to reflect true Christian theology and the nature of the Scriptures, the reader and interpreter of the biblical canon necessarily must be a Christian.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to argue for a Christocentric theological method which, if done accordingly, will produce true Christian theology. If one practices a Christ-centered approach to doing theology in the world, he or she will not only construct a systematic theology which will hold the gospel as normative, but also will create theologians who are constantly being conformed to the image of Christ (cf. Rom 8:29). Theology which proceeds from the Bible was not intended to be wholly static. Rather, the dynamic nature of the Scriptures informs the essence of systematic theology thereby causing its handlers to move beyond the mere collection of propositional truth and into the application of its apparent implications. Hence, the institution of a Christocentric theological method has several hermeneutical and personal ramifications.

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<sup>42</sup>Vanhoozer, "The Reader at the Well: Responding to John 4," 248.

<sup>43</sup>Brown asserts the validity of implied readership in the construction of the Scriptures as well as that the authorial intention contained in them is meant to move beyond simply propositional truth. She intimates, "To read only for the cognitive knowledge we can get from the Bible diminishes its value and purposes. Part of allowing Scripture to shape us is submitting to it not only with our minds but also with our affections and actions. Only in this way will we truly and personally know (Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 128)."

First, the theologian must take seriously the OT. Due to Jesus' statements in Luke 24, there is an obvious role in which the OT plays in exalting and manifesting Jesus Christ in exactly the way in which he appeared in the NT.<sup>44</sup> A Christless understanding of OT theology is not evangelical, and furthermore, is definitely not Christian. Moreover, Christ functions as the great unifier between the Old and New Testaments; therefore, an unbalanced approach to theology from either side will paint a distorted picture of God in Christ.

Second, the theologian must recognize that Jesus Christ and God's gospel in him is the central figure and message of every epoch in human history as depicted in the Scriptures. Jesus Christ transcends all of salvation-history from before creation, up to the Incarnation (i.e. the Gospels), beyond Pentecost and the rest of the NT literature, and into the Second Coming and the age to come. This point has great bearing on how one views the biblical canon and its implications on all of reality.

Third, the theologian must take into account the role of the Holy Spirit in doing theology. Because the gospel is a spiritual truth, yet not detached from verbal and literary communication, the Spirit and the Word go forth together. If the gospel is in fact the norm of Christian theology, then the Holy Spirit must be at work in the theologian in order to bring about a Christ-centered interpretation of Scripture which should make its way into daily Christian practice and living. In addition, the doctrine of the "Word and Spirit" was a major facet of the Reformation, and for Martin Luther, these two were utterly inseparable.<sup>45</sup> The Holy Spirit is the interpreter and revealer of scriptural truth

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<sup>44</sup>Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 303.

<sup>45</sup>Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress

which accurately corresponds to Jesus Christ of whom he was sent to bear witness (Jn 15:26).<sup>46</sup>

In conclusion, a Christocentric theological method seeks to discover Jesus Christ as he is revealed and made known in the biblical canon. Christ, who is the image of the invisible God, is perfectly portrayed in the Scriptures; thus, their primary goal is to testify to him.<sup>47</sup> However, the end of theology is not simply “seeing” Christ in the text, but rather “savoring” him as the exalted and glorified Lord and Savior of all creation.<sup>48</sup> Edmund P. Clowney submits sage wisdom to churchmen and theologians alike in his brief book, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture*, when he says, “‘Show us Jesus’ is a fit motto for Sunday school teachers and for preachers.” Still, the theologian’s intent for doing theology in today’s world ought to be motivated by the incentive that those who see him lifted up in the text, may make him the center of their lives to the point that Paul’s statements in Col 3:3-4 would be true of them: “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ *who is your life* appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (emphasis added).”

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Press, 1966), 36-38. Althaus says that Luther’s perspective on the relationship between God’s Word and the Holy Spirit can be summarized in two ways: “(1) The Spirit does not speak without the word. (2) The Spirit speaks through and in the word.”

<sup>46</sup>Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 307.

<sup>47</sup>Donald G. Bloesch, “A Christological Hermeneutic: Crisis and Conflict in Hermeneutics,” in *The Use of the Bible in Theology*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 82. Bloesch writes with this idea in mind, “. . . God reveals himself fully and definitively in one time and place, viz., in the life history of Jesus Christ. The Bible is the primary witness to this event or series of events.” See also Vanhoozer’s interesting discussion on this issue which he labels as “Christopic” (Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 346-49).

<sup>48</sup>John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 11-17. This method is the premise of Piper’s devotional work which seeks to disclose Christ from the Scriptures so that the believer may respond in joyful worship, adoration, and satisfaction.

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