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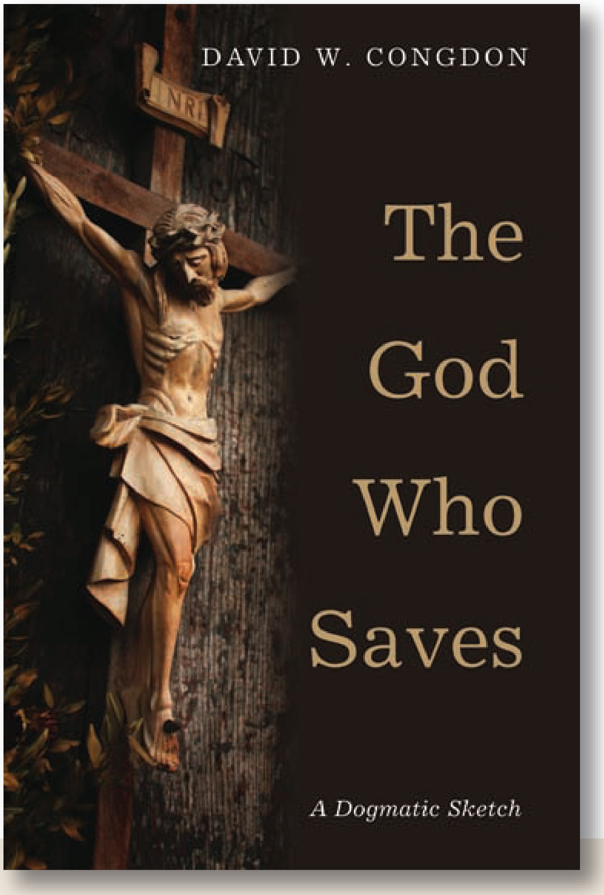
The God Who Saves

DAVID W. CONGDON

A Dogmatic Sketch



Christian universalism has been explored in its biblical, philosophical, and historical dimensions. For the first time, *The God Who Saves* explores it in systematic theological perspective. In doing so it also offers a fresh take on universal salvation, one that is postmetaphysical, existential, and hermeneutically critical. The result is a constructive account of soteriology that does justice to both the universal scope of divine grace and the historicity of human existence.

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David W. Congdon is associate editor at IVP Academic. He is the author of *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology* (2015) and *Rudolf Bultmann: A Companion to His Theology* (2015).

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The God Who Saves

A Dogmatic Sketch

DAVID W. CONGDON

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THE GOD WHO SAVES
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Prologue

How My Mind Has Changed

This is not the book I initially set out to write. For that reason, some biographical context is necessary.

This book had its genesis in 2006, when I came to the realization that universal salvation was the only account of Christianity I could find credible. The reasons for this are varied and I will not go into them here. Suffice it to say that everything I studied since has only confirmed those initial intuitions, even if my explanatory account has dramatically changed. At the time I was still a theological neophyte, a seminarian discovering the diversity of the Christian tradition. I was under two main influences. The first was my complicated, often antagonistic, relationship with my evangelical heritage. I was raised within the context of conservative American evangelicalism and was a sixth-generation Wheaton College graduate—my evangelical credentials were second to none. But my experience at Wheaton left me disillusioned with this community and I sought to expand my theological horizons. Following graduation I matriculated at Princeton Theological Seminary in fall 2005 to study under Bruce McCormack, who had lectured at Wheaton on the doctrine of justification in 2003. The year 2006 was also important because that year Gregory MacDonald published *The Evangelical Universalist*. As I was seeking to flee my evangelical identity in favor of universalism, MacDonald's work came along to show how to have one's cake and eat it too. While I never shared MacDonald's particular view on the matter, it arrived at a most opportune time and convinced me I was on the right path, albeit a different one.

Naturally, as a Princeton Seminary student, the second influence was my study of Karl Barth. From Barth I appropriated a strong sense of Jesus Christ's centrality to faith and theology. But even more importantly, Barth taught me to see Christ's saving work as the *actuality* of salvation and not merely its *possibility*. In those early years of seminary I was still in the mode of deconstructing my evangelical upbringing, a process that began the summer between my freshman and sophomore years of college. Barth provided me with the tools to leave evangelical theology behind where soteriology was concerned. Evangelicalism, especially in North America, has always placed a premium on the personal decision of faith. Salvation occurs when a person consciously commits to follow Jesus. Such a person, some say, is now "born again." Many have criticized this evangelical paradigm for making salvation contingent upon being born in a context in which one is likely to hear the gospel and be able to respond to it—hence the perennial question, "What about those who have never heard?" Barth taught me to reject this paradigm for a more basic theological reason, namely, that it made the human person, rather than God in Christ, sovereign over my eternal place before God. If Christ alone actualizes our reconciliation to God, then the only question is whether Christ represents all people or only a select few. On that point I had no doubts—the former! I was never a Calvinist—and despite what I tried telling myself in 2006 and 2007, I was never Reformed either. Things then took a surprising turn in 2008.

Like many seminary graduates, I thought my theological perspective was more or less settled. But in the autumn of 2008 I began the PhD program in theology with an independent study on Rudolf Bultmann under the tutelage of James F. Kay. Reading Bultmann threw open the windows of my mind and let a fresh wind blow through me. In that independent study I read Bultmann's 1959 response to Barth's essay, *Christ and Adam*, in which Bultmann objects, among other things, to the clearly universalistic thrust of Barth's piece.[1] This was initially quite a shock. I recognized all the key elements of Barth's dialectical theology in Bultmann's writings, so I naturally expected the latter to reach the same soteriological conclusions. The fact that he did not—and demurred emphatically—took me months, even years, to process. In a way unlike any theologian I had encountered, Bultmann emphasized the problem and significance of our *historicity* (*Geschichtlichkeit*), referring to the fact that our existence, including our thinking and speaking, occurs within a particular historical location. For Bultmann any theological claim has to concern us in our historicity. The problem with universalism—as well as any notion of pretemporal election—is that it makes a judgment about the individual without regard for her particular historicity and is only, at best, indirectly related to personal existence. Reading Bultmann thus validated an instinct I had inherited from my evangelical upbringing. Bultmann (perhaps ironically, perhaps not) helped me to recover my evangelicalism!

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[1] See Bultmann, "Adam and Christ," 158.

During the following years, with assistance from further study of Barth and the writings of Eberhard Jüngel, I would gradually internalize Bultmann's insights into the historical nature of both God and appropriate talk of God. But my basic intuitions about universal salvation remained unshakeable. The result was a deep internal tension—a tension between a Bultmannian methodological starting point and a Barthian soteriological conclusion. My dissertation, which I began to formulate in 2010, was an attempt to reconcile Barth and Bultmann at the methodological level. The received wisdom is that the Bultmann who formulated the program of demythologizing had abandoned the dialectical theology he once shared with Barth in the 1920s. Before I could tackle the question of soteriology I first had to overturn that widely held assumption. The research I conducted revealed that Barth and Bultmann shared a core dialectical thesis from beginning to end, and it was *Barth*, rather than Bultmann, who departed from the original version of this thesis in response to various theological and political pressures. Because the shared thesis is soteriological in nature, their disagreement was also soteriological. Essentially, dialectical theology is "an eschatological-christological soteriology, in which the saving event of the transcendent God that occurs in Jesus Christ remains beyond every immanent situation," but "one can either develop this soteriology consistently to the end (as in Bultmann), or one can reinterpret it protologically (as in Barth)."[2] The difference between Barth and Bultmann is "a difference in soteriology, but both soteriologies remain dialectical in nature. Both establish the nongivenness of God, but the one does so in terms of an eschatologically-grounded time-eternity dialectic in the event of revelation, while the other does so in terms of a protologically-grounded divine-human dialectic in the person of Christ."[3]

I am getting ahead of myself. It took me until at least 2012 before I had the details of Barth and Bultmann's relationship worked out, which was also around the time I was figuring out what my own position would be. The virtue of studying the Barth-Bultmann debate is that it forces one to become a systematic theologian, since their dispute touches on the core matters of Christian doctrine. But in 2010 I had not yet gone through that theological gauntlet. On January 5, 2010, Robin Parry contacted me about the idea of writing a "systematic theology on universalism." I had attempted something along these lines back in 2006, when I wrote a series of posts for my weblog called, "Why I Am a Universalist: A Dogmatic Sketch." The outline hews closely to the pattern of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, with some modifications borrowed from Eberhard Jüngel, whom I was avidly reading at the time:

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[2] Congdon, *Mission*, 233.

[3] Ibid., 290. See ibid., 281n112: "Bultmann, by remaining consistent with the soteriology of the early Barth, remains consistently dialectical in his theology. Barth's change in soteriology does not mean he abandons dialectical thinking altogether, but it does mean that he adopts a new *kind* of dialectical theology. . . . By shifting the center of gravity to protology Barth broke away from the dialectical movement he inaugurated."

1. Prolegomena
2. The Doctrine of God, Part 1: Introduction
3. The Doctrine of God, Part 2: *Deus pro nobis*
4. The Doctrine of God, Part 3: The Attributes of God
    - 4.1. God's complexity and simplicity as the "one who loves in freedom"
    - 4.2. Grace
5. The Doctrine of God, Part 4: The Doctrine of Election
    - 5.1. A summary of Barth's doctrine of election
    - 5.2. Jesus Christ, electing and elected
    - 5.3. Jesus Christ, divine election, and predestination
    - 5.4. The election of the individual
6. Jesus Christ, the Judge Judged in Our Place
7. The Doctrine of Justification
    - 7.1. Introduction to the doctrine of justification
    - 7.2. *Solus Christus*
    - 7.3. *Sola gratia*
    - 7.4. *Solo verbo*
    - 7.5. *Sola fide*
8. The Doctrine of the Atonement
    - 8.1. Introduction to the doctrine of the atonement
    - 8.2. Models of the atonement
    - 8.3. Foundations for a doctrine of the atonement
    - 8.4. Parameters for a doctrine of the atonement
        - 8.4.1. Triune
        - 8.4.2. Concretely christocentric
        - 8.4.3. Substitutionary
        - 8.4.4. Actualized

        8.4.5. Ontological
        8.4.6. Eschatological (written but not posted)
    8.5. The logical argument for universalism (unwritten)
9. Eschatology and the Last Judgment (unfinished)
10. Ecclesiology, or, What Is the Point of the Church for a Universalist? (unwritten)
11. A Universalist Sacramentology: The Eucharist as the Feast for the World (unwritten)

The work reached nearly 40,000 words before I called a halt to the series after four months. The posts garnered a surprising amount of attention. I regularly received emails from people around the world expressing appreciation for defending universalism. I was even invited to speak at a Christian Universalist Association meeting (which I declined due to scheduling conflicts). I became tired of explaining to people why the series ended so abruptly. Two years later, on November 12, 2010, I left a note on my blog explaining why I abandoned the project:

> Because some people have asked, I want to make it clear that (a) I will not finish this series and (b) I no longer agree with some of the theological claims I make in these posts. That's not to say I now reject the "universal scope" of God's grace. Rather, I reject a number of the theological moves and concepts that I employ in order to articulate this grace. I am currently working on a book (to appear in a few years) that will clarify my thinking on these matters.

This brings me back to the email from Robin. In January 2010 I was still very much in a period of transition. My theology was no longer what it was when I wrote the 2006 series, but it had not yet matured into something more firmly rooted. I responded to Robin the same day, agreeing to the project in principle and offering a tentative outline of the project I had in mind.

1. Dare We Hope? Dogmatic Theology, Evangelicalism, and the Question of Universalism
2. The God Who Saves: YHWH, Yeshua, and Divine Love
3. God's Decision to Save: Christology and Election
4. Humanity's Decision to Receive: Pneumatology and Faith
5. The Communion of Saints: Ecclesiology and the Mission of God

6. "All Things New": Eschatology and the Glory of God
7. God is Victor!

This outline operates within the same theological framework as my 2006 series. Like Barth's dogmatics, it not only begins with the doctrine of God, but it also moves from the objective side of soteriology (christology and election) to the subjective side of soteriology (pneumatology and ecclesiology). The language of decision is also indebted to Barth and makes the human participation in reconciliation a matter of conscious response. Robin contacted me again in May to discuss the project further and solicit a formal proposal, which I submitted on May 20. In the proposal version of the outline, I added a chapter after "God's Decision to Save: Christology and Election" on "God's Saving Action: Christology and Atonement." I also added a discussion of sin in the pneumatology chapter. These seemed only to reinforce the connection between my proposed study and Barth's work.

At the same time, the chapter descriptions in the proposal revealed my nascent attempt to grapple with Bultmann's challenge to Barth. In the chapter on election, for instance, I wrote: "I put forward a pneumatological reworking of Barth's doctrine of election. Briefly, I argue that Barth tends to make election a one-time decision in pretemporal eternity, which abstracts election both from the lived historicity of Jesus Christ and the lived historicities of human persons here and now." In the chapter on atonement I proposed to "construe the atonement as an eschatological word-event in which the cry of dereliction becomes the divine-human event of reconciliation." I stated my intent "to develop a nonmetaphysical conception of the atoning work of Christ, which means that the ancient substance ontology is done away with entirely." The pneumatology chapter would criticize Barth's "christocentric universalism" for "remain[ing] mired in a metaphysical logic that [Barth] never successfully extirpated from his theology despite his best efforts." I wanted to develop an account of participation that "does not require recourse to a substantival 'logic of assumption.'" All of this material would eventually find its way into the final version of the work. What changed after 2010 was my recognition that the *content* I envisioned required a commensurate *form*. It was not sufficient to animadvert against the metaphysical logic underpinning Barth's theology while retaining the structure of his dogmatics. I would have to reconstruct the whole on a different methodological basis.[4]

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[4] Another important part of this story took place in 2012. I was invited to speak at the 2012 Karl Barth Conference held annually at Princeton Theological Seminary. The theme was the fiftieth anniversary of Barth's trip to America, where he gave the lectures that became *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*. I spoke on Barth's engagement with

The answer finally came in 2011. After trying and failing to make my new approach to soteriology work within a Barthian framework, I finally realized the problem: the starting point had to be the saving event itself rather than God, and this saving event had to be simultaneously objective and subjective, or rather it had to dispense with the distinction between objective and subjective altogether. On July 3 I sent Travis McMaken a draft of the opening pages of my new chapter titled "Soteriocentrism." While it would take many more years to realize the full consequences of this decision, all the essential pieces were now in place. Unfortunately, I had to shelve the project in order to work on my dissertation, which consumed my attention between the fall of 2011 and the fall of 2013. I returned to *The God Who Saves* in earnest only in the spring of 2014.

Toward the end of my dissertation, which was published by Fortress Press in 2015 as *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology*, I sketched my new approach to theology and soteriology:

> Theology is not merely christocentric but always *soteriocentric*. It is God-talk ordered by the eschatological saving event in which God and human beings are concretely related in Christ. This, of course, has profound implications for numerous doctrinal *loci*. Given that soteriology is the permanent starting point for future dogmatic theology after Bultmann, a theology of demythologizing must begin there. . . . Among other things, the missionary

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existentialism in those lectures and the way he sought to be *more* existentialist than the existentialists by grounding existence eternally in the being of God (see Congdon, "Theology"). Later that same summer I wrote an article responding to Oliver Crisp's criticism of Barth's inconsistency regarding universalism (see Congdon, "*Apokatastasis*"). My work on Barth's engagement with existentialism gave me a new appreciation for his response to universalism. Theology for Barth is not merely describing what is "objectively" true, as if the theological facts need only to be recounted in print. He instead affirms the existentialist insight that theology always speaks existentially—speaking of God is also speaking of ourselves. This connection between objective reality and subjective encounter has implications for what he is able to say soteriologically. We are not finished with soteriology once we affirm that all human beings are objectively reconciled in Christ. For Barth our election in Christ is not an election to *objective* reconciliation but an election to *subjective* witness. We have only adequately described Christian salvation once we have accounted for each person's participation in the missionary act of proclaiming the gospel. The error of universalism, as Barth understands it, is that it collapses subjective witness into objective reconciliation. It thus runs roughshod over the historicity of each person. We cannot speak in general and in the abstract about the particular histories of those who are included objectively in Christ. My own work is an attempt to take seriously Barth's existential insights. The problem is Barth's sharp distinction between the objective and subjective, which is what leads to interpretations of inconsistency and perpetuates the metaphysical notion that reconciliation applies to us even though it does not concern us existentially. I developed *The God Who Saves* in response to this problem.

> account of the kerygma . . . denies the metaphysical differentiation between "objective" and "subjective" soteriology. Reconciliation is not first a transaction or change that occurs "above us," so to speak, in relation to some general human substance (a universal *humanum*) in which we all participate; it is always only a contingent event within each person's concrete history.[5]

I wrote this with *The God Who Saves* in mind, where I was concurrently fleshing out these ideas. The challenge, of course, was how to conceive a universal salvation within these parameters. How does salvation include all persons without a universal human nature? The start of an answer gradually formed during the months I was writing my dissertation and combined two ideas I had encountered as early as 2010: the concept of repetition (developed by Kierkegaard) and the concept of unconscious Christianity (developed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer). By conceiving the saving event as an unconscious act that is repeated in each person, it became possible to see how salvation could be universal while still located in the concrete historicity of each person.[6] Later I translated this conception of faith into an existential and es-

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[5] Congdon, *Mission*, 833–34.

[6] In a way my attempt to answer this problem serves as my constructive counterproposal to Schubert Ogden's *Christ without Myth*. In this fine but flawed study, Ogden argues that there is a structural inconsistency in Bultmann's demythologizing program insofar as it consists of two contradictory claims: (1) "Christian faith is to be interpreted exhaustively and without remainder as man's original possibility of authentic historical (*geschichtlich*) existence as this is more or less adequately clarified and conceptualized by an appropriate philosophical analysis"; (2) "Christian faith is actually realizable, or is a 'possibility in fact,' only because of the particular historical (*historisch*) event Jesus of Nazareth" (*Christ*, 112). Ogden finds in Bultmann "the self-contradictory assertion that Christian existence is a historical (*geschichtlich*) possibility open to man as such and yet first *becomes* possible for him because of a particular historical (*historisch*) event" (ibid., 117). Ogden's interpretation rests on his use of Bultmann's distinction between faith as an ontological "possibility in principle" (which is universal) and faith as an ontic "possibility in fact" (which is only available to those who have faith in Jesus as the Christ). The key to Ogden's argument is that Bultmann, he claims, understands human beings as responsible before God for not realizing the authentic existence that is ontologically possible in principle (ibid., 141–42). But if the historical occurrence of Jesus is the exclusive means for accessing authentic existence, then those who could not have known Jesus—such as those who lived before Jesus—cannot be held responsible for a lack of faith. Either authentic existence is possible outside of faith in Jesus or people are not actually free and responsible before God.

Ogden's reading of Bultmann is flawed. Among other things, Bultmann does *not* think faith can be interpreted *exhaustively* as the original human possibility; Ogden mistakenly interprets demythologizing as a reduction of theology to philosophy. Nor does Bultmann make the natural person guilty before God for not realizing faith—a notion based largely on Ogden's own reading of Paul and his misreading of Bultmann on "natural revelation"—but instead human beings are sinful because they actualize their chatological register with the help especially of Eberhard Jüngel and J. Louis Martyn. All of this formed the basis for the new soteriological norm around which the rest of my dogmatic sketch would be constructed: the apocalypse as an unconscious event of being placed outside oneself in participation in the crucified Christ. The pieces came together in chapter 3, "The Act of Salvation," which constitutes the heart of this book. The other chapters then explore what christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, creation, and trinity look like when reinterpreted according to this norm.

The order of these chapters is integral to their content. Soteriocentrism is an inherently *actualistic* approach to theology, and for this reason we must treat the *act* of salvation prior to the *agent*. We only know the agent in light of the act. But since the act is inseparable from the agent, there is already a substantial amount of christology in chapter 3. The discussion of the agent in chapter 4 focuses specifically on the question of the divine person who is defined by this saving act, but since the act is simultaneously past and present, the agent is not Christ or the Spirit in isolation but only the Christ-Spirit. Christology and pneumatology are two perspectives on the same divine activity. The discussion of ecclesiology is not a comprehensive account of the church but an interpretation of the community of faith as defined by the soteriological norm of the apocalypse. Many important topics, such as sacramentology, are largely ignored. Chapter 5, in other words, is an account of the *being* of the church as constituted by the saving event; it is an exercise in ecclesial ontology. Only after those doctrines have been covered do I then look at the doctrine of creation. A soteriocentric approach reverses the creed: it integrates the second and third articles and then treats

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existential inauthenticity by boasting of their deeds and living ungratefully (Bultmann, "New Testament," 28–29). But we can set aside the interpretive issues because it is clear that Ogden is using Bultmann to raise a fundamental issue within Christianity. The "structural inconsistency" is not unique to Bultmann but arises out of a dilemma basic to Christian theology: is it possible to affirm (a) the freedom and responsibility of the human person before God *and* (b) the exclusive uniqueness of Jesus Christ? Liberal theologians like Ogden deny the second proposition, while those in the Augustinian-Reformed tradition deny the first. Many modern evangelicals and Bultmann ironically belong together insofar as they seek to uphold both propositions, albeit in different ways. The point here is that Ogden is driven to his position in part because of his observation—one that I share—that the authentic existence of faith is clearly manifest among people who do not have faith in Christ. His solution is not only to reject the exclusivity of Christ, something he thinks is necessary on the basis of the NT itself (*Christ*, 144), but he also says "it is arguable that 'salvation' and all it implies must be meaningless to the modern man" (ibid., 136). The present book is my attempt to address Ogden's classic dilemma in a way that affirms the truth of his position—namely, that authentic existence is found outside of *explicit* faith in Christ—while still upholding the exclusivity of Christ in agreement with Bultmann. In doing so I hope to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of talk of "salvation."

them first before turning to the first article. Taking this approach means that creation is seen strictly in terms of the new creation—in terms of what Barth would call the covenant of grace—but more importantly it means the doctrine of creation is primarily anthropology and only indirectly concerned with cosmology. Finally, the work ends with the trinity as the appropriate conclusion—or *Schluss*, according to Friedrich Schleiermacher—to Christian dogmatics. We only know the *God* of salvation in the *act* of salvation. God defines God's being as Christ, Spirit, and Creator in the event of the apocalypse.

This work is not a complete systematic theology—it is a "dogmatic sketch" for a reason. I was commissioned by Parry to explore what systematic theology would look like if one took a universalist perspective. But in order to do so I had to solve a problem: how to affirm the universal scope of God's saving grace within the existential, historical parameters of hermeneutical theology. *The God Who Saves* is my answer to this problem. The answer has meant I could not simply tack on universalism to an otherwise traditional Protestant theology. I could no longer view a universalist variation on Barth as sufficient. Instead, I had to rethink the very nature of salvation—even the meaning of the word—from the ground up. So while I engage in systematic theological reflection, I do so in order to explain what makes my answer to this question cogent and coherent. *The God Who Saves* is the beating heart of my systematic theology but not the full realization of it. Whether I tackle a complete systematics, and how my mind may change should that day come, only time will tell.

The God Who Saves is not only my attempt to solve this soteriological problem, however. It is also an attempt to demonstrate that a genuinely *dialectical* systematic theology is possible—dialectical in the consistently actualistic sense represented by a synthetic reading of *inter alia* Barth, Bultmann, Ebeling, Gollwitzer, and Jüngel. It is an attempt, in order words, to construct a dogmatic theology according to a demythologizing hermeneutic that recognizes the absolute transcendence of God, the historicity of revelation, the contextual nature of God-talk, and the existential significance of faith.[7] Much more still needs to be done. Hopefully many others will take up the mantle.

David W. Congdon
Pentecost 2016

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[7] Insofar as dialectical theology is both exegetically grounded and existentially concerned, it is also the realization of genuinely *evangelical* theology.

Acknowledgments

I would not have attempted such a project had Robin Parry not asked me about it in 2010. A good editor is able to discern what someone can and should write even if she or he does not know it yet, and Robin is one of the best. Writing this book has been personally rewarding beyond anything I anticipated. I am grateful to him for his confidence in my ability to carry it out, as well as for his patience as the project stretched well past the original deadline.

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I have had two of the best teachers in systematic theology one could ask for. At Wheaton College in fall 2003 I had my first taste of systematic theology under the guidance of Mark Husbands. In that course I encountered many of the ideas and appropriated many of the theological instincts that continue to guide me today. Prof. Husbands introduced me to the Lutheran "theology of the cross" for the first time in that course, which was a revelation to me then and remains normative for my thought now. In spring 2006 I enrolled in the first of two semesters of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. The course covered the doctrines of God and creation and was cotaught by Bruce L. McCormack. His mastery of the history of doctrine showed me that to become a good systematician, one needed to become a good historian. Constructive theology that lacks historical consciousness is an exercise in futility. Prof. McCormack's scholarly rigor and personal interest in my well-being modeled what it looks like to *live* one's theology. In 2010, while a PhD student under Prof. McCormack, I was privileged to be a teaching fellow in his systematic theology course, which was as educational for me as it was for the seminary students. I am eternally grateful to both Mark Husbands and Bruce McCormack. I dedicate this work to them as a small token of my appreciation.

Abbreviations

BSLK	Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchenausschuss, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*
CD	Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*
GuV	Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen*
KD	Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*
LW	Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
ST	Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*
WA	Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (*Weimar Ausgabe*)

1

Introduction

The Problem of Christian Universalism

And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you.
Psalm 39:7

DARE WE HOPE? CAN WE KNOW?

For what may we hope? The question is not just an eschatological addendum. It is the primal question of faith, the "burning bush" at the center of Christian existence (R. S. Thomas). The question, when asked by faith, does not concern *what* will happen in the chronological future, but rather *who we are* in the eschatological now. Can we live—right now—as creatures of hope? This is the question of our identity and mission in light of our true end (*telos*) as constituted and revealed in Jesus Christ through his Spirit. In asking it here, we thus mean something very different from Immanuel Kant's asking of the same question in his third *Critique*. Theological eschatology is qualitatively different from philosophical teleology. And this is because eschatology is wholly and simultaneously a matter of soteriology, christology, and the doctrine of God. In other words, it is not merely one part of a larger system of doctrine; it is instead the heart of the Christian life. As Karl Barth famously put it, “Christianity that is not completely and utterly eschatology has completely and utterly nothing to do with *Christ*.”[1]

Today, however, the recognition of the centrality of eschatological hope is insufficient. We hear about “hope” everywhere we go. What ought to be a decisive word of divine grace and new possibilities too often seems to be a way of skirting the radical implications of God’s revelation in Christ. The confidence that belongs to the hope of *faith* is often confused with the ambivalence that belongs to merely worldly hope. The Psalmist declares, “And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you” (Ps 39:7). How different this is from the trivial remarks we hear every day: “I hope I get a new bike for my birthday” or “I hope I get chosen for this new position at work.” Even theologians often speak about eschatological hope in a way that sounds more like one’s hope for a new bike than the Psalmist’s paradoxically *confident* and *certain* hope in the loving-kindness of God. In his response to T. F. Torrance’s claim that “at the very best universalism could only be concerned with a hope, with a possibility,”[2] John A. T. Robinson remains profoundly correct in his judgment that to speak about eschatological “possibilities” may sound humble but “is in fact that most subtly unbiblical. For the New Testament never says that God *may* be all in all, that Christ *may* draw all men unto himself, but that he *will*. And to assert that he will is not human dogmatism, but to hold fast to the fundamental declaration of the gospel of the effective election of all men in Christ.”[3] To ask with Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Dare we *hope* that all will be saved?”[4] does not preclude asking, “Can we *know* that all will be saved?” To affirm the former’s hope does not compete with the latter’s certainty. If it is truly *Christian* hope, then such confidence is not only possible but in fact necessary. Anything less would contradict the faith attested by Paul before Agrippa: “I stand here on trial on account of my *hope* in the *promise* made by God to our ancestors” (Acts 26:6; emphasis mine). Christian faith is *confident hope* in the *effective promise* of God.

The purpose of this book is to develop a Christian dogmatics in light of the universality of God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ. If the redemptive promise of God is indeed universal in scope, then what must we say about God, the world, and ourselves in light of this?[5] This dogmatic sketch examines what it means to think systematically according to the revelation that *God is the one who saves*—that is, the one who saves *all*. Before we can properly turn to that dogmatic project, however, it is first necessary to do some introductory ground-clearing by (a) defining what we mean by "Christian universalism" and (b) presenting the two main problems that a doctrine of universal salvation must overcome.

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[1] Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 430. Originally translated in Barth, *Epistle*, 314.

[2] Torrance, “Universalism,” 313.

[3] Robinson, *In the End*, 96.

[4] See Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*.

[5] I will not argue in this work for the “orthodoxy” of universal salvation, simply because, as many others have already demonstrated, it was never condemned as heretical in the first place. Gregory MacDonald, commenting on the well-known anathemas

DEFINING UNIVERSALISM: A TYPOLOGY

Universalism is an ambiguous concept that requires clarification. Since this is a work of Christian theology, I do not use this word with any of its philosophical connotations. I do not have in mind anything related to the metaphysical problem of universals, nor do I use it as an antonym of relativism. Instead, the word as employed here pertains to the theological debate over the nature and scope of salvation. Universalism refers to an account of the God-world relationship that includes all creatures within the scope of God's reconciling grace—though precisely how we should understand the nature of this grace and the way it includes every creature is what I will explore in later chapters.

What follows is a brief typology of universalisms, drawing on the work of Robin Parry and Christopher Partridge.[6] Because every typology trades in abstract categories and ideal types, there is the persistent threat of doing violence to the uncategorizable complexities of history. The typology on offer here is therefore little more than a heuristic device to orient our analysis. No claim is made to comprehensiveness, nor is each category necessarily

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of the fifth ecumenical council of 553, observes that "in anathemas I and XV the concern is with *apokatastasis* as linked with the idea of the pre-existence of souls and an eschatology that sees a simple return of souls to an original unity. In anathema XIV it is *apokatastasis* as associated with an immaterial, pantheistic eschatology. But this is not a condemnation of universalism *as such*" ("Introduction," 8). Despite the council's reference to Origen, it is questionable whether the anathemas even apply to Origen's own position. Ilaria Ramelli speaks for many when she says that Origen's "thought is grounded in the Bible first and in Plato after" (*Christian Doctrine*, 137–221, here 214). As both Ramelli and MacDonald demonstrate in their respective works, there are a host of Christian theologians who develop accounts of universal salvation that do not depend upon the metaphysical schema condemned in 553. See MacDonald, *All Shall*; on Origen's universalism see also Greggs, *Barth*. The other reason for not arguing over universalism's orthodoxy is that I do not accept the assumption that the ecumenical councils determine what counts as authentically "Christian." The councils and creeds are only authoritative insofar as they embody and bear witness to the norm of the gospel that stands always beyond them.

[6] See Parry and Partridge, "Introduction," xv–xix.

exclusive of the others. But this typology provides a basic roadmap by which to navigate complex theological waters.

Multiethnic Universalism

A certain kind of multiethnic universalism[7] is basic to Christianity, in the sense that God calls people from every nation or people group (in Greek, *ethnos*) to become followers of Jesus Christ and participants in the community of faith. People from "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9) are included within the family of God. The experience of the early church at Pentecost, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, is decisive: whereas salvation under the old law entailed becoming part of a specific people group (viz., Israel), the new community of the Spirit is one that affirms the presence of God equally within each ethnicity and social context. Salvation no longer involves becoming part of Israel, and the mission of God is no longer the diffusion of a specific social and cultural framework. While there are debates over how radically to understand the multiethnicity of Christianity, some account of it is a *sine qua non* for Christian faith and thus not a matter of serious dispute within theology.

Potential Universalism

"Potential universalism" claims that all people *can* be saved, but not necessarily that all people *will* be saved. It affirms that the salvation of all people is a *possibility*, not an *actuality*. God's saving work in Christ is potentially effective for all but not actually effective. It only *becomes* effective when an individual responds to the gospel in faith. This form of universalism finds its scriptural warrant in 1 Timothy 2:3b–4: "God our Savior . . . desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." While potential universalism takes seriously the description of God's universal desire, it assumes that God's will regarding the salvation of all is not efficacious. God can will something to be the case without causing it to be so. The causal "moment" that effects one's reconciled status before God occurs in a conscious act of the human will.

Parry and Partridge refer to this position as "Arminian universalism" because of the Arminian emphasis on human free will as the basis for individual salvation. The adjective "Arminian" is of course defined in contraposition to “Calvinist,” which emphasizes God’s absolute sovereignty over all creaturely matters. Calvinism, according to this typology, is any position that (a) denies the human will’s capacity to effect one’s salvation and (b) denies that all people will be saved. The result is therefore double predestination: God’s determination in pretemporal eternity that some will be saved and others will be damned. Both “Arminian” and “Calvinist” soteriologies deny universal salvation: the former by virtue of the fact that some freely reject the gospel, and the latter by virtue of the fact that God freely determines that some will not be saved. The Arminian position is thus a *potential universalism*, while Calvinism is an *actual nonuniversalism*. What unites both positions is their experiential starting point: they begin with the empirical fact that some people believe and other people do not. On that basis they draw two diametrically opposed positions: the “Arminian” position claims that salvation must depend upon the will of the individual human person, while the “Calvinist” position claims that God must have determined in advance that only some would believe.

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[7] Parry and Partridge describe this as "multiracial universalism," but I prefer to use the language of ethnicity.

I have chosen in my analysis to replace the language of Arminian and Calvinist with the language of potential and actual for the following two reasons. First, the Calvinist-Arminian typology often loses contact with the actual writings of Calvin and Arminius. While it is not inaccurate to see Calvin as a proto-Calvinist or Arminius as a proto-Arminian, it is nevertheless problematic to abstract from their respective writings by creating an ahistorical either-or that has questionable historical merit. Recall that Calvin and Arminius were not contemporaries and consequently never engaged in direct debate. Arminius was a student of Theodore Beza, one of Calvin’s protégés, and one can only understand his work against the background of the infralapsarian-supralapsarian debate that led to the Synod of Dort. Arminianism, for that matter, is more associated with those influenced by his theology—especially the Methodist movement as it developed in North America—rather than with Arminius himself and the Remonstrants. Isolating the issue of free will from the rest of the Remonstrant articles distorts the larger theological context within which the controversy over Arminius’s teachings occurred—a decisively *Reformed* theological context. Since the issue in question lies at the heart of all Christian theology, we are better served by using terms not derived from a highly specific moment in Protestant church history.

Actual Universalism

The third type of universalism refers broadly to those positions most people associate with the term. These are soteriologies that entail the *actual salvation of all people*. Parry and Partridge call this "strong universalism," referring to those positions that "agree with the Arminian universalists that God does indeed desire to save all individuals," but which "go on to add that *God will achieve his purposes*. Thus all individuals will in fact be saved."[8] They further subdivide this category as: (a) non-Christian universalism, (b) pluralist universalism, and (c) Christian universalism. The first is irrelevant to the present essay. With regard to the second, we will simply note the seminal work of John Hick, who wrestled with the theological challenge of religious pluralism.[9] Though his approach is a theological dead-end, we cannot simply dismiss the questions he raised or the honesty and integrity with which he sought to answer them. On the contrary, it is essential for Christian theology to deal with the pluralistic question seriously and responsibly. We must, in our own way, venture a theological proposal that does not disregard but *integrates* the problem of pluralism into an account of Christian theology that does not lessen in any way the uniqueness of Jesus. This will be the task of subsequent chapters. Having set aside the first two of the three versions of "actual" or "strong" universalism, we turn to an analysis of "Christian" universalism.

The category of Christian universalism is itself too vague to be helpful. Parry and Partridge acknowledge a long list of questions over which Christian universalists disagree, but they refuse to specify further categories. Any attempt at a comprehensive typology capable of accounting for every one of these contentious issues would quickly become tedious and pointless. At the same time, leaving off at "Christian universalism" fails to account for the differences that really matter to people, the ones that are especially decisive for the current debates. What follows is a description of the two most significant divides within Christian universalism.

The Who of the Actualization: Individual or God

At the most basic level, Christian theology splits over the question: Where is the locus of salvation? Are we to locate a person's salvation in the agency of the human individual, or in the agency of God? Putting it this way is, of course, a false contrast. No theologian who repudiates the pelagian heresy would permit the individual to be pitted against God, as if salvation were a matter of pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps, so to speak. Such a notion does not even apply to ancient Israel, whose "covenantal nomism" understands adherence to Torah to be a way of life that follows from one's inclusion in the covenant that YHWH has sovereignly and graciously established with Israel.[10]

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[8] Parry and Partridge, "Introduction," xvi–xvii.

[9] See, in particular, Hick, *God*; Hick, *Death*; Hick, *Metaphor*; Hick, *Evil*.

The question therefore needs to be specified more exactly. Let us put it this way: is the "objective status" of the individual before God actualized by something that occurs "in" the individual, or is it actualized by God entirely outside of and apart from—even in spite of—the individual without her being aware of it? By placing scare-quotes around "objective status" and "in," I mean to indicate that there is still much more unpacking that needs to take place regarding the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity as they pertain to soteriology. The present concern is to note that there are Christian universalists on both sides of this question. For lack of better terminology, we will refer to these two groups as "evangelical universalists" and "Barthian universalists."

The term "evangelical universalist" comes from the 2006 work of the same name by Gregory MacDonald. This work presents an exegetical case for a version of Christian universalism. The introduction presents an imaginary representative of the position named Anastasia:

> Anastasia is an evangelical Christian. She believes in the inspiration and authority of the Bible. She believes in all those crucial Christian doctrines such as Trinity, creation, sin, atonement, the return of Christ, salvation through Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone. In fact, on most things you'd be hard pressed to tell her apart from any other evangelical. Contrary to what we may suspect, she even believes in the eschatological wrath of God—in hell. She differs most obviously in two unusual beliefs. First, she believes that one's eternal destiny is not *fixed* at death and, consequently, that those in hell can repent and throw themselves upon the mercy of God in Christ and thus

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[10] This insight into the nature of Judaism is a constitutive element in what is called the "New Perspective on Paul" (NPP). In stating my agreement on the question of Israel and Torah, I do *not* mean to imply that I thereby agree with NPP's reconstruction of Pauline theology, especially with regard to the doctrine of justification. Scholars in the NPP movement seem to think that the former necessarily entails the latter, but this is a judgment I strongly dispute. However, I do not thereby side with the conservative evangelical and Reformed critics of NPP, who blindly adhere to a Protestant orthodox theology over against any challenges from modern theological and historical scholarship.

> be saved. Second, she also believes that *in the end* everyone will do this.[11]

We will return to the eschatological focus of this passage below. The important thing to notice here is the assumption that one's "eternal destiny" is determined by an individual's conscious decision to place one's trust in Christ. This assumption above all is what makes this version of universalism distinctively *evangelical*.

It is worth noting that this version of universal salvation stands in basic continuity with the account of "potential universalism" noted above. The only real difference between potential universalism and evangelical universalism is that the former places a limit for conversion at the time of death, while the latter rejects such a limit—the dubious basis for such a limit being the ambiguous passage in Hebrews 9:27. Potential universalism opposes actual universalism not on the grounds of a divine decision to condemn certain persons, but because of the various contingent factors related to the brevity of human life. The problem with this position, as many have pointed out, is that it effectively condemns the majority of humankind due to nothing more than the sheer fact (one might say, "bad luck") of being born in one place rather than another. Some will simply never hear the gospel; others will only hear a gospel distorted through ideological perversion; still others will be unable to hear the gospel because the lives of those who proclaim it are fraught with violence, greed, lust, pride, and other vices, often toward the very ones who are the intended recipients of the message. Denying universalism implies that God's favor belongs especially to those who just happen to be born in traditionally Christian cultures to traditionally Christian families. Once one learns about the mutual entanglement of religion and politics throughout the history of the church, it is impossible to overlook the fact that the opposition to some form of actual universalism goes hand-in-hand with the affirmation of the imperial and colonial powers of the western world as the mediators of divine grace. This is a problem for both potential universalism (i.e., "Arminianism") and actual nonuniversalism (i.e., "Calvinism"). The difference between them is that potential universalism places the blame for these failures on the Christian church, while predestinarianism or actual nonuniversalism places the "blame" upon God—though without there being any real blame, since it is all a confirmation of God's justice in the face of human depravity. The consequences of each position are catastrophic. The former lays an evangelistic burden upon the church at least as heavy—if not infinitely heavier—than anything Luther faced in his experience of *Anfechtung*. The church's mission becomes purely one of law, not of gospel. No wonder the so-called "good news" often sounds like a threat rather than a promise. The latter, by contrast, is quite freeing for the church, but only at the expense of turning God into the devil.[12]

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[11] MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 6.

The alternative position is what we will call "Barthian universalism." This term appears to be an oxymoron since Barth himself rejected universalism. I have argued elsewhere that Barth's denial of universalism has nothing to do with a denial of the universal scope of God's saving work in Christ and everything to do with his consistent denial of doctrinal worldviews that speak in the abstract about humanity. It is the "ism" and not the "universal" that is most problematic for Barth—or, put differently, it is universal understood as something general and not universal understood as inclusive of all that worries Barth.[13] The concept of "Barthian universalism" seeks to highlight his radically Protestant and rigorously christocentric approach to soteriology. Barth developed a theological method that sought to cut the nerve of nineteenth-century liberal theology, which was characterized by a kind of anthropocentrism, even egocentrism, that made the individual believer the norm and center of Christian faith. He contended that Friedrich Schleiermacher was the primary culprit, and he identified (rightly or wrongly) contemporaries like Adolf von Harnack, Emanuel Hirsch, Emil Brunner, and Rudolf Bultmann as carrying on this anthropocentric tradition in theology. Barth saw the specter of this liberalism almost everywhere: in Roman Catholicism, European pietism, American evangelicalism, German missiology, and existentialist theology, among others. Each was found to be an instance of "natural theology," and thus found wanting. In their place Barth stressed the "wholly otherness" of God, the sovereignty and freedom of divine grace. He later corrected the *totaliter aliter* conception of God in favor of emphasizing God's humanity and nearness to the world, but this alteration preserved—even radicalized—his understanding of reconciliation and salvation as an act solely effected by God in Christ.[14] What occurs in Christ, according to Barth, is not the mere possibility of reconciliation but its *actuality*. To be sure, the event of salvation is always actualized *for* the human person (*pro nobis*), but the person does not contribute to this event in any way except as a *witness* to it in the world. Faith is not the condition for one's reconciled status before God. This status is determined in advance in Christ. Faith is rather the condition for one's correspondence to this status, to the truth of our being in Christ. Faith recognizes and responds to what has already been accomplished, in its full efficacy, on our behalf. We could avoid the thicket of Barth interpretation by calling this position simply "objective universalism."[15] It refers to a saving relation to God exclusively and efficaciously established by God alone.

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[12] Terry Eagleton observes that "the biblical name for God as judge or accuser is Satan, which literally means 'adversary.' Satan is a way of seeing God as a great big bully" (*Reason*, 20).

[13] See Congdon, "*Apokatastasis*," 464–80. Cf. Greggs, "Jesus," 196–212. I am all too aware that many evangelicals have dismissed Barth on the grounds that he is a universalist, while defenders of Barth have been quick to deny the validity of this charge, arguing that Barth is not at all a universalist. The irony is that these people have sought to rescue Barth's reputation among conservative evangelicals by saddling him with a deplorable theology. This is the very definition of a *sacrificium intellectus*. The proper response to these evangelical critics is not to make Barth into an evangelical, but rather to demonstrate both the validity of universalism and the erroneous basis for the claim that nonuniversalism is the only "biblical" and "orthodox" position. Bruce McCormack's defense of Barth takes a mediating position: he still denies that Barth was a universalist, but he spends the bulk of his time arguing for the possibility of universal salvation as a valid Christian position. See McCormack, "So That He May."

At the risk of over-jargonization, we might describe these two positions on the "who" of salvation as "anthropo-actualized" and "theo-actualized" universalism. The former refers to a salvation whose establishment occurs through an act of the individual human being. The latter refers to a salvation whose establishment occurs through an act of God alone in Jesus Christ.

The When of the Actualization: Protology or Eschatology

Closely related to the first differentiation regarding the "who" is a second differentiation regarding the "when." We can identify the two options here as "protological actualization" and "eschatological actualization." Protology is the study of the first things (*prota*), while eschatology is the study of the last things (*eschata*). The concept of protology refers, in this context, to that which precedes human history, to what theologians call pretemporal eternity, though it is not properly used in reference to the debate over human origins. It is a theological term referring to the *ground* of human history, not a scientific term referring to the *beginning* of history. The concept of eschatology, by contrast, refers not only to that which follows human history (i.e., to posttemporal eternity), but also to world history itself as understood in light of its proper end. The New Testament understands the eschaton to begin with the arrival (παρουσία) of the Messiah—"the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5:23). Paul clearly thought himself to be living in the "last days." While the early community's expectation of the imminent parousia proved to be misguided, their theological interpretation of present history remains necessary, at least in some form. The distinction between protology and eschatology in the context of Christian universalism comes down to this: is the salvation of all people a reality that has already occurred in the past (protology), or is it a reality that is occurring or will occur in the future (eschatology)?

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[14] See Barth, "Humanity," 37–65.

[15] Travis McMaken refers to Barth's position as "soteriological objectivism" (*Sign*, 4). Later he comments: "Rather than understanding the salvation Christ achieves as requiring application to the individual at a later time in order to become effective, Barth understands the reconciliation between God and humanity enacted by and in Christ as complete *per se*. Salvation is something that is complete and effective for all here and now because Jesus Christ accomplished it once and for all there and then" (ibid., 86).

Already it should be clear that the protological-eschatological differentiation is closely connected to the individual-God differentiation. The evangelical or anthropo-actualized universalism is necessarily an eschatological universalism. Since one's salvation is only possible by virtue of the individual's conscious conversion to faith in Christ, that salvation cannot be protological in nature. It can only be a salvation that occurs (ideally) *within* human history or (if necessary) *after* human history, as a conversion to God that happens while one is experiencing the divine wrath of hell.[16] By contrast, the Barthian or theo-actualized universalism is necessarily a protological universalism. Barth grounds salvation in the protological election of God, that is to say, in God's pretemporal decision to reconcile the world to Godself in the Son. To be sure, this decision is only efficaciously actualized in Jesus Christ's history. The electing decision of God is made *in anticipation of* this historical occurrence; it is a "stop-gap" for the man Jesus himself in his lived history.[17] Barth's grounding of this event in an eternal decision by God has the intended effect of precluding every human attempt to lay a special claim upon God. Salvation is something that is *already* actualized; it precedes each person as a fact to be acknowledged. It does not meet us as a potentiality to be realized by our decision of faith. What happens in the present and the future is only the recognition and manifestation of what is already true about us on the basis of what Christ has done for us in his life of obedience.

There is, however, a third option irreducible to Barthian protology and evangelical eschatology. The third way would be a universalism effected by God, but effected *eschatologically*. This would entail locating the sovereign and gracious work of God in the present tense and/or the future tense, as opposed to the past tense. It would also entail giving greater attention to the subjective or personal dimension as playing some kind of role. It cannot be a conscious and constitutive role, or else we would have the evangelical account of universalism noted above. But neither can it be a totally passive role, or else we have God possessing human beings against their will. There is a variety of possible ways of articulating an *eschatological theo-actualized universalism* between these extremes. The present essay offers just such an account. Barth himself actually comes very close to some version of this position, though he demurs for reasons that we will need to explore in depth. For now, it will suffice to note the types of Christian universalism that we have identified:

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[16] Some accounts, particularly those that argue for some kind of "anonymous Christianity," place the moment of conversion at the moment of death, or in that liminal space between life and death. I see this as a variation on the category of "within human history."

[17] *CD* 2.2:96. We must not make the mistake of some early critics of Barth (e.g., Emil Brunner), who claimed that, for Barth, Christ was merely a manifestation of something antecedently actualized in pretemporal eternity. In truth, history is not a mere reflection of eternity, but rather the content of eternity is constituted by what happens *in* history.

a. protological theo-actualized (or Barthian) universalism;
b. eschatological anthropo-actualized (or evangelical) universalism; and
c. eschatological theo-actualized universalism.

THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALISM

Having mapped the universalist terrain, we must now take stock of the problems that confront any credible account of Christian universalism. Typically, of course, universal salvation is ruled out in principle on the grounds that it is unbiblical and heterodox (if not heretical). This common, knee-jerk dismissal of the idea is a thoroughly anti-intellectual response because it has little interest in actually investigating the traditions and texts in question. Universalism is a threat to a certain account of ecclesial power, and those who feel threatened end up making blanket appeals to authority (e.g., orthodoxy and proof-texts) in order to shore up both their faith and their power over the faith of others. In the end, such objections are false objections, and they are false because they presuppose precisely what must be interrogated, namely, what it means to be "orthodox" and "biblical." To conduct this interrogation is to enter the field of hermeneutics, which we will treat in the next chapter.

There are, however, two serious objections to universal salvation: (a) the freedom of God and (b) the historicity of the individual believer. We will address them initially here, though the only way to respond adequately is by engaging in constructive theological reflection, which we will do in later chapters.

The Freedom of God

The standard objection to universal salvation from those in the Augustinian-Reformed tradition is that it compromises the sovereignty and freedom of God. A classic prooftext for this position is Romans 9:18–21:

> So then [God] has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses. You will say to me then, "Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use?

Those who appeal to divine freedom on the basis of passages like this generally assume that God wills, or at least willingly permits, the damnation of most people. God's freedom is a *freedom to condemn*. The doctrine of universalism thus appears as an idea that expressly contravenes the divine will. Those who propose universalism are seen as setting up an abstract principle to which God is necessarily bound: God *must* save everyone, against God's own will as described in scripture. Universalism, so this line of thinking argues, ties God's hands and forces God to act graciously toward all people.

Outside of fundamentalist Reformed circles, Barth is often seen as the most prominent proponent of this objection in recent theology. In a conversation with members of Princeton Theological Seminary in 1962, Barth responded to a question about universal salvation with the following: "[By] universal salvation I understand what Origen has told people, in the end all will be good, all will be saved, even the Devil is coming home. . . . And if we proclaim, well, we are all saved, we all will end in a pleasant way, *then we take away God's freedom to do it*."[18] Barth made the same point more famously in *Church Dogmatics* 4.3:

> To the man who persistently tries to change the truth into untruth, God does not owe eternal patience and therefore deliverance any more than He does those provisional manifestations. We should be denying or disarming that evil attempt and our own participation in it if, in relation to ourselves or others or all men, we were to permit ourselves to postulate a withdrawal of that threat and in this sense to expect or maintain an *apokatastasis* or universal reconciliation as the goal and end of all things. No such postulate can be made even though we appeal to the

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[18] Barth, *Gespräche 1959–1962*, 503. Emphasis mine.

> cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even though theological consistency might seem to lead our thoughts and utterances most clearly in this direction, we must not arrogate to ourselves that which can be given and received only as a free gift.[19]

The point is clear: to posit universal salvation or *apokatastasis* is to deny God's divine prerogative to bestow mercy and grace as a "free gift." Universalism *obligates* God to be gracious, which of course contradicts the very nature of grace. Salvation is not something we are given but something we are *owed*. Effectively, then, to posit this doctrine is to attempt to save ourselves.

The problem is that this objection presupposes we already know that God's will is a will to condemn sinners to eternal damnation. In other words, it is an exercise in begging the question. If God has determined to send some people to hell, then of course any doctrine that proclaims the salvation of all would be an infringement on God's freedom. There is, of course, a very simple response to this problem, namely, to reject the original premise. Nothing prevents us from saying that God saves all people because God *wills* to save all—precisely *as* an exercise of God's sovereign freedom.[20] Election does not need to be double predestination; it could also simply be an election of all people to salvation. God cannot compromise God's own freedom. If God determines that something must take place, this is a genuinely sovereign act of God. And God could just as well determine that all people belong in reconciled fellowship with God.

Whether this is the right way to think about God's saving purposes is another question, but the point here is simply that universalism need not contradict divine freedom; it can instead be the natural expression of it. I would argue that this is Barth's actual position, though he refuses to call it universalism because of the problematic connotations of the word. Indeed, and as I have argued elsewhere, Barth's real problem with universalism has to do not with the freedom of God but with the *historicity* of the believer.[21]

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[19] *CD* 4.3:477.

[20] Ironically, those who argue that God is only true free if God is able to condemn certain individuals to an eternal hell are in fact the ones placing external limitations on God's freedom. The real problem people have with universal salvation is that most people do not want a God of such boundless mercy. They cannot stomach a God who might forgive evildoers and display infinite hospitality to those who denied such hospitality to others. And so they end up creating a God in their own image who *must* condemn and *must* exclude. Of course, this is itself a denial of hospitality.

[21] See Congdon, "*Apokatastasis*," 464–80.

The Historicity of the Believer

Most objections—and also the most serious objections—to universal salvation focus instead on the freedom of the individual believer. A classic prooftext in this case is from Romans 10:9: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." This approach does not deny that salvation is a gift of grace, but it insists, on good biblical grounds, that this gift necessarily includes the decision of the human recipient. Those who advocate this view also oppose the doctrine of double predestination for precisely the same reason. From this perspective, double predestination and universalism both operate according to the same logic of an abstract, overriding divine decision that nullifies the significance of human agency.

This argument is typically framed as a matter of human freedom. Supporters of this view often draw an analogy to the relation of love between two persons, where the free response of each person is necessary in order for a relationship of love to exist.[22] But this raises serious problems when applied to the divine-human relationship. The analogy implies that divine agency and human agency occur on the same ontological plane: God relates to me the way my friend does, except what I receive from God is not merely affection but salvation. Within this single order of being, we only have two options: another person can either *elicit* my love through persuasion or *effect* my love through coercion. The elicitation of love suggests a *cooperative* relationship in which the human person supplements and completes a relation that God merely initiates and makes possible. By contrast, the external effectuation of love implies a *competitive* relationship in which the sovereignty of God comes at the expense of my own free agency. The freedom of God and the freedom of the individual exist in a zero-sum game, and in that game, God always wins—and violently so. Given this ontological presupposition, and the binary opposition it entails, it is no wonder that many people simply opt for the synergistic account of divine-human cooperation. Mutual reciprocity is obviously superior to divine abuse. When set within this kind of framework, universalism (along with double predestination) appears to be spiritually pernicious, much less theologically and exegetically doubtful. As Barth stated on another occasion in 1962, this time in a conversation with a group from the World Student Christian Federation: "What do we mean by *apokatastasis*? It is the theory that finally and ultimately all men, and possibly the Devil too, will be saved, *whether they wish it or not*."[23]

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[22] The assumption behind this way of thinking about the divine-human relation is the notion that God is a "personal" God. Evangelicals, in particular, are fond of speaking about faith as a "personal relationship" with Jesus. If by "personal" we mean the kind of relationship that I have with another human person, then such language is clearly being used metaphorically, all personal delusions to the contrary notwithstanding. God is not *a* person, as Paul Tillich rightly stressed in his writings. What then is the meaning of such talk? In the best sense, it affirms that God is not an impersonal thing, an object lying at our disposal, which we are free either to use or ignore. A "personal" God is a living *subject* that confronts us and unsettles us. To say that faith is a "personal" relationship with God is to say that faith is a personally transformative event wherein we encounter the active reality of God. That much we can and must affirm. But to go beyond this and construe God in anthropomorphic terms as a supernatural person is to leave the realm of faith and enter the world of mythology and fantasy.

While it is rarely discussed, the mythological conception of God as a personal deity is substantially based on passages from the Old Testament, particularly the covenant texts that describe the relation between YHWH and Israel in terms taken from the suzerainty treaties of the ancient Near East (ANE). We thus read in Deuteronomy, which is based on such ANE documents, that YHWH "maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments" (Deut 7:9). Here is a clear expression of the divine-human relationship that takes a human-human relationship as its *analogans* and template. Those who operate on a model of biblical authority that believes whatever is in the Bible was divinely ordained to be there—once again assuming that God is a person, much the way I am personally authoring this book—are forced to conclude that this account of God as a heavenly suzerain (or king) testifies authoritatively to the nature of God. This would imply either that YHWH selected the suzerainty treaty as the model for the treaty/covenant with Israel or that the ANE culture was superintended by God to develop suzerainty treaties so that the Israelite people could come along later and use the format to describe a treaty/covenant with their national deity, named YHWH.

The problem, as those in the Reformed tradition are often quick to point out, is that this appeal to human freedom misunderstands the Reformed understanding of divine sovereignty because it fails to see the

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The sheer mythology of all this aside, trying to give such notions a divine sanction is a misguided attempt to escape the historicity of the biblical text. We must not sacrifice our intellect in this manner. We must instead face the fact that the scriptures are thoroughly historical documents of their time. There is nothing directly divine or inspired about the suzerainty treaty; it was simply what the Hebrew tribes knew as part of their cultural context. We must not ascribe any intrinsic theological significance to it. With Barth we can instead affirm that the "spiritual horizon [of the prophets and apostles] was as limited as—and in an important respect much more limited than—our own," and that "their natural science, their world-picture, and to a great extent even their morality cannot be authoritative for us. . . . They were with few exceptions not remarkable theologians." See Barth, "Die Autorität," 6. We see this most clearly in the way the Hebrew scriptures project an ANE conception of the suzerain-vassal relation onto the YHWH-Israel covenantal relation. We must not take this view of God as definitive in any way for theology today. These texts *become* authoritative and meaningful for Christian theology only when interpreted retrospectively from the normative reality of Jesus. Seen from that perspective, God does not relate to us as a cosmic suzerain but as a crucified prophet.

[23] Barth, *Gespräche 1959–1962*, 431; emphasis mine. Barth certainly does not share the univocal ontological framework, but his comment nicely captures the basic objection.

significance of God's absolute transcendence. Once we recognize that divine agency operates on a qualitatively different ontological order, we no longer need to worry about a competition between God and the human person, and thus we no longer need to resort to a cooperative account of the divine-human relation. Indeed, both cooperation and competition trade on a fundamentally mythological and metaphysical understanding of God as one causal agent among others within the cosmos. If divine agency does not conflict with any creaturely agency—being of a wholly different order—then a universal divine decision to elect all human beings in Jesus Christ need not compete with the free decision of individual persons.[24] There are various ways of explaining how this is possible, some being more satisfactory than others. At this point I am not advocating for any of the typical Protestant options. I am only interested in demonstrating that a responsible account of divine being and agency makes it possible to hold together a strongly monergistic doctrine of divine sovereignty with an equally strong doctrine of human freedom. Indeed, if freedom is not defined negatively as freedom *from* limitation—which is the doctrine of freedom underpinning modern capitalist ideology—but rather *positively* as freedom *for* the good, and if this good is understood theologically in terms of the liberating justice of Jesus Christ, then the only genuine human freedom is the one established and preserved by the Spirit of God. True human freedom occurs only *within* the space opened up by divine action, not alongside or apart from it.

My point here is not to dismiss the appeal to human freedom by those who are (often justifiably) put off by the Reformed tradition. Instead, I wish to reframe the problem in order to discern the actual issue at stake. The real issue is not one of freedom but of *historicity*. The problem of historicity arose in the nineteenth century as people began to recognize as never before that human beings are situated within a particular moment of history, and that every idea, text, and event is inseparable from its historical location—including those religious texts that are invested with normative authority.[25] The problem of historicity is thus the problem of hermeneutics, which we will take up in the following chapter. But it is also the problem of existence, of our being-in-the-world. To be a historical person is to be one who is "caught up with the world in constant change," and who thereby constantly places oneself in relation to one's past and future.[26] The historicity of a person, like that of a text, means that a person is never static, never a fixed entity; each person is always in the process of understanding herself (and being understood by others) ever anew. This means that true humanity is *historical*. There is nothing behind or above one's history. Put another way, to accept the problem of historicity is to reject the Platonic ontology that posits an eternal form or essence behind historical phenomena. Each person is a historical being whose being is thus only ever in becoming. People are inseparable from the historical moments in which they exist in relation to God, the world, and themselves.

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[24] The argument works for the traditional Reformed doctrine of double predestination, which is generally the context in which such debates play out. I am, of course, only interested in the way that this understanding of divine agency impinges on the possibility of universal salvation. I will treat questions of divine and human agency more fully and constructively in later chapters.

[25] The best account of the problem of historicity and its significance for the church can be found in Ebeling, *Problem*, esp. 3–33.

The problem with most versions of universalism—especially those that ground salvation in God's sovereign will—is that they run roughshod over the question of historicity. This is a problem, in fact, for any soteriology that rejects the evangelical emphasis on the individual human person as the site for the actualization of salvation (e.g., double predestination or Barthian objectivism). If a person's nature is historical—that is, if there is no human essence behind one's concrete actions and decisions—then *the question of salvation cannot be decided apart from the particular moment in which a person realizes her historical existence*. Salvation is meaningless if it ignores or bypasses a person's historicity, since that would mean ignoring or bypassing the person altogether. Unfortunately, many doctrines of salvation are guilty of doing precisely that, and perhaps none more so than the doctrine of universalism. Indeed, universalism—particularly its theo-actualized instantiation—almost by definition trades on an abstract and ahistorical conception of salvation.

Does this mean we are left with evangelical soteriology as the only credible option? Must we accept that the individual believer consciously and willingly actualizes her salvation, as Romans 10:9 might suggest? In doing so we face a dilemma. If we insist with the tradition that such faith is a gift from God, then we are still left with double predestination, where God determines who will have saving faith and who will not. If we hold, by contrast, that this faith is a purely human magnitude, such that we contribute decisively to our own salvation out of our own resources, then we end up abandoning what is arguably the central claim of the entire New Testament witness, namely, that we are dead in our transgressions and only the resurrecting work of God can make us alive again. We who belong to the old age would be unable to participate in the new were it not for God's apocalyptic intervention in Christ. Sixteenth-century Lutherans could therefore rightly say that "in spiritual and divine matters . . . the human being is like a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife, indeed like a block of wood or a stone, like a lifeless statue."[27] Similarly, according to Barth, "Fallen human beings are surely dead. But for the wonder of their awakening from the dead, which they need, and in which their reconciliation with God consists, it is necessary that they should still be there as corpses, as human corpses."[28] The dead cannot save themselves. Only the miracle of new life can rescue them from their desperate situation. Such is the grace that confronts us and elicits our response. To be sure, we are speaking here in a naively traditional idiom, and we will have occasion later to rethink what it means to speak of sin and grace. The point is that we cannot ascribe salvific significance to our actions—understood as purely natural, human deeds—and still remain connected to the truth that comes to expression in the Christian kerygma. Indeed, if we had to reduce Christianity to a single idea, we could plausibly, and I would argue correctly, identify this idea with the claim that we achieve authentic existence "by grace alone" (*sola gratia*).[29]

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[26] Ibid., 25, 38.

We thus find ourselves in a theological conundrum. On the one hand, a credible soteriology, especially if it is universalistic, has to take the historicity of the believer seriously. On the other hand, we must avoid any soteriology that makes salvation a cooperative effort between God and the human person. But in rejecting soteriological synergism we must also preserve divine freedom. There is indeed a way out of this conundrum—or rather *through* it—which we have named above as "eschatological theo-actualized universalism." It protects divine freedom because it is actualized by God, and it protects the historicity of the believer because it is eschatological. What this might look like will be explored in the chapters to come.

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[27] Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration II.20 in Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*. The quoted material is culled from several of Martin Luther's own writings and attributed to him as a quote.

[28] *KD* 4.1:535. Cf. *CD* 4.1:481.

[29] In effect, I am denying in principle the central tenet of evangelical soteriology, namely, that a person is saved by the response of faith—and according to this soteriology salvation means being saved from reprobation. I will readily admit that this tenet appears to have biblical support, but that is an insufficient criterion for theology. Many positions can be supported from scripture that we have good reason to reject, both ethical (e.g., slavery and the subordination of women) and theological (e.g., binitarianism, dispensationalism, and supersessionism). The question is whether this soteriology makes coherent sense of God and the gospel, and here I must render a negative verdict. The aporias are simply too great to overcome. I will discuss this more in chapter 3, but a few points can be noted here. Evangelical soteriology proclaims a sovereign God of grace who is capable of rescuing people from damnation (and desires to do so), and yet God requires that each individual make a response of faith in order to carry this out—unless this faith is a divine gift, in which case we have predestination again. On this account, when a person dies who has not responded in faith, God's hands are supposedly tied. Such a God may be personal, but at the expense of being impotent.

TOWARD A UNIVERSALISM WITHOUT METAPHYSICS

The task of the present work is to develop an account of universalism that addresses the aforementioned challenges. We can name this a "universalism without metaphysics." We will say more about metaphysics in the next chapter, but we can define it here as a mode of thinking that constrains rational inquiry from the outset with abstract, ahistorical presuppositions. For instance, attention to human historicity might be constrained by an idea that determines human nature as such in advance (e.g., body-soul dualism), and divine freedom might be constrained by an idea that determines the nature of divine action in advance (e.g., the notion that God's salvific will is constrained by human response). An account of universalism will avoid metaphysics by defining each concretely and historically in accordance with the following conditions:

1. Salvation is freely actualized by God in history.
2. Salvation relates to each person in concrete historicity; it is situated but not synergistic.
3. Salvation is not a once-for-all ontological transformation of nature but an ongoing ontic transformation of existence.

Sketching a version of universalism that meets these conditions is the task of the subsequent chapters.

2

Soteriocentrism

Prolegomena to a Dogmatic Sketch

For the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.

Matthew 15:6

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free.

Romans 8:2

EXORDIUM TO A SOTERIOCENTRIC THEOLOGY

Theology is traditionally understood as the science of God—the *logos* of *theos*. Like every other science, theology operates under a variety of presuppositions. Not all of the presuppositions are shared by every theologian, hence the many intractable conundrums and the apparent incommensurability between various parties. The initial task of a systematic theology is to come clean about one's presuppositions for the sake of clarity and mutual understanding. Achieving such prolegomenous clarity will be the goal of this chapter.

In the case of discussions of soteriology—and especially such a contested issue as universal salvation—the presuppositions are numerous, decisive, and often hidden from view. This is largely because it is hard for us to imagine others thinking differently about something so basic and essential to the faith. It is easy to think that one's view of salvation is self-evidently "biblical" or that it is the obvious position to hold in light of one's confessional tradition. Of all the doctrinal *loci*, soteriology is perhaps the one most determined by latent presuppositions, in part because the scriptural texts and doctrinal traditions are so ambiguous, even at times contradictory. Moreover, there has never been an official dogma regarding salvation. The consequence has been a diverse multiplicity of positions, even within a single confessional tradition. There are almost as many soteriologies as there are theologians to espouse them. In such a situation, it is crucial that one's methodological assumptions are made evident for the sake of promoting a dialogue that will edify the communion of the saints.

What follows in this chapter is an all-too-brief discussion of how I define the task of theology. In order to define this task, however, I must already engage in theological reflection. There is an ineluctable circularity in theological prolegomena. One cannot speak *about* theology without already *doing* theology. One's methodological presuppositions, if they are not to unjustly prejudice one's understanding of the subject matter, must in some sense be determined by, or at least derived from, the object of one's inquiry. In other words, the presuppositions for the theological task are determined by the object of theology—God—and thus they themselves already presuppose some level of theological analysis. The way in which one speaks about God is conditioned from the beginning by one's understanding of God. And this understanding is not a private conversation constructed by the individual monad; it is conditioned by one's confessional tradition, historical situation, and social relations.

We find ourselves in the midst of an ongoing dialogue about God. We are not the originators of this conversation, nor will we bring it to a close. This does not mean we are constrained by the parameters of past generations, only that we cannot isolate our theological reflection from this wider social and historical context. To put it another way, there is no neutral, ahistorical, and universally-acceptable starting point for theology. We approach the task of thinking and speaking about God from a particular location within history, under various personal limitations and social conditions. But this is as it should be, since our concern is not with a general, ahistorical concept of deity, but rather with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who is revealed to us in the concrete person of Jesus and who encounters us in the particularities of our present situation. A *God* who is within history—whose very *being* is, as Eberhard Jüngel puts it, "historical being"[1]—can therefore only be approached appropriately from within history. The triune God of Christian faith is one who embraces the radical contingency of worldly existence. Any attempt to speak faithfully of this God will similarly have to acknowledge and affirm the historical contingency and cultural plurality that characterizes our creaturely relation to God.

All this is simply to say up front that what follows has no pretensions of providing a universally valid description of the theological task. Every theology is written in and for a specific location within history. I follow Rudolf Bultmann in the view that "there is neither a definitive form of Christian kerygma nor a definitive expression of Christian self-understanding, but both must always appear in an ever new form contingently upon each historical situation."[2] This work seeks to be nothing more than just such a contingent form of Christian self-understanding, a modest yet systematic treatment of what the Christian gospel compels us to proclaim boldly in the present moment.

This chapter is divided into four main parts, each of which is a key facet of theological inquiry. The order of presentation does not indicate priority. Each is an equally essential aspect. I begin with a brief discussion of theology as a *science*. This will strike some as both problematic and somewhat dated. The scientific (i.e., *wissenschaftlich*) nature of theology is a German tradition going back to Schleiermacher and given new life by Karl Barth. By employing the notion here, I consciously place myself in that tradition of thought, though I also seek to break it open from within in recognition of its limitations. Certain insights are lost by giving up the language of theology as a science, but retaining it requires careful qualifications. I thus follow by treating theology as an exercise in *hermeneutics*. Theology is an act of interpretation; it seeks to understand what it means to speak of God today. It is an attempt to understand who we are in light of the church's missionary proclamation of the gospel news about Jesus. The third facet connects the scientific and hermeneutical dimensions of theology to its concrete, bodily instantiation within particular sociopolitical situations. Theology is always necessarily *praxis*, a mode of embodied action. The theological task is irreducibly communal, ethical, and political in nature.

Theology is scientific, hermeneutical, and praxical. The fourth and decisive section brings these three elements together by speaking of theology as *soteriology*. Here I lay my cards on the table in terms of how I approach the topic at hand. This work radicalizes the "christocentric turn" in theology inaugurated by Barth. Following Jüngel's lead, I claim that theology must be *soteriocentric*.[3] The position of soteriocentrism is not meant as a contrast to christocentrism but rather as a postmetaphysical radicalization of it. A soteriocentric approach to theological inquiry affirms that the person of Christ is defined in terms of his saving work and, therefore, the being of God is defined in terms of God's trinitarian economy of grace. It is not the being of God as an isolated metaphysical entity in itself (which does not exist) but rather the concrete being of God *for us* (which is deity as such) that is the topic of Christian theology. Clarifying this starting point will set us on the right path for evaluating the dogmatic basis for answering the question of universal salvation. The problem of universalism is not a secondary and dispensable issue. It thrusts us deep into the heart of the doctrine of God, and it can only be properly analyzed from that perspective.

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[1] Jüngel, *God's Being*, 109.

[2] Bultmann, "Theology," 64–65.

A concluding section will draw out the implications of these methodological points for the problem of theological unity and diversity. The topic of universal salvation has long raised questions about what counts as "orthodox" and whether universalism is a "heresy." This chapter will propose jettisoning the dichotomy between orthodoxy and heterodoxy by speaking instead of an *orthoheterodoxy*, defined as "speaking differently but in the right way." A soteriocentric theology radicalizes the path of the reformers not only by refusing to take any received tradition as a norm to which one is bound, but also by refusing to participate altogether in the ongoing attempt to "normalize" the faith by identifying a particular creaturely artifact (e.g., scriptural text or creedal formula) with God's revelation. The pursuit of an abstract and authoritative "Christian worldview" undermines the hermeneutical and practical character of theological discourse, and it cuts the very nerve of the gospel as a word that absolutely resists all attempts to turn it into propaganda. The good news that God saves eternally subtracts itself from and continually subverts all attempts to convert it into a religio-ideological superstructure. It is instead a word that announces every day the true *freedom* of a Christian, as Luther rightly saw. Theology is therefore an eminently *free* discourse. Its orthoheterodox multivocality is not opposed to the gospel but rather takes place within the very space opened up by God's word of grace in Jesus Christ.

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[3] The term "soteriocentric" is most widely associated with Paul Knitter's pluralistic, liberationist theology of religions. In *One Earth Many Religions*, he rejects his previous "theocentric" position for a "soteriocentric" understanding of religions, which finds a common soteriological concern at the heart of all religions, though this concern for "salvation" is normed differently within particular faiths (*One Earth*, 17). I use the term "soteriocentric" somewhat differently here, though I do see it as having a similar relevance for interfaith dialogue.

THEOLOGY AS SCIENCE

Theology is the science of God. Science is here understood as a mode of rational inquiry appropriate to its object. The method of its inquiry is determined by the particular characteristics of the object under investigation. If, as Rudolf Bultmann claims, "the object of theology is that which constitutes what is Christian," we must ask what precisely is the nature of this object if we are going to understand what kind of science theology actually is.[4]

Theology throughout history has vacillated between two main objects of reflection: the *fides quae creditur* ("the faith *that* is believed") and the *fides qua creditur* ("the faith *by which* it is believed"). The distinction itself originates with Augustine, who says in *De trinitate* that "what is believed is one thing, the faith it is believed with is another."[5] It was later developed by Peter Lombard, Philipp Melanchthon, and Johann Gerhard. In essence, the *fides quae* refers to the received content (i.e., orthodox doctrine or *regula fidei*) to which one relates, while the *fides qua* refers to the faith of the human subject that relates to God. The tradition of orthodoxy, particularly in its late medieval and post-reformational forms, placed the emphasis on the received dogmas and doctrines of the faith, on the *fides quae creditur* understood as something passed on unchanged from one generation to the next. Christian faith was primarily the intellectual assent to the truth of these theological propositions.

The simplicity of this account was challenged in the modern era with the recognition that the human subject does not passively receive content from the world around her but actively contributes to the production of knowledge. The rise of historical consciousness radicalized this insight, as people became ever more aware of the historical conditions of our thinking and speaking—that is to say, of the contingency and historicity of our knowledge. As a result, the tradition of liberal theology established by Friedrich Schleiermacher shifted the emphasis to the consciousness and experience of the believer. If the divine being—the theological *Ding an sich*, so to speak—was no longer accessible as an object in itself apart from the consciousness of the subject, then it seemed to follow that theology ought to inquire instead into the nature of this consciousness. Theology shifted its object to the *fides qua creditur*; its concern was no longer God as such but now God as experienced and believed by a person or community. Schleiermacher thus defined theology in 1811 as a "positive science" (*positive Wissenschaft*), in which the various parts form a "cohesive whole only through their common relation to a particular mode of faith."[6] Unlike a "speculative science," theology eschews metaphysical speculation and concerns itself with a "practical task."[7]

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[4] Bultmann, *What Is Theology?*, 32.

[5] Augustine, *The Trinity*, 13.5, 345.

While the definition of theology as a "positive science" remains valid in its broad strokes, Bultmann judged that, in the modern era, theology "lost its object." And that is because "this object, clearly, is God, in some sense or other."[8] In the final analysis, both orthodoxy and liberalism speak of God, but they do not have God as their object. The former makes scriptural texts, church dogma, and logical propositions the object; the latter makes personal experience and historical research the object of theology. In either case, one ends up only with a science of *religion*, not a science of *God*.[9] Each position assumes that the divine is directly accessible or given within the immanent nexus of the world. This givenness can take the form of officially approved structures and practices (e.g., scripture, church teaching, sacraments, etc.), or it can take the form of structures and practices that are either generally accessible (historical analysis) or generally inaccessible (experience). Both positions assume a static conception of God as something fixed and stable. What neither contemplates is a God who *acts*, who actually *does* something in the world. Neither the *fides quae* nor the *fides qua* in isolation relates to the God who is an object only *in actu*. God does not act in the mythical-supernatural sense of effecting miraculous occurrences, but in the noncompetitive sense of being actively present in worldly occurrences, all of which have a so-called "natural" cause.[10] The God who acts is the eschatological God who annuls the world *within* the world and who establishes the new creation *within* the old creation. This is the paradox of the Christian faith: the Word becomes flesh without ceasing to be Word; the eschatological becomes the historical without ceasing to be eschatological.[11] In other words, *the God who is not an object of science becomes an object of science without ceasing to be the God who is not an object of science*. This event, whereby God acts in a decisive and paradoxical way, is what theology seeks to comprehend and clarify, while always recognizing that its object is beyond comprehension and precludes any final clarification. All of this means two things: (1) if God is an object of thought, God is unlike any other object we know; and (2) the object that is God is only accessible to a certain kind of subject, namely, the faithful subject who is confronted with the paradoxical presence of God in the world.

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[6] Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline*, §1, 1.

[7] Ibid., §1, 2. According to Clifford Anderson's analysis of Schleiermacher, "theology is more akin to engineering or medicine than to physics or biology. Strictly speaking, theology does not produce scientific knowledge, but puts knowledge from other sciences to a particular use" ("Crisis," 145–46).

[8] Bultmann, *What Is Theology?* 45.

[9] Regarding liberal theology, Bultmann writes: "As a matter of fact, in the course of the nineteenth century and by the beginning of the twentieth, theology became essentially the science of religion. The biblical sciences became branches of the history of religion, and the same was true of church history insofar as it did not become simply profane history. Systematic theology became the philosophy or psychology of religion (Ernst Troeltsch and Rudolf Otto), and practical theology was now simply religious folklore, psychology of religion, and education" (Bultmann, "Theology," 51).

[10] We will continue to clarify talk of divine action throughout the course of this book, since to speak meaningfully of such action requires that we understand the agent. For now we will simply observe that talk of divine action is metaphorical and analogous talk. I can talk about God as agent the way I talk about my love for another person. In each case, this talking-about is an objectification of the reality itself and so inadequate if taken literally or in isolation. The idea of God as agent only truly makes sense in the event of this action. The aim of this book is to clarify the nature of this event, and thus

We can therefore agree with orthodoxy that the *fides quae creditur*, rightly understood, is the object of faith. There is indeed a reality *that* we believe, which stands outside of ourselves and to which we are responsible. But because this reality is utterly *sui generis*—being pure noncompetitive activity in the world available to faith alone—the *fides quae creditur* is inaccessible apart from the *fides qua creditur*. The object of theology is the unity of the *fides quae* and the *fides qua*; subjective reception is included within the object itself. Unlike the objects of the general sciences, the object of theology is not available for empirical observation and investigation by any human person. While the knowing subject is never irrelevant to the general sciences—since every knower is personally involved in the production of knowledge—the general sciences do not restrict knowledge to a certain

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to clarify the nature of the divine.

[11] The Chalcedonian point, of course, is that the flesh remains flesh and the historical remains historical. This is already implied in the statement that the word remains word and the eschatological remains eschatological, but it is worth making it explicit, not only to indicate my continuity with the tradition, but also to reinforce the *non-miraculous* nature of divine action in the world. A miracle is, by definition, nonparadoxical: the water actually becomes wine, and the blind person actually receives sight. But this is precisely what cannot be the case christologically, on the grounds of orthodoxy itself, since the entire basis of Christianity depends on the claim that divinity and humanity—however we understand these terms—remain unchanged in the event of their union in Christ. Each dimension of Christ remains unimpaired in its integrity. This is not to deny the unity and mutual participation of divinity and humanity, but only to point out that such participation cannot lose the paradoxicality of the Christ-event without losing Jesus Christ altogether. It is thus more accurate to speak of a *paradoxical identity* of divinity and humanity in this event. Traditional accounts of theology want to make the Christ-event an exception to the way God acts elsewhere in the world. Here I take a radically christocentric approach and argue that God acts elsewhere *only* in the way God acts in Christ, since the Christ-event is definitive, even constitutive, of who God is and how God acts.

kind of subject.[12] The general sciences only care about the *that* of the subject, not the *how* of the subject. Theology is of a different order altogether. Theology's object is qualitatively different from every other scientific object, since its object stands over against the knower as an uncontrollable *subject*, and therefore theology is qualitatively different from every other science. Because theology's object is a divine subject, it demands a certain kind of human subject as its knower and restricts knowledge of itself to this particular subject. The *how* of the theological subject is essential to the encounter with the theological object. Objectivity within theology is irreducibly and simultaneously subjectivity. In other words, the object determines the means by which it comes to objectivity—encounter, thought, and speech. The faithful human subject of theological inquiry comes into existence, so to speak, in the event of the object's coming to speech. *Theology is thus the science that reflects on the coming-to-speech of the object, which is at the same time the coming-into-existence of the subject*.

The upshot of this is that "[theology's] object is found in no other science than in theology."[13] Apologetics as the attempt to defend Christianity according to extratheological criteria is consequently ruled out in principle. If God is only perceptible to faith, then theology does not investigate evidence accessible to any neutral observer. There is no extratheological access to the reality of God. Theology does not conform to the standard scientific parameters of verification and falsifiability, because God is not a datum like other data capable of being verified or falsified according to general criteria. God is not a self-evident axiom, a fact of history, a specimen of nature, or the conclusion to a logical syllogism. God is only known in the faithful encounter with the kerygmatic word of Jesus Christ, that is to say, only in the divine act whereby God gives Godself to be known. Christian theology is thus possible only when and where God makes it possible. The theologian *responds* to a divine *act* that calls forth her responsible inquiry and disciplined speech. God calls us children, commands our attention, and commissions our proclamation.

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[12] Some theologians have tried to appeal to the likes of Michael Polanyi, with his account of "personal knowledge" (see *Personal Knowledge*), because they think this allows them to *deny* the distinction between the general sciences and theology. The claim is that post-critical, post-Kantian philosophy of science shows that there is no pure objectivity, since every scientific inquiry is shaped by the person engaged in this inquiry. As true as this may be, such theologians attempt to use this insight to claim that theology's statements are no less "objective" than those of chemistry or biology, as if the admission of a subjective dimension suddenly means that theology and the natural sciences are operating at the same level of discourse. This position fails to start by considering the true nature of the *object* of theological inquiry. Doing so quickly reveals that theology speaks of a qualitatively different kind of object, which leads to a qualitatively different kind of subject. Subjective or personal involvement in the sciences is an insufficiently formal analysis. In the end, appeals to such ideas almost inevitably serve crude apologetic ends that end up falsifying the content of Christian faith. The aim here is really to secure the validity of Christianity by defending the scientific rationality of a bodily resurrection, and they try to do so by undermining the objectivity of the natural sciences. The result of this failed procedure is a gross misunderstanding of both theology and the natural sciences.

[13] Bultmann, *What Is Theology?,* 45. The full context of this statement reads: "The question, What is theology? is itself a theological question, or can only be treated theologically. It is not to be answered apart from knowledge of the object of theology, which cannot be known apart from theology. . . . To say what theology is, it would itself have to be theology. Theology, therefore, can be defined only on the basis of its object, and its object is found in no other science than in theology. This object, clearly, is God, in some sense or other. . . . Thus to deal with the question, What is theology? already means to do theology."

Theology is a science whose very scientificity is exploded from within by the singularity and eventfulness of a God who "does not stand still and does not put up with being made an object of observation."[14] Christian faith concerns a God who is both radically transcendent and radically immanent, both intimately subjective and gloriously objective, who is "nearer to me than I am to myself" and yet is "radically removed from me" as the one who "distances us from ourselves."[15] God sublates—in the Hegelian double sense of both preserving and abolishing—the distinction between subjective and objective as an *event* that is, at one and the same time, "more inward than my most inward part"[16] and more real than any purported reality. Theology is therefore the science in which to know God is to know *ourselves* anew, since it is not so much God who is known as *we* who are known by God: "you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God" (Gal 4:9). Put another way, "all knowledge of God is included in the being-known-by-God."[17]

In sum, the nature of theology as the science of God requires that we attend equally to the human subject who speaks of God. To understand God is to understand the historical situation in which God-talk takes place. For this reason, the science of God is an intrinsically *hermeneutical* science.

THEOLOGY AS HERMENEUTICS

"Hermeneutics is necessary, because the truth is elusive. What is normal, commonplace, and apparently self-evident largely reveals what is false and conceals what is true."[18] Heinrich Balz's axiom regarding the necessity of hermeneutics is, on the surface, merely a description of life within the world. We are fallible creatures within a bewildering environment: the world is a thoroughly ambiguous place, and what we try to make of it—the things we see, think, and do—often has very little connection with the truth. On a certain level, then, Balz's statement is simply a fact of life. We can no more escape the problem of hermeneutics than we can escape our very creatureliness.[19]

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[14] Bultmann, "Science and Existence," 144.

[15] Jüngel, *God as the Mystery*, 182–83.

[16] Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.6.11, 43.

[17] Stoevesandt, "Basel—Marburg," 109.

The apparent obviousness of the hermeneutical problem is deceiving. The very fact that we can now take for granted the elusiveness of truth is a sign of our historical location. For precisely the opposite assumption prevailed throughout most of western history, dominated religiously by a Christianity concerned with precluding all ambiguity and uncertainty and philosophically by a naïve realism that took for granted the correspondence between our language and the world. The two coincided as part of the medieval synthesis of Christianity and Aristotelian philosophy. Hilary Putnam refers to this scholastic metaphysical position as the belief in a "ready-made world with a wholly precise structure and a determinate relation of correspondence."[20] To believe in the "metaphysical fantasy" of a "ready-made world" is "to think that a sign-relation is *built into nature*," which is "to revert to medieval essentialism, to the idea that there are 'self-identifying objects' and 'species' out there. . . . Such an idea made sense in the context of a medieval world view, which had not only an elaborate ontology . . . to back it up, but also an elaborate psychology . . . and an elaborate correspondence between the two."[21] We need not examine the details of correspondentist metaphysics. The point is that the medieval metaphysical belief in a ready-made world took for granted the direct connection between language and reality, because the rational explanation for the world was thought to be "built into" the world. The *conceptual understanding* of the world was seen as being just as self-evident and unambiguous as the world itself. In other

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18. Balz, "Hermeneutik," 206.

19. On this point I agree with James K. A. Smith in his rejection of those "who consider hermeneutics to be a result of the Fall and who understand interpretation as somehow fallen. . . . These thinkers express the confident hope of overcoming and escaping human finitude" (*Fall*, 18). My agreement with Smith on the *problem* should not be taken to imply an agreement with him on the *solution*. Indeed, my own work is diametrically opposed to his "creational hermeneutic" and the cultural-liturgical conception of Christianity that follows from it.

20. Putnam, *Realism*, 278. Putnam provides the argument against this premodern metaphysics in his essay, "Why There Isn't a Ready-Made World," in ibid., 205–28.

21. Ibid., xii–xiii.

words, the metaphysical belief in a ready-made world was the absolutization of a culturally specific idea, which obscured its historicity and contingency.

The philosophical position that Putnam describes was at the same time a theological position. The "medieval world view," with its ontology and psychology, was the worldview of medieval Christianity. The philosophical belief in the self-evidentness of the ready-made world was inseparable from the theological conviction that Christian orthodoxy was a universal truth that alone made sense of reality. The truth of Christianity was believed to be just as objective as the structure of the ready-made world, precisely because a certain kind of Judeo-Christian theism was the "sign-relation" that they believed to be "built into nature." Scholastic theologians built their entire apologetic edifice on this foundation, with proofs for the existence of God based, for example, on worldly causality—as if the "sign-relation" of God were an objective feature of the world.

This metaphysical-theological fantasy of the ready-made world was not merely an epistemological position. Like its religious predecessors, ancient and medieval Christianity posited an all-encompassing teleological cosmology, which ordered every entity within a cosmic hierarchy and understood the world to be the unfolding of an overarching divine plan determined in advance.

> Just as the contents of a play are established beforehand in the major and minor roles which appear in it, so too the events of this history are given in advance in the "spiritual substances of all the orders," which "are united in the Church as a mystical body, which extends from the Trinity and the angels which are nearest to Them [*sic*] down to the beggar at the church door and to the serf who kneels humbly in the obscurest corner of the church to receive the sacrifice of the Mass." But this interpretation of history as a kingdom of metaphysical essences or substances, motivated teleologically within itself and comprising the whole world within this teleology, allows no historical significance to precisely that which we regard as the actual historical process, namely the vital personal experiences of particular individuals in their particular characters and responsibilities. This loses its historical significance because history anticipates it by taking place within the framework of those metaphysical beings. And it is only in so far as they enter into this metaphysical framework that man's life and its events have a place in the history which unfolds there.[22]

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[22] Gogarten, *Demythologizing*, 22–23. Gogarten is here quoting from Wilhelm Dilthey.

As Friedrich Gogarten observes, the metaphysical framework of medieval Christianity involved much more than a normative epistemology; it was a comprehensive ontology that placed every detail of life within a divine order. In other words, the ready-made world was a ready-made *culture*. We can start to see the intrinsic connection between the great medieval synthesis and the church's constantinian collusion with imperial power.

The point is that today's problem of hermeneutics was simply not a problem in the medieval context. Ambiguity or uncertainty was, at least in theory, precluded by the ecclesiastical expropriation of all hermeneutical queries. Ambiguity was impossible for people who were supposed to submit to the authoritative interpretation provided by the church—an interpretation that was as authoritative regarding the cosmos as it was regarding salvation. For this reason, Balz's axiom regarding the elusiveness of the truth presupposes a situation in which one can actually recognize the truth to be elusive, in which there are competing claims regarding what is true and false. It therefore assumes the modern crisis of authority, namely, the era in which the old structures of meaning—primarily, the institutional authority of the church as the authoritative interpreter of the scriptures and thus the arbiter of what counts as true or meaningful—are no longer taken for granted. There are numerous persons and events that contributed to this situation: the Cartesian pursuit of rational certainty, the Pascalian wager, the Kantian turn to the subject (i.e., the so-called "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy), the rise of the empirical sciences as a competing norm for what is real and true, the fragmentation of the church itself due to the Reformation, the imperial and colonial efforts of European Christendom, the rise of the nation-state, and various other developments that, in time, placed the traditional orders and narratives into question, or at least led to a disillusionment with those orders.

At the heart of all these developments is the rise of what scholars refer to as "historical consciousness." The rise of historical consciousness names the replacement of the old metaphysical and teleological interpretation of the world and our existence in it with a historical interpretation. The word "historical" here means dynamic, evolving, contingent, spatiotemporally located, socially constructed, political, and open to ongoing criticism and interrogation. Whereas a metaphysical interpretation understands God, the world, and human existence in terms of an eternally fixed and unchangeable order, a historical interpretation understands them in terms of a historically situated and ever-changing nexus of forces. Whereas a metaphysical interpretation posits timeless essences underneath the contingencies and complexities on the surface of history, a historical interpretation denies that there is anything behind or beneath the historical that could stabilize and secure human existence in advance. *Metaphysics*, as the term is used here, is simply any conceptual schema that secures the object of its inquiry (e.g., the being of God or the nature of human existence) apart from and prior to the historical situation. By contrast, *hermeneutics* is the project that understands its object in terms of its radical historicity, which means understanding it as subject to constant reinterpretation and renegotiation.

For our purposes, the rise of historical consciousness is what defines modernity. Modernity is the age in which the metaphysical understanding of history was called into question thoroughly and irrevocably. It was thus in the modern era that human beings became aware of the elusiveness of truth and the necessity of hermeneutical inquiry. "Only with the collapse of traditional Western metaphysics, i.e., with the loss of its self-evident character, did people become fully aware of the historic character of existence," out of which arose "the freedom, but also the sheer necessity, to regard historical events in their pure historicity."[23] No longer was the hierarchical "chain of being" taken for granted. No longer was the ecclesiastical tale of our given place in God's order accepted on faith. It was no longer assumed that the old stories exhaustively narrate each person's identity. Modernity initiated a turn to human subjectivity as people sought to make sense of their existence.[24] For those institutions and ideologies that depend on this authority, new strategies were devised to shore up faith: for example, Roman Catholics put forward the doctrine of papal infallibility in the early 1870s, while Reformed Protestants formulated the doctrine of biblical inerrancy with renewed vigor in the early 1880s. Both sides were certainly able to claim that such views were held long before they were codified in these forms. And yet it is significant that this codification occurred at precisely this moment. Their very formulation indicates that the traditional "plausibility structures" were no longer taken for granted.[25] The end of metaphysics ushered in an era of fear in the face of the unknown. Proliferation of theologies of fear designed to safeguard Christians from the hermeneutical problem was a predictable result. Today's culture wars are simply the long death rattle of an antiquated version of Christianity trying to maintain some vestige of metaphysical security.

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[23] Ebeling, "Significance," 46.

[24] It has become increasingly fashionable over the past century—especially over the past fifty years—for theologians to disparage modernity and the so-called "turn to the subject" initiated by thinkers like Descartes and Immanuel Kant. Oswald Bayer, for instance, refers to the post-Kantian concern with subjectivity as a "modern narcissism," in which "subjectivity no longer has a counterbalance in a cosmic piety. Rather cosmic piety is absorbed into subjectivity." See Bayer, *Gott*, 74. Cf. Bayer, "Modern Narcissus." Defenders of modernism observe that the turn to subjectivity in modern thought has nothing to do with solipsistic inwardness and vicious individualism. It is rather a recognition that human beings are not merely passive observers but active participants in the pursuit of meaning and identity. Kevin Hector calls this pursuit of meaningful identity the modern project of "mineness" (see *Theological Project*). Of course, for the reactionary enforcers of orthodoxy this is precisely the problem: human beings should not actively make sense of their existence but rather receive the meaning given to it by God. Not only does this require a *sacrificium intellectus*, but it also serves to reinforce a particular sociocultural worldview as divinely authorized and so necessarily imposed upon human beings as the only appropriate framework for interpreting the meaningfulness of one's life. Such an approach is at odds not only with the Reformation but also with the missionary principle of recipiency, according to which the recipients of the gospel message determine what counts as a faithful translation of the message. Translation is thus "surrender to the terms of the target culture" and has more to do "with their self-understanding than with literalness and accuracy. . . . To ignore this fact is to concede the idea of mission as foreign imperialism" (Sanneh, *Translating*, 237–38). Those who cast stones on modernity need to be careful lest they inadvertently find themselves on the side of colonialist missions.

The church can no longer afford to ignore the problem of hermeneutics. Theology that engages in metaphysical thinking today is an exercise in pretending that the curtain has not been pulled back to reveal the man posturing as a wizard.[26] We ignore the elusiveness and ambiguity of truth

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[25] See Berger, *Heretical Imperative*.

[26] The reference to the story of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is quite intentional. As many have observed, the original 1900 novel, made famous by the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, can be read quite persuasively as a parable about the disillusionment with Christianity and the rise of secularism. There are numerous religious parallels, with the Emerald City bearing no small resemblance to the New Jerusalem in John's Apocalypse; there is even a yellow-brick road in place of streets of gold. And the need for brains (faith), courage (hope), and heart (love) represent the classic theological virtues, for which traditional Christian theology believed one needed the infused gift of God's Spirit. In the story, God—or at least the metaphysical notion of God—is represented by the wizard, whom they discover is just an ordinary old man playing a trick on the people. The pseudo-wizard still gives each of them something, but they are useless objects that they invest with "power" through their own belief. The message is clear: God cannot save us, but we can save ourselves if we simply believe in ourselves. We can see in this story a parable of the transition from religion to psychotherapy that was taking place concurrently in the work of Sigmund Freud and others.

What is perhaps even more remarkable as a commentary on our culture is the 2013 film, *Oz the Great and Powerful*. Serving as a kind of prequel to *The Wizard of Oz*, this film tells the story of how Oscar "Oz" Diggs ends up in the Land of Oz and eventually has to pretend to be a great wizard in order to save the people from the wicked witch. In effect, the story is the reverse of the 1939 film. Here we begin with the knowledge that Oz is a fraud with no powers, but the film concludes with Oz becoming a great wizard (i.e., "God") thanks to the collective belief of the people. As an audience, we are led to believe that, even though it is fake and meaningless in itself, corporate religion is necessary to achieve certain social ends. The main characters in the story all know the truth but keep it a secret so that the people of Oz have something to motivate them. And so Oz, played by James Franco, declares rather remarkably: "Oscar Diggs died so that the Wizard of Oz could live. When those witches come back, and they will come back, we're going to need everyone to believe." Here we have an all-too-obvious Jesus-figure, at our peril, because to do so is to ignore our own historicity, that is, our situatedness within a particular cultural context. Such an account faces an immediate objection from Christian orthodoxy, insofar as we appear to be privileging a nontheological or extrabiblical starting point, viz. the modern-western historical context. The fact is that the theological significance of this modern context—in the sense of its radical historical consciousness—is itself theologically grounded. We can substantiate this in three primary ways, in conversation especially with the work of Gerhard Ebeling.

First, Christianity "stands or falls with the tie that binds it to its unique historical origin."[27] Christianity is rooted in a concrete historical event. More precisely, Christianity identifies a particular historical event as revelation, as God's unique self-disclosure to humankind. In a certain basic sense, therefore, the contingencies and complexities of history are *internal* to Christian faith because they are internal to the very identity of God. This is the beating heart of Christianity's rejection of docetism. It keeps the church open to the contingencies of history, and thus continually exposes the church's teaching to critical analysis in light of the present situation. Of course, Christianity was quick to betray this orientation to history through numerous attempts at securing ahistorical or permanent points of access to revelation, which allow people to bypass the hermeneutical problem altogether as nonexistent. As Ebeling points out, this occurred in a number of ways, including

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though in a crude Tillichian sense wherein Jesus dies so that the Christ may live in and through the community of faith. It is strongly reminiscent of Philip Pullman's provocative retelling of the Gospel narrative, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010), in which Christ, the brother of Jesus, fabricates the story of Jesus's resurrection in order to create a religious force for good in the world.

If the 1939 film captures the twentieth century's "death of God," the 2013 film captures, among other things, the return and proliferation of gods and religions in the twenty-first century, as well as the apologetic entrenchment of conservative evangelicalism. And this is why I brought the story up. Since the 1970s we have seen a reaction against historical consciousness and the hermeneutical problem throughout North American Christianity, both evangelical and mainline. Metaphysics is on the rise in multiple forms. We need to name this return to metaphysics for what it is: a naïve belief in the power of a pseudo-wizard. Of course, the unfortunate truth is that many people today, as the 2013 film accurately portrays, no longer care if the "God" of religion is a fake. Just as Oz and his friends in *Oz the Great and Powerful* supported the myth of his greatness in order to mobilize the people, so too people support traditional religion because it "works." We see this, for example, in apologetic arguments that appeal to psychological studies about the personal benefits of religion and prayer—as if this somehow proves that God is real or that we were created by God. And while many people actually believe the religious myths on a literal level, they are unconcerned about matters of veracity and historicity, because at the end of the day, religion *helps* them. For this reason, genuine Christian theologians may find that outspoken atheists are actually their strongest and closest allies in the pursuit of truth.

[27] Ebeling, "Significance," 28.

the use of metaphysical and metahistorical concepts in the formulation of christological dogma, the interpretation of scripture as a "sacred history" (*historia sacra*) through the doctrine of verbal inspiration, the whole system of sacraments and relics designed to grant immediate and objective access to salvation, and finally the very institution of the church itself as the prolongation of the incarnation that possesses the "deposit of faith" (*depositum fidei*).[28] Together these serve "to secure for the event of revelation its place in the world and its history, but on the other hand to isolate it at the same time from the world and its history."[29] If the Reformation served only one purpose, it served to call into question the entire ecclesiastical attempt to secure revelation, either *for* us or *from* the world.

Hence, second, the present essay takes for granted the reformational commitment to the doctrine of justification—*sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus*—which is fundamentally a "de-securing" of revelation.[30] Setting aside the question of the reformers' interpretation of Paul, the doctrine of justification is a theological position that is faithful to the scandalous nature of the originating Christ-event. The heart of this doctrine is the *sola fide*, "by faith alone," which is set against the "works of the law." Revelation is therefore present exclusively to faith, and thus exclusively within the concrete historicity of human existence.

> The *sola fide* of the Reformation is directed not only against justification by works and thereby against a legalistic exposition of scripture, not only against mysticism and against multiplication of the revealing reality in the form of saints and against materialization of the revealing reality in the form of sacred objects. But the *sola fide* has undoubtedly also an anti-sacramental and an anti-clerical point. To the *sola fide* there corresponds *solus Christus*. Revelation and the present are separated from each other in such a way that only one bridge remains: the Word alone—and indeed, lest any misunderstanding should arise, the Word interpreted as salvation *sola gratia*, *sola fide*. All other bridges have been broken up. . . . There is no such thing as a simple, matter-of-fact presence of revelation.[31]

Sola fide thus rejects every means of controlling our access to revelation—whether conceptual, sacramental, or institutional. The only available means is entirely outside of our control, namely, a personal encounter with God's present word within our historicity. The reformational rejection of both justification by works and the *opus operatum* of the sacrament leads to "the shattering of all historical assurances that supposedly render the decision of faith superfluous. . . . The *sola fide* destroys all secretly docetic views of revelation which evade the historicalness of revelation by making it a history *sui generis*, a sacred area from which the critical historical method must be anxiously debarred."[32]

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[28] See ibid., 30–35.

[29] Ibid., 30.

[30] See Eberhard Jüngel's view that the "certainty of faith" is a "de-securing" (*Entsicherung*) of oneself in *Gott als Geheimnis*, 227.

[31] Ebeling, "Significance," 35–36.

For this reason Ebeling argues that the doctrine of justification laid the foundation for the rise of the historical-critical method. To be sure, the reformers did not themselves adopt a historical-critical perspective, and Ebeling is quick to point out that the reformers had their own means of securing revelation in ways counter to their own central insights. Nevertheless, what emerged in the Reformation was the necessity of the hermeneutical problem for theology.[33] The Reformation destroyed the ideal of a *theologia perennis*, a perennial or permanent theology safe from the hermeneutical queries of the present situation. As a consequence, there can be no "archaizing repetition of 'pure doctrine,'" but only a fresh encounter with the word of God.[34] This does not mean, of course, that everyone who championed the historical-critical method was thereby faithful to the Reformation by default. "But what it certainly does mean is, that wherever they made way for the critical historical method and, however grievous their errors, took it seriously as their task, there, if certainly often in a very paradoxical way, they were really asserting the fundamental principle of the reformers in the intellectual situation of the modern age."[35]

A third and final reason why the modern historical consciousness is theologically grounded follows closely from the former point. *Sola fide* not only entails the radical dependence of human beings upon the gracious action of God, but it simultaneously entails the radical transcendence and unavailability of God. The axiom of divine transcendence is the ontological correlate of the reformational axiom of justification by faith alone without the works of the law. To acknowledge that justification is outside of our grasp is to acknowledge that *God* is outside of our grasp. This point has significant hermeneutical implications. Balz's claim about the necessity of hermeneutics in general is thus especially applicable to theology. Hermeneutics is uniquely necessary within theology because the truth about God is uniquely elusive. Whereas general truths are *relatively* hidden within the ambiguities of history, the truth about God is *absolutely* hidden by virtue of the fact that God absolutely transcends the world. The event of revelation does not change this situation. Revelation is not a datum that grants immediate and self-evident access to eternal truth; instead, revelation is always God's *self*-revelation. For this reason, divine revelation is not only inseparable from but also coincides with divine hiddenness. Put another way, revelation demands the patient work of interpretation. Revelation actually *creates*, rather than solves, the problem of hermeneutics.

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[32] Ibid., 56.

[33] Ibid., 42.

[34] Ibid., 41.

[35] Ibid., 55.

We can summarize as follows: *Theology is hermeneutical, because theology is historical. And theology is historical, because it reflects on the God of history—the God who is a "historical being."*[36] The God revealed in Jesus Christ unsettles our assumptions about what is self-evident and disrupts our self-assured attempts to secure our existence. As the apocalyptic agent of new creation, the God of the gospel is perpetually problematizing the world and our place within it. For this reason, a theological science faithful to this God can only ever take the form of hermeneutics.

> The nature of theology as a whole is hermeneutical. . . . It is a matter of understanding Biblical texts, of understanding the subject matter that comes to expression in them, and ultimately of the understandability of the witness to this subject matter in each present situation. He who inquires as to the nature and the program of theology cannot avoid the problem of understanding, the hermeneutical problem. . . . What used to be treated in the system of orthodox dogmatics in the opening chapters entitled "De Theologia" and "De Scriptura Sacra" must be discussed today under the title of the hermeneutical problem.[37]

The problem of hermeneutics, as Heinrich Ott observes, is foundational to systematic theology. It is thus appropriate that I treat it here in the prolegomenal chapter. Everything else flows from this.

What form will such a theological hermeneutics take? We have already alluded to the answer: it will take the form of a *critical* hermeneutic, one that is both historical and theological in its critique. Such a hermeneutic will critically interrogate the text or tradition in question in light of its twofold historicity as both a past artifact and a present event. The dialectical theologians of the twentieth century gave this hermeneutic the name of *Sachkritik*, meaning a criticism according to the content or subject matter (*Sache*).[38] A program of *Sachkritik* differentiates between "what is said" and "what is meant," and it tests what is said against the criterion of what is meant.[39] Of course, we only access what is meant through what is said, which means that interpretation is an ongoing process as we continually discern the word that is being spoken to us today in this text. Ott calls this ongoing process the "hermeneutical arch." With this image he means to convey the continuity that persists between artifact and event in the midst of the plurality of historical situations and interpretive encounters. The unity of the hermeneutical process, he says, lies in the *kerygma* or what I have called the *Sache*: "A single arch stretches from the Biblical texts to the contemporary preaching of the church. It is the arch of the kerygma and of the understanding of the kerygma."[40] The kerygma is the divine word-event that unites past and present, there and here, then and now. It is an event pregnant with infinite possibilities of meaning, which presses us ever onward toward the open future, compelling the community of those who hear this word to understand its contemporary significance in surprising new ways.

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[36] Jüngel, *God's Being*, 109.

[37] Ott, "What Is Systematic Theology?," 78–79.

[38] Barth initiated this approach in the preface to the second edition of his Romans

As a program for discerning the possibilities of meaning available to the present moment, *Sachkritik* is not concerned with separating husk and kernel—since there is no textual "canon within the canon," no set of

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commentary, where he writes: "I must push forward to the point where I virtually only confront the riddle of the *subject matter* [*Sache*], and no longer merely the riddle of the *document* [*Urkunde*] as such, where I thus virtually forget that I am not the author, where I have understood him so well that I let him speak in my name and can myself speak in his name." He adds later: "I must confess that I am concerned now . . . more with the *real* than with the so-called *whole* gospel, because I can see no way to the *whole* gospel than by grasping the *real* gospel." See Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 14, 20.

[39] Bultmann, "Problem," 239. Gregory MacDonald argues *against Sachkritik* in his argument for universalism: "This observation [regarding the affirmation of God's justice and love together] serves to undercut the common objection that universalists practice *Sachkritik*—criticizing and rejecting one part of the Bible on the basis of another. Thus, it is said, universalists make much of the biblical texts about God's love but use them to reject the many texts about God's justice and fierce punishments. This is a fair criticism of some contemporary Christian universalists; but, as it stands, this objection does not apply to the argument in this book" (*Evangelical Universalist*, 164). MacDonald associates *Sachkritik* with a crude husk-kernel approach that simply disregards certain texts. A more sophisticated approach as seen in the work of Bultmann *interprets all texts* in light of the norm that stands *beyond* every text. Certain texts certainly correspond more faithfully to the norm than other texts, but every passage has to be read and interpreted anew. No verse is directly identical with the *Sache*. That being said, *Sachkritik* freely criticizes the Bible where appropriate and does not take every passage as equally authoritative. These judgments are based on an ever-new hermeneutical inquiry. The process of testing our interpretations in light of the dialogue between kerygma and context is always ongoing and must not be halted through appeals to the timeless infallibility of the text or authority of the tradition.

[40] Ott, "What Is Systematic Theology?," 79.

texts and traditions that escapes hermeneutical criticism—but rather with understanding the whole text as an event for the hearer(s) of this word today.[41] For this reason, "textual interpretation cannot be separated from

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[41] I agree in part here with the hermeneutical program of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. In *Bread Not Stone* she presents three hermeneutical models: (1) the doctrinal model, (2) the historical-factual model, and (3) the dialogical-pluralistic model. The doctrinal model "subscribes fully to the archetypal understanding of the Bible, especially in literal interpretations, and conceives of biblical revelation as verbal inspiration." The historical-factual model "identifies biblical truth and authority with historical or textual factualness." The dialogical-pluralistic model "seeks to recover *all* canonical texts and traditions and to understand them as theological responses to their historical-communal situations." Because it acknowledges the multiple contexts and forms within the canon, the dialogical-pluralistic model "must establish a 'canon within the canon,' a theological criterion and measuring rod with which to assess the truth and authority of the various biblical texts and traditions" (*Bread*, 11–12). There are two basic versions of this third model. What Schüssler Fiorenza calls the "neo-orthodox model" identifies certain texts and traditions as normative. This textual/traditional canon can be historical-factual (e.g., historical Jesus), doctrinal (e.g., justification by faith alone), or philosophical (e.g., universal revelation or liberating truth). Schüssler Fiorenza associates the neo-orthodox model with figures like Rudolf Bultmann and Rosemary Radford Ruether (ibid., 12). Her own alternative version of this third model "derives this canon [within the canon], *not* from the biblical writings, but from the contemporary struggle of women against racism, sexism, and poverty as oppressive systems of patriarchy and from its systematic explorations in feminist theory" (ibid., 14). She therefore locates the normative "canon within the canon" outside of the biblical canon altogether. "In doing so this mode of interpretation subjects the Bible to a critical feminist scrutiny and to the theological authority of the church of women, an authority that seeks to assess the oppressive or liberating dynamics of all biblical texts" (ibid., 13). The Bible "no longer functions as authoritative source but as a *resource* for women's struggle for liberation" (ibid., 14). Schüssler Fiorenza further develops her analysis in *But She Said*, where she criticizes the "logic of identity" that looks "for a unifying center of Scripture" (*But She Said*, 141). In contrast, she says that "inspiration—the life-giving breath and power of Sophia-Spirit—does not reside in texts: It dwells among people" (ibid., 156).

While Schüssler Fiorenza does not make this observation, the two versions of her third hermeneutical model essentially divide along Protestant and Roman Catholic lines. A Protestant critical hermeneutic locates the theological norm in some essence that is connected to the text, even if it lies beyond or outside of it. A Roman Catholic critical hermeneutic locates the theological norm in the community of faith—which for Schüssler Fiorenza is "women-church." She claims that the "Protestant" versions of a critical hermeneutic ultimately posit an abstract, idealized unity that remains trapped within the logic of the patriarchal West. For instance, regarding Bultmann's demythologizing program, she writes: "Yet such a reduction of particular biblical texts to a theological principle, theological essence, or ethical norm not only cuts down the rich pluriformity of biblical discourse to abstract principle and norm, it then goes on to claim that such a theological principle is the inspired and revealed Word of G-d" (ibid., 142). She elsewhere clarifies that "I share Bultmann's program of *Sachkritik*, [but] I do not share his neo-orthodox existentialist position or his method of demythologization" (*Bread*, 184n22). I would dispute her reading of Bultmann on three counts. First, a demythologizing or existential *Sachkritik* does not reduce texts to a principle but *tests* the self-interpretation," and since "a specific self-interpretation underlies every exegesis, no exegesis is neutral."[42] Every genuine interpretation is an existential encounter with a reality that confronts and claims us in and through this text. And "it is not the letter of the Bible but the One who is proclaimed by it that makes it a divine address to us, the bearer of all promise."[43] The task of the exegete is thus to hear that message and see the text in its light. Consequently, "no exegesis is able to simply reproduce the wording of the text, but tries somehow to say what is meant."[44] In some cases, this meaning—which is always for today—will require that we interpret the text *against* the text, since what is said actually obscures or even contradicts the meaning. We cannot shy away from criticizing scripture. In many instances, *only* such critique will enable us to hear the kerygmatic word that God means for us to hear in the text. The question for us as exegetes is whether we are existentially *alive* to this word, whether we are ready and willing to hear its demand upon our existence.

THEOLOGY AS PRAXIS

Thus far we have defined theology in terms of science and hermeneutics—in other words, in terms of its *epistemology*. That is crucial, of course, since theology must be, in some sense, a way of knowing and talking about something. But we have also seen that theology's distinct mode of God-talk is one that *concerns* the human subject in a unique way. Indeed, if knowledge of God is always a knowledge of ourselves—since it is not so much we who

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text against the material norm of the kerygma. Second, Bultmann does not then identify this principle or this reduced text with some "inspired and revealed Word," which is a concept he entirely rejects. Third, it is not clear to me that her reconstruction of women-church is any less abstract or more pluriform than Bultmann's reconstruction of the kerygma. The ultimate issue at stake is whether we understand revelation to be a transcendent divine act (Bultmann) or an immanent historical community (Schüssler Fiorenza), but even this proves to be a false binary, since Bultmann's divine act is a paradoxical event that occurs simultaneously and noncompetitively in the historical community of faith, wherever this genuinely occurs. Perhaps the main difference between the Protestant Bultmann and the Catholic Schüssler Fiorenza is that, for Bultmann, we cannot point to a place in the world and say definitively and securely "this is revelation" or "this is the people of God," whereas it would seem that, for Schüssler Fiorenza, we can indeed do so. Both, I argue, would point to the same community—the discipleship of equals—as the site where the kerygma takes bodily form, but Bultmann would make a *paradoxical or indirect identification* of this site with revelation, whereas Schüssler Fiorenza would make a *direct identification*.

[42] Bultmann, "Problem," 253, 243.

[43] Käsemann, *On Being a Disciple*, 139.

[44] Bultmann, "Problem," 243.

know God but God who knows us—then to engage in theological inquiry is to interrogate our life in the world. And since our life involves the totality of our bodily existence, theology is fundamentally concerned with *praxis*, that is, with the question of creaturely agency and action. Scientific and hermeneutical theology is essentially *praxical* theology.

The intrinsic link between hermeneutics and praxis comes to expression most clearly in the intercultural hermeneutics of Theo Sundermeier.[45] Born in 1935, Sundermeier has been a professor of religious studies and mission studies at the University of Heidelberg since 1983. His work operates at the generative intersection of missiology, hermeneutics, and interreligious studies, which has led him to his central project of "intercultural understanding."[46] The term "intercultural" refers to the broad range of issues addressed by missiology and (inter)religious studies, where people who are cultural-religious strangers must learn to communicate and share life together.[47] The term "understanding" refers to the discipline of hermeneutics, which is the science of understanding. Sundermeier's key insight is that mission is fundamentally hermeneutical, and conversely, hermeneutics is fundamentally missionary. Each involves the interpretation and affirmation of the other precisely in his or her otherness. His term for this coexistence with the other is convivence (*Konvivenz*), which he takes from the word *convivencia* used by Latin American liberation theologians. The word literally means "living-with," and sharing life with those who are culturally different from oneself is precisely what he deems to be the goal of mission. For this reason, if theology is fundamentally concerned with the mission of God, and if this mission is concerned with understanding and embracing the stranger, then theology is necessarily *practical* or *praxical* in nature.[48]

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[45] What follows draws upon Congdon, "Emancipatory Intercultural Hermeneutics."

[46] See Sundermeier, "Erwägungen," 87–101.

[47] There is a debate within the German academy over whether "missiology" or "mission studies" (*Missionswissenschaft*) ought to be replaced by the term "intercultural theology" (*Interkulturelle Theologie*). The proposal to make this change was formulated in 2005 by the Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Missionswissenschaft. See their document, "Mission Studies as Intercultural Theology." For the German original, see http://www.dgmw.org/Missionswissenschaft.pdf. As part of this change, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Missionswissenschaft changed the name of their scholarly journal from *Zeitschrift für Mission* to *Interkulturelle Theologie: Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*. Though Sundermeier uses the term "intercultural" in his writings, he disagrees with this attempt to remove talk of mission from the theological academy, as if mission were reducible to its imperialistic and colonialistic legacy.

[48] For those accustomed to associating mission with evangelism, the definition of mission as intercultural understanding will doubtless seem strange. The shared point of origin is the definition of mission as sending (Latin, *missio*), which implies a sending towards one who is strange and other. Mission is thus concerned with the relation