1

The Form of Theology

This chapter is devoted to outlining some of the essential features, the intellectual structures of Classical Reformed Theology (CRT). We shall not be chiefly concerned with the literary shape that a particular theologian chooses to give to his theology, though it might be worth saying a word or two about this to begin with.

Literary Shape

In his *Institutes*, John Calvin, one main fountain-head of Reformed theology, wrote what amounts to his systematic theology (though it has strong occasional elements in it), structuring it by the overarching claim that true wisdom consists in the knowledge of God and of ourselves. He announces this theme in the opening words of the book, and it controls the discussion of at least the first three books. It is only through Jesus Christ that we are brought to know God and ourselves. By contrast, others have preferred to follow the *loci* method. That is, they have constructed their work in the form of a series of discrete doctrinal topics, sometimes in a straightforwardly didactic way, sometimes in more polemical terms. And so Francis Turretin develops the *loci* method by *elencthus*, by questioning and answering. This method, both topical and catechetical, in which Christian theology is developed doctrine by doctrine, has come down to us as the dominant organizing principle. Instances of it can be found in Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology*, in William Shedd's nineteenth-century *Dogmatic Theology*, and in the early twentieth century in such as Herman Bavinck and in the journal articles of B. B. Warfield, whose work has had a number of popular imitators, such as Louis Berkhof. Yet others, such as the Puritan

John Owen, have "systematized" by considering Christian theology from a variety of complementary standpoints, such as the Holy Spirit, justification, and so on. Calvin's own approach has rather dropped out of fashion; the only example I know of is the Southern Presbyterian Robert Breckinridge's work *The Knowledge of God*,[1] though no doubt there are others. Others have structured Christian theology in terms of the concept of the covenant and developed "covenant theology." Herman Witsius in his *Economy of the Covenants* is a prime example.[2] We shall consider the relation between systematic theology and covenant theology shortly.

Each approach has strengths and weaknesses. Having one main theme or concept, such as Calvin's *Institutes,* provides a synoptic or unifying approach that binds together the various doctrinal discussions. In addition, Calvin writes in the first or second person, the knowledge of God and of *ourselves*, adopting a more immediately personal style. Calvin is also able, through this structure, to link together doctrines that are linked in reality. So he discusses justification and sanctification together, treating them as two distinct but inseparable gifts, through his brilliant idea of Christ's two-fold grace. But the price he pays for this approach (despite his praiseworthy concern for "order") is the toleration of a kind of disorderliness. For example, though he deals with the fall of mankind at the beginning of Book II, he has in fact already introduced some effects or results of the fall before that, in his treatment of the perversion of the natural knowledge of God. This knowledge with which we are endowed, he says in Book I, chapter 4, is stifled and corrupted as a result of the fall. So the structure of the work is not that of a set of topics or steps, but more like a symphony, in which an initial theme is introduced and elaborated, and developed further as the work progresses. The old idea of systematic theology as a "body of divinity" underlines this organic character. And so the theme of the knowledge of God and of ourselves, introduced in the very first lines of Book I of the work, returns at the beginning of Book II, and again elsewhere.

Others, such as Turretin and Hodge and Bavinck and Berkhof, favor a topical or loci method. This is a step-by-step approach, in which each topic is penetratingly discussed. In Turretin, each topic is framed in terms of the controversies of his day. The obvious advantages of this approach are thoroughness and clarity. But the separation of topics can sometimes create misleading impressions. Take again the relation of justification and

1. Breckinridge, *The Knowledge of God, Objectively Considered, Being the First Part of Theology, Considered as a Science of Positive Truth, Both Inductive and Deductive*. In fact, however, this work is also topical in structure.

2. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenant between God and Man Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*.

sanctification. In Turretin's and Hodge's treatments, these topics are deliberately separated, and this works against what needs to be said about the connectedness of the two. For while justification and sanctification are two distinct elements in God's saving purposes that are conceptually very different, they are nonetheless inseparably connected, as Calvin makes clear. Separating their treatment may suggest that they are only accidentally connected, even though efforts may be made to mitigate this impression.

Covenant Theology was developed within the Reformed community in the early years of the seventeenth century, by theologians such as Ursinus, Olevianus, Robert Rollock, John Preston, and John Ball. At least in Holland this development gave rise to a certain tension as it was seen to be less scholastic and exact than the dominant Reformed Orthodoxy, and not organized topically and controversially (i.e., in terms of the several doctrines of the Christian faith, and the analysis of doctrinal errors and their resolution). By contrast, the basic organizing principle of covenant theology is that of the unfolding economy of salvation, through a succession of developing covenants established between the Lord and his people. Such theology has a "redemptive historical" character. Though at first the scholastic and the covenant approaches were regarded as exclusive alternatives, hence the controversy, they were, in works such as that of Herman Witsius' *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, regarded as complementary. Creation, fall, and redemption, and particularly the historical unfolding of the one covenant of grace, is clearly set within the framework of systematic theology, employing its conceptuality. Witsius's work was organized in terms of four topics: the Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Grace, and the fourth on Covenant Ordinancies. Yet "he treats each topic analytically, and draws with evident happiness on the expository resources produced by systematicians during the previous 150 years."[3]

This is the theology of the history of redemption, or, as might be said currently, narrative theology within a systematic theological framework. In the body of this book I shall be arguing that a careful balance between theological narrative set within a systematic framework is exactly right. The mix of these two elements is obviously a matter of judgment; nevertheless each is indispensable, because central to the Christian faith are the actions and words of God, the eternally triune Lord and creator, in human history. One reason for writing this book is to show the perils and dangers of current attempts to "theologize" without that framework of systematic theology in place. So is it to be biblical theology at the expense of systematic theology,

3. Packer, "Introduction: On Covenant Theology," no pagination.

or the reverse? The unoriginal answer that I shall give and defend is "it is to be both," but with logical priority being given to systematic theological reasoning.

Intellectual Structure

So there will be gains and losses in any way of organizing a work of systematic theology. But this is not our chief concern, either in this chapter or in the book. Rather we are concerned in the first place not with the literary character but the *intellectual* structure of Christian systematic theology, with the appropriate manner in which Christian theological conclusions are to be drawn from both general and special revelation. Christian systematic theology builds on the work of exegetical theology, "biblical theology" in one sense of a phrase that has come to have other senses as well, as we shall see in due course. Exegetical theology informs the systematic theologian what a biblical passage means, or might plausibly mean, taking into account its scope and context, its situation in the canon, the genre of the work, and so on. The systematic theologian takes these results and links them to other biblical data concerned with the same or contrasting themes, employing them to contribute to the development or refining of the results, and then linking it with other themes.

It is important to note why this is done. It is not because the results of exegetical theology, the unfolding of the meaning of a biblical passage, are in any way imperfect or second-rate. It is to form an estimate of what a particular passage, in its particularity, contributes to the biblical revelation as a whole, and to the overall theme of that revelation under consideration, the doctrine of God, the work of Christ, the image of God in mankind, or whatever it may be. Parallel points arise about the relationship between systematic theology and historical theology. Doctrinal exactness has usually occurred when it has been possible to say what the doctrine implies, and also what it does *not* imply. It often takes the pressure of controversy to bring out the negative as well as the positive implications of a doctrine. That is why, once he has relied upon the exegetical theologian, the systematizer also has an eye to historical theology, for it is in discussion of some issue, even in historical controversy, that doctrines frequently receive their shape. For example, the controversies over Christology are in view in the Chalcedonian definition, and disputes over merit made possible the protest that justification is not by faith, but by faith *only*.

But what's the point of such systematic endeavors? There is a sense in which systematic theology provides its own justification. Our pragmatic

age, in which what we do can only be justified by its immediate payoff, is likely to be irritated by such an answer. Systematic theology is an end in itself, attempting to display in an orderly and connected way the "whole counsel of God" as revealed in Scripture. It shows, when every allowance has been made for the historically situated and occasional character of the books of Scripture, what is the overall teaching of Scripture about the nature of God and man, of the person and work of Christ, and so on. It is foolish to suppose that such a program disdains the original literature of the Bible. Systematic theology is not an endeavor to improve on that literature, but to do something else, to set forth the overall teaching of Scripture on who God is and what he has done and said. This enables the church to set out the character of the faith in terms that contrast it at the most general level with non-Christian and sub-Christian theologies, as well as to form a corrective to the way in which the prevailing culture may distort or enhance its teaching.

But while systemic theology may be pursued as an end in itself, this does not mean that it is merely academic. The goal of *scientia* legitimately leads to that of *sapientia*. And *doctrine* leads to *application*. B. B. Warfield expresses the relation between systematics and its biblical foundations in the following terms:

> Systematic Theology is not founded on the direct and primary results of the exegetical process; it is founded on the final and complete results of exegesis as exhibited in Biblical Theology. Not exegesis itself, then, but Biblical Theology, provides the material for Systematics. Biblical Theology is not, then, a rival of Systematics; it is not even a parallel product of the same body of facts, provided by exegesis; it is the basis and source of Systematics. Systematic Theology is not a concatenation of the scattered theological data furnished by the exegetic process; it is the combination of the already concatenated data given to it by Biblical Theology. It uses the individual data furnished by exegesis, in a word, not crudely, not independently for itself, but only after these data have been worked up into Biblical Theology and have received from it their final coloring and subtlest shades of meaning—in other words, only in their true sense, and after Exegetics has said its last word upon them.[4]

This procedure is first exegetical, providing a "biblical theology," as Warfield calls it. By this he means the practice of exegesis, conveying the

4. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," 66–67. Compare Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* I:617.

most exact sense of the original passages that it is possible currently to give. Since for Warfield these passages are God's word, the result is biblical theology. So his meaning is somewhat narrower in aim, and preparatory to biblical theology in its more recent meaning, which conveys in some sense the historical "story" or unfolding of God's acts. Then follows systematic theological construction, based upon inference from the biblical data.

So, intellectual structure, rather than mere organizational structure, is to be our chief concern. The elements of such a structure are drawn from general revelation, but especially from Scripture as the supreme theological authority for Christians, utilizing the fruits of exegetical theology. In this sequence the systematic theologian also takes into account the way in which these concepts have emerged from and have been shaped by and (because of their firm basis in Scripture) sharpened by the clashes of theological controversy.

System

What is systematic about systematic theology? Such theology is not a free-standing, merely speculative discipline, but depends both upon the fruits of exegetical theology, and of historical theology, in the ways just discussed. It seeks to exhibit two main features. One is establishing, or endeavoring to establish, a doctrine's faithfulness to Scripture, and the logical consistency of a doctrine, both internally and in its connection with other doctrines, and its place in the system of thought.

The second is to bring out the positive relationship between doctrines, the way in which they connect up with and enhance each other. This is a stronger requirement than mere logical consistency, important though such consistency is. These endeavors are warranted by the underlying conviction that Scripture is the one word of God. We may take each of these features in turn.

No doubt it is possible to offer a theological argument for the importance of logic, from the character of God whose word is necessarily veracious. But coming rather closer to home, logic is basic to all thought and speech. Take a simple example. If it's true that the apple is green, then it is false that the apple is red. If the apple is pear-shaped, then it is true that it is not round. And so on. What could be more basic to our thinking? So basic is it that in fact we largely take such matters for granted. It is obvious that when we assert something we are by implication not asserting some other thing (though perhaps not denying it either). When we ask someone to shut the door, they respond by shutting the door and not the window because

"The window is open" has a distinct meaning from "The door is open." A door is not a window, and so the requests to shut the door, and to shut the window, are distinct. In common with us all, the systematic theologian has this commitment to such basic logical implications of thought and speech, including of course God's thought as this is revealed to us in his speech. The incomprehensibility and mystery of God and his ways is no objection to this, provided such language is used univocally, for then it can be used consistently, even though the language may be metaphorical or analogical or hyperbolic.[5]

The Reformed systematicians, in common with many others, take the basic operations of logic for granted. For some reason there is currently a general suspicion of the place of logic in theology: it is said to be abstract, cold, and formal. Life is larger than logic. Maybe so. But logic is indispensable to life, especially to the life of theology.[6]

Something that is not quite as basic is the idea that thought and speech, both human and divine, have logical consequences. So it is that Christian systematic theologians think that not only the very words of Scripture have theological importance, but also that what can "by good and necessary consequence" be derived from them is also important. The meaning of Scripture is Scripture. So Herman Bavinck:

> If the knowledge of God has been revealed by himself in his Word, it cannot contain contradictory elements or be in conflict with what is known of God from nature and history. God's thoughts cannot be opposed to one another and thus necessarily from (sic) an organic unity.[7]

> But revelation is systematic disclosure of the words and deeds of God; it encompasses a world of thoughts and has its center in the incarnation of the Logos. And religion is not feeling and sensation alone but also belief, living for and serving of God with both heart and head. And that revelation of God can therefore be intellectually penetrated in order that it may all the better

5. The distinction between univocal and literal language needs to be borne on mind. To use language univocally is to use it consistently, whether its terms are understood literally or metaphorically. If every use of a metaphorical expression such as "our God is a consuming fire" is understood univocally, then the expression, so understood, can be used in arguments. Not otherwise. The same applies more obviously to terms used literally.

6. See the pertinent remarks of Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* I:18–34. (For ease of reference I shall refer to passages in Turretin's *Institutes* by volume and page of the English translation.)

7. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* I:44.

> enter into the human consciousness. In that connection one cannot even take ill of theology if it aims at clarity in thought, at making lucid distinctions and at precision in articulation. Such precision is pursued and valued in all the sciences; it is equally appropriate in theology.[8]

Obviously, for the theological tasks that Bavinck outlines, an understanding of the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences, and what they logically imply, is an indispensable tool.

Good and Necessary Consequences

We shall give a fuller treatment of logic and language in chapter 7. Note here, however, the phrase "*good* and necessary." Why not just "necessary"? Should not necessary consequences satisfy the logician? What are "good and necessary" consequences? They are consequences drawn from an informed induction of the relevant biblical data. So there is a balance to be struck at this point between induction and deduction. Here again the prior work of good exegesis shows its importance. Biblical doctrine should not be formed on the basis of one verse alone, nor on words and sentences taken out of context, but from a sound exegesis of all the relevant material. If God is spirit, then it is unwarranted to conclude from Psalm 18:6 that he has ears. Attention must be paid to the type of language in which thoughts are expressed in the particular passage of Scripture under discussion. So doctrinal formulations, which take us beyond the very words of Scripture, are validly made if they are based upon such good and necessary consequences. And that can only be decided by asking, for example, whether in the original text the language about God is literal or anthropomorphic in character. And genre. Is the Song of Solomon simply a love song, or something more? What does the parable of the sower teach us, how does it connect with other parables and with other teachings of Scripture? Such a procedure, that of establishing the "good" consequences of a text, implies a willingness to reconsider the exegetical foundations of a doctrine whenever there is a good, non-frivolous reason to do so.

So, for example, J. I. Packer has this to say about the use of the idea of imputation:

> Thus "Christ . . . is made unto us righteousness" (I Cor. I.30). This was the thought expressed in older protestant theology by the phrase "the imputation of Christ's righteousness." The

8. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* I:605.

> phrase is not in Paul, but its meaning is. The point that it makes is that believers are made righteous before God (Rom. V.19) through His admitting them to share Christ's status of acceptance. In other words, God treats them according to Christ's desert. There is nothing arbitrary or artificial in this, for God recognizes the existence of a real union of covenantal solidarity between them and Christ. For Paul, union with Christ is not fiction, but fact—the basic fact, indeed, of Christianity; and his doctrine of justification is simply his first step in analyzing its meaning.[9]

So, according to Packer here, the *thought* that Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer is present in Paul. The *word* is not present, but the idea of imputation is expressed by Paul, for example, in the words "made unto us righteousness."

Calvin makes a parallel point in the following remarks on justification by faith alone:

> The reader now perceives with what fairness the sophists of the present day cavil at our doctrine, when we say that a man is justified by faith alone (Rom. 4.2). They dare not deny that he is justified by faith, seeing Scripture so often declares it; but as the word alone is nowhere expressly used, they will not tolerate its being added. Is it so? What answer, then will they give to the words of Paul, when he contends that righteousness is not of faith unless it be gratuitous? How can it be gratuitous, and yet by works? . . . Does he not plainly enough attribute everything to faith alone when he disconnects it with works?[10]

So how does the systematic theologian work systematically, using the fruits of the exegete, to form or re-form biblical doctrine and to situate one particular doctrine in relation to others? Such careful induction precedes the deduction of doctrinal consequences from the relevant texts, and in turn may lead to more general inductions. The systematic theologian first apprises himself of the data as comprehensively and thoroughly as he can, and then he endeavors to draws conclusions from them. Of course, he does not do this in a vacuum, but in his own particular situation, informed by the church's conciliar and confessional tradition, and pressed by the need to articulate the faith in his contemporary culture. So the exegetical fruits may be used to finesse or to articulate the tradition further, or to correct it—as in times of reformation. The tradition may provide him with a set of answers

9. Packer "Justification," 685.

10. Calvin, *Institutes,* III.11.19.

and raise a further set of questions. To endeavor to answer these questions the theologian must use both inductive and deductive inference.

The requirement that only "good and necessary consequences" may be drawn is a rather demanding one. It shows that theological deductions may legitimately be made from Scripture, but that the inferences must be "good," that is, as we have seen, they must not be drawn hastily, but from a full induction and with regard to the "analogy of faith." In practice the theologian may have to rest content with Scripture providing very good inductive support (as he believes) for some particular doctrine, but support that falls short of its deducibility from Scripture. The wise theologian proportions his belief to the evidence.

The Word and Our Words

So the fact that certain conclusions can be deduced from the language of Scripture when properly interpreted does not mean that all our conclusions must be deductions. While we may not deduce some doctrine from Scripture, drawing it as a necessary consequence, we may nevertheless have good reason to think that Scripture teaches such and such, reasons that fall short of a clear entailment. So we can think of a range of possibilities; perhaps on some matters Scripture gives us *some reason* to think that it teaches such and such, or a good reason, or a very good reason. We might, then, think of the strength of Christian beliefs arrayed like a web with a center and a periphery, each element supporting and being supported by the others, with greater or lesser degrees of strength.

The fact that scriptural expressions can be the basis for drawing conclusions expressed in language other than the very words of Scripture naturally raises the question of the consistency of one doctrine with another. Systematic theology is systematic partly because it has consistency as one of its aims. This is one simple reason, though not the only reason, why the various positions or doctrinal statements of systematic theology must be consistent, logically consistent. For consistency is a necessary condition of the truth of sets of statements. "This apple is red" must be consistent with "This apple is round" (same apple, of course) if the statement "The apple is both read and round" has any chance of being true. "Jesus is human" must be consistent with "Jesus is divine" if the theologian is validly to state "Jesus is human and divine." Of course such consistency is necessary but not sufficient for the truth of the sets, for a set of propositions may be consistent but false. By contrast, inconsistency is a tell-tale sign of lurking falsehood.

It is necessary that "This apple is both red and round" is *consistent*, but to be *true* that statement must not only be consistent but it must also be in accord with the facts, with how it is. It won't be true if the apple being referred to in our sentence is in fact red and pear-shaped. As this simple example shows, consistency is not enough for truth; to be true a set of statements must not only be consistent but must also be (putting the point roughly to begin with; we shall return to it) adequate to how things are, it must faithfully represent the facts, or correspond to those things, or however we may wish to express that relationship.

So the requirement of consistency is necessary, but not sufficient. It is necessary because consistency is necessary for truth. For example, the fact that (say) what the Apostle Peter says about God is different from what the Apostle Paul says about God does not mean that what Peter says is inconsistent with what Paul says. If you say "The apple is red" and I say "The apple is round" (when we are each referring to the same apple) then what each of us says is consistent with what the other says. There is reason to wonder if sometimes "different from" is clumsily regarded as equivalent to "inconsistent with" and the fact that there are in Scripture several different ways of depicting the work or atonement, or of the believer's relation to Christ, say, is used to call into question the theological unity of the New Testament. If what Peter says is *inconsistent* with what Paul says, then that unity is seriously imperilled, for we don't expect one Apostle of Christ to teach something that is inconsistent with the teaching of another Apostle. What this would mean is that what the Apostles together teach could not be true. For example, it would be possible for Paul's teaching about union with Christ to be inconsistent with what Peter teaches about the church being a royal priesthood.

Why does consistency, this basic requirement, matter in theology? One can think of a general answer to that question. Consistency in thought and speech is a virtue. But the primary reason is a theological one. God himself is truthful, veracious, faithful. The truth of God is one. And if special revelation is God's word, or if the gospel of grace it announces is one gospel, then there must be one consistent word, or one consistent teaching, which reflects the mind of God. The alternative, that God's word is not consistent, would carry the intolerable implication that the various teachings of Scripture cannot be *true together*. One Christian doctrine, such as the doctrine of justification by faith alone, must be consistent with all other Christian doctrines. Why? Because each doctrine considered separately, and the doctrines then considered together, are parts of the one divine revelation.

Later on we shall reflect on the claim of some theologians that utterances, whether they are human or divine utterances, are always made

in a context and relate only to that context, that their meaning and their truth is established by the context in which they first occur. Here we simply note that such a basically relativistic view, were it true, would at one stroke undermine the entire project of Christian systematic theology. God's word is one word, uttered and augmented in distinct eras, and capable of being connected together in a way that may display its consistency, or at least ward off the claim that its inconsistency can be established. There are different contexts in which his word first arises, different genres of writing in which it is expressed, different historical and geographical and cultural situations, but these complement and qualify and interpret each other. As we saw earlier, it is the job of the exegete, the exegetical theologian, to determine in what ways the context and the genre and the syntax and the grammar of the language in which God's word is given bear upon its meaning. But it is an indispensable presupposition of Christian systematic theology that what the exegetical theologian then delivers is part of a consistent systematic theological "scheme."

As we have noted, this does not mean that there are not gaps, puzzles, lacunae, or mysteries. It does not mean that the theologian should force consistency upon the data in an unnatural way. The systematic theologian is not a know-all, knowing the mind of God as God himself does. Certainly not. Nor is the Bible an encyclopaedia. The systematic theologian must be prepared to say, in answer to some claim, that it is not known, or tentative, or pure speculation. (Incidentally, speculations have their place. For example, reflection on them may serve to reinforce our confidence in the meaning of what is non-speculatively revealed in Scripture). But as he ponders the overall biblical teaching on some particular matter, the theologian's underlying assumption is that the picture that he is attempting to draw of the revealed character and ways of God is one picture. And when it comes to the great and obvious mysteries of the faith, such as the Trinity and the incarnation, the theologian must assume the consistency of the teaching of Scripture even when he may not be able to demonstrate it. Perhaps the most that he can hope for in these areas is not to demonstrate that the threeness and oneness of God are consistent, but to show that the claim that they are inconsistent has not been proven.[11]

An interesting example of misunderstanding about the relation of logic to the mysteries of the faith is provided by Alister McGrath, who complains about those who claim that divine revelation is logically consistent. He reckons that such a claim is an example of too great a confidence in the capacity of reason to judge the truth of revelation, a case of the imprisoning

11. On this, see Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology.*

of revelation within the flawed limited of sinful human reason. McGrath illustrates the allegedly grave consequences of "talking loosely about the 'logical nature' of divine revelation" [12] by reference to the incarnation, "the definitive Christian teaching that Christ is both divine and human." "Even in the patristic period, such philosophers ['secular' philosophers] were quick to point out this alleged logical flaw in the doctrine. Those criticisms were intensified at the time of the Enlightenment."[13] Noting that the doctrine of the incarnation has regularly been criticized for being logically flawed, McGrath's response is not altogether clear, but he seems to argue that the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation cannot be claimed to be logical, or charged with being illogical because it is "above" or "beyond" logic.[14] What he fails to see, by his reference to being imprisoned by logic, is that there is a world of difference between a set of claims being proved to be self-contradictory, and that set being apparently self-contradictory, or not shown to be self-contradictory. And in addition, he fails to make the distinction made routinely by CRT between inductive and deductive reasoning, and reason in the sense of what seems to be reasonable to the philosopher, or to the man in the street. In the words of the Puritan theologian John Owen:

> So that though we will not admit of anything that is contrary to reason, yet the least intimation of a truth by divine revelation will make me embrace it, although it should be *contrary to the reason of all the Socinians in the world*. Reason in the abstract, or the just measure of the answering of one thing unto another, is of great moment; but reason—that is, what is pretended to be so, or appears to be so unto this or that man, especially in and about things of divine revelation—is of very small importance (or none at all) where it riseth up against the express testimonies of Scripture, and these multiplied, by their mutual confirmation and explanation.[15]

For Owen, all the Socinians in the world may regard the Trinity as contrary to reason, but this fact does not amount to a proof of its self-contradictoriness.

That the whole of Christian theology is consistent is not merely a working hypothesis that the Christian theologian may discard, a "model" that may be put it to one side. It is his non-negotiable presupposition. Nevertheless the work of the systematic theologian is never finished, as it is

12. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth.*
13. Ibid., 171.
14. Ibid.
15. Owen, *Works*, II:412. Emphasis in the original.

continually open to revision from refined interpretations of the biblical text on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the need for the re-statement and vindication of Christian theological claims in the light of questions raised about the faith, and challenges to it that may arise from the culture.

So the work of the theologian involves saying what a doctrine does not mean as well as what it does mean. The ability to do this may come as a result of self-conscious reflection on a doctrine and where it stands in relation to other doctrines and teachings within the Christian church. But as we noted earlier, in Christian theology this further aspect has usually arisen as a result of controversy over some doctrine. This discipline involves not only the use of language that is as clear as can be, but also saying what that language does not imply. By such endeavors the edges of a doctrine are sharpened; indeed, the understanding of the doctrine may itself be shaped through controversy. Such an approach is not a novel departure, for it is already to be found in the New Testament, particularly of course in Paul: justification is by faith, *not* of works; we are saved by grace, through faith, *not* of ourselves, it is the gift of God. There is to be a resurrection of the body, but the body in question will be a spiritual body, *not* a merely physical body. Shall we sin that grace may abound? *By no means*. In each of such cases Paul not only affirms, he denies. He tells us what God's revelation implies, and what it does not imply, and in this he sets the example that the Christian church, and especially the systematic theologian, follows, to distinguish one doctrine from another and by implication to connect up one doctrine with another.

Consistency is vital. Contradiction is fatal. However, we saw earlier, with one of our very simple examples, that consistency is also a very weak relationship. "My eyes are blue" is perfectly consistent with "The Moon is nearer to the Earth than to the Sun," but the two statements have precious little to do with each other.

Connectedness

What is connectedness? Sometimes consistency, which we have been discussing, is confused with a stronger requirement, and arising out of such confusion systematic theology may unfairly get a bad name. The stronger requirement is *logical entailment*. Logical entailment is another way of referring to deducibility. We have seen that CRT envisages the deduction of conclusions from Scripture. Let us suppose that there are many such deductions possible from various sets of statements in Scripture. It does not follow, however, that such deduced conclusions are in turn related to each other by entailment. From the fact that the rose is red, and that it has a scent,

we can deduce that the rose is both red and scented. And from the fact that the violet is blue and has a scent it is possible to deduce that the violet is blue and scented. But it obviously does not follow that the rose is red and scented *entails that* the violet is blue and scented, or *vice versa*.

The idea that systematic theology is a deductive system consisting of one or more axioms, from which the entire remainder of the theology is deducible, and is in fact deduced, is a serious misunderstanding. For systematic theology to be systematic, it does not follow that there must be one theological axiom (or even several such axioms) from which all other true theological statement follow logically. Systematic theology does not have the shape of Euclidian geometry.

It's worth pausing a moment to see why this requirement of entailment is far too strong, and that requiring it would distort the entire fabric of Christian theology. Basically, it has to do with God's freedom. Or, putting the point a bit differently, it has to do with the fact that often there are alternative means to the same end. The Christian faith is intrinsically historical: it concerns God's action within his creation. God's plan of salvation is a free act. He did not have to decree it, he was not externally constrained to do what he did. In other words, it is impossible to deduce from the nature of God alone that there will be salvation, or that it must take the pattern that it in fact took. God freely chose to provide salvation, and this is incompatible with such deducibility.

But was he similarly free to choose the means of salvation? Perhaps he was. No less a figure that John Calvin claimed that God could have saved us by a word, and others, such as Augustine and Aquinas and Samuel Rutherford, held the same or a similar view. But let us suppose that all these notables are in fact wrong. Suppose the atonement by the God-man Jesus Christ was the only means available to God (given his justice and the nature of sin, and perhaps other factors), as John Owen, another notable, seems to have believed, at least in later life.[16] Then the theological page begins to get a bit complex. For granted the freely chosen end of salvation, it may be (for Owenians at this point) that there are elements of necessity to the means. Yet even so we are still far from the view that everything that occurs had to occur simply because of *who God is*. But the deductive view of theological connectedness requires us to believe that in principle if we knew enough about the nature of God we could have deduced what in fact has happened down to the last atom and molecule. What is more, such a view would have

16. There is a good general discussion of Owen's change of mind in Trueman, *The Claims of Truth,* 104–7.

us believe that it is the job of the systematic theologian to map out these necessities as best he can.

So there are three or four ideas (at least!) in play here: the matter of consistency or inconsistency of a doctrine or doctrines, the matter of entailment or non-entailment. And then there is reflection upon what has happened, as in the example of the atonement and controversies about it. Did what in fact happen have to happen?

How does this help us over the nature of connectedness in systematic theology? It indicates that the relationship between doctrines is not a sheer accident, nor is it mere consistency, nor (at the other extreme) is it a case of geometric proof. What is there left? Reformed theologians have often spoken of the organic connectedness of doctrines, and of theology as constituting a "body of divinity." What do they mean?

Suppose that we compare a Christian doctrine, say the doctrine of the atonement, to an organ of the human body, the liver, say. It is possible to study the composition of the liver, its various properties. But to fully understand the liver it is necessary to know how it connects up with other vital human organs, such as the pancreas, and the kidneys, and the heart. This connectedness has an operational or functional character. (There are non-organic analogues: think of what is involved in understanding a carburetor, or a water pump, in a car.) So it is with the atonement. One can study the atonement intrinsically, its internal features, the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. But what makes that an atonement? An atonement for what? An atonement to whom? An atonement for whom? Why an atonement? To answer these questions we need to venture into other areas, or contexts, of Scripture, to the doctrine of God, to the nature of sin, and so on. The relation between atonement and these other doctrinal areas may be one of functional or operational interdependence. One doctrine makes other doctrines more intelligible, and necessary, albeit hypothetically or conditionally necessary, and we may come to appreciate this as we come to see the interdependence.

So systematic theology requires or works with different senses of connectedness, expressible in a form of sound words, not just consistency and logical or metaphysical necessity, but also functional interconnectedness. This is what B. B. Warfield identifies when he writes of the task of "discovering the inner relations of its [viz. theology's] several elements," setting it forth "as an organic whole, so that it may be grasped and held in its entirety, in the due relation of its parts to one another, and to the whole, and with a just distribution of emphasis among the several items of knowledge which combine to make up the totality of our knowledge of God." And later he

writes of a "concatenated system of truth."[17] Can we be more precise than this?

By and large Scripture tells us what in fact has happened, not what must have happened, and when it does introduce the idea of necessity it often does so in a rather special and qualified way. This is what is sometimes referred to as hypothetical necessity, that is, the necessity of what occurs as a result of some prior divine prophecy or decree. It was impossible for death to hold Jesus, or for his bones to be broken, not because it was logically or metaphysically impossible for Jesus to remain in death (though that bears thinking about) but because his resurrection was prophesied, and so had to happen; his bones were unbreakable not because they were special, freakish bones, but because there was a divine prophecy that not one of his bones would be broken. Such necessity, hypothetical, decreed necessity, naturally enough applies to possible interconnections between events and how they are to be understood, not to the connection of one doctrine with another.

These cases of hypothetical necessity imply cases of strict necessity. It was impossible that Jesus' bones should be broken because it was impossible that the divine decree could be broken. Why was that? Because it is impossible that God should lie, or should fail in other ways. It is impossible for God to lie; God cannot be tempted with evil. These statements are expressions of God's essential character, his nature. More on this a little later on.

Due to the presence of this teleological and functional interdependence, parts of systematic theology may be very tightly connected. Take the prime instance of such connectedness, the doctrine of God. The seventeenth-century Dutch theologian Wilhelmus à Brakel, discussing the various attributes of God, states

> We understand these attributes to be one from *God's* perspective, however, such that they can neither be divorced from the divine Being nor essentially and properly from each other as they exist in God, but are the simple, absolute Being of God Himself.[18]

What is à Brakel saying? That God is an essence that comprises all divine perfections. It follows that all the perfections—perfections of oneness and of threeness, say—are held necessarily by God. They are as aspect of what God *is*. God does not simply happen to be truthful, or just, or gracious. He is *necessarily* truthful, just, and gracious. Moreover he has these perfections in an infinite, eternal, and unchangeable manner. Further, if we suppose that God does not have an essence, but that he *is* an essence, then

17. Warfield, "The Task and Method of Systematic Theology," 92–93.

18. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service,* I:89

the separate perfections of truthfulness, justice, and grace are distinctions within that essence (though not, of course, "parts" of it). These three attributes or perfections (among many others) must themselves be strongly united. They are warranted by the nature of the glorious essence that is God, but they are not separate aspects or features of that essence, and are certainly not features some or all of which God might have lacked. He could not have lacked justice, because his essence is pure justice; in the same way he could not have lacked truthfulness. Given his perfection, being truthful entails being just, and vice versa, and so with all his perfections.

More Examples

A similar point holds with regard to human nature, for necessity and impossibility do not pertain only to divine properties. It is not only God who has an essence. Following patristic and medieval theology, CRT saw how the use of modality is necessary in understanding the biblical account of human beings. Unlike the case of God, human beings, in common with trees and fish, are kinds of things. Part of this idea has to do with the capacity of human beings, and trees and fish, to reproduce. Unlike God, who is necessarily unique, kinds such as human persons, grizzly bears, and oak trees also have essential properties, we might call them general essential properties, properties capable of being had by more than one instance. When a grizzly bear produces offspring, they have the nature of grizzly bears, oak trees produce acorns, human persons produce human babies, and so on.

According to CRT, such an account of human beings, one in terms of kinds, is necessary to enable us to give a satisfactory account of what the fall has done to the human race. What is fallenness? Here we have the reverse procedure at work from that just discussed in the case of God's faithfulness, or so it would seem. In the case of God, he necessarily acts in accordance with his nature, and intrinsic to his nature is faithfulness and veracity. But here an action, the disobedience of taking the forbidden fruit, leads to a radical change, according to Scripture, to the loss of innocence, to rebellion, rupture, and the like. How are we to understand this? What we must say is that in the fall aspects of human nature were disordered, or lost, but that human nature itself remained. From a metaphysical point of view what was lost was accidental, or adventitious, for the fall did not literally dehumanize, changing mankind into a different kind of animal. So there are essential features of being a human being—whatever they are—and also accidental features, those lost in the fall, and those restored through Christ.

Let us consider another example. In his discussion of justification and sanctification in his *Systematic Theology* Charles Hodge offers a typical instance of the systematic theologian at work.[19] After his treatment of faith he considers what justification and sanctification are, first offering a characterization of justification. Justification is an act, a divine declaration, and not a continual and progressive work; it is an act of grace but one that does not produce a subjective change in the person justified. Its ground or basis is not faith, but the righteousness of Christ. Such righteousness is imputed to the believer; it is imputed as the believer (through grace) receives and rests on Christ alone for his salvation. In terms of the organization of the material, Hodge draws these statements from the Reformed symbols and the work of distinguished Reformed theologians such as Francis Turretin and Jonathan Edwards and only later considers the scriptural basis for the various positions he takes.[20]

So Hodge distinguishes justification and sanctification, though he does not separate them.[21] The divine declaration that the sinner is pardoned and reckoned righteous *is* his pardoning and *is* the change in his status to that of being righteous. It is a forensic act, with the authority *instantaneously* to change a person's moral and spiritual status. By contrast, sanctification is a *process* of renewal, wrought by divine power in the soul of the believer. Hodge disambiguates the word "righteous" and its equivalent in Greek, as between denoting a subjective character on the one hand, and a relation to justice on the other. He notes how the Bible connects the demand of the law, of the day of judgment, of the justice of God and its distinction from his benevolence, of the immutability of his law,[22] of the connection of justification with union with Christ, and of the effects of justification.

This is only a sketch, of course, but it is nonetheless revealing. What is Hodge doing? Three things: he is *defining*, *distinguishing,* and *connecting up* the data that he draws from Scripture. He provides definitions of justification and sanctification, he indicates some of the important respects in which they are distinct, and then in the case of justification, his main topic at this point, he proceeds further to connect up justification with the doctrine of God, his justice, his grace, his law, and then with other New

19. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, III:17.

20. This procedure should lead us to question the idea of critics of Hodge that he is naively inductive in his theological method. Had they taken note as they read the work, it is likely that at points such as this they would offer the opposite criticism, not that Hodge was being "naively inductive" but that he imposes dogma on Scripture! We shall consider the role of induction in chapter 7.

21. Hodge, *Systematic Theology,* III:118f.

22. Ibid., III:125–27.

Testament depictions of the believer. In all this Hodge derives material not only from exegetical theology but also from historical theology (principally, in this case, the Reformation controversy with Rome), and reviews it in the light of relevant data of Scripture generally, but especially from Paul in Romans. Such connectedness, as we have seen, has an organic character. In an animal the heart is distinct from the lungs; they have different functions in maintaining life. But they are connected. No lungs, no life; no heart, no life. And both are related to other matters, such as the nervous system and the blood supply. So it is with justification and sanctification. There is a form of sound words. Systematic theology is a body of divinity.

One cannot have true connectedness unless the concepts and propositions of systematic theology being connected have a fairly clear meaning to begin with. That meaning was often secured by definitions of key terms. So it might be helpful to say a word or two here about the place of definitions in CRT.

Definitions

There are various kinds of definitions. For example, there are lexical definitions, defining one word in terms of another, and ostensive definitions, as when, pointing to the large beast with a trunk, someone says "That is what I mean by 'elephant,'" and there are stipulative definitions, as when a law says "A vehicle is . . ." Many legal definitions are of this kind. And there are persuasive definitions, as when a dictatorship defines itself as a "free democratic republic." It wants the connotations of freedom and democracy to rub off onto a state of affairs that is in fact neither free nor democratic.

Sometimes the very idea of formulating definitions is subject to a hilarious criticism, that to offer a definition of something is to make an attempt to "capture" that thing in words, and that this is an expression of fallen mankind's will to power, to domination. This proposal is hilarious because it confuses the idea and the thing. To "capture" something by a definition is not to capture the thing defined. The definition of what a pit bull terrier is does not (alas) lead to the capture of the animal itself. The elimination of all such terriers (devoutly to be wished, in my view) would not touch the definition. More worrying than this laughable misunderstanding is the anti-essentialist temper of the age expressed in the disdain of definitions by many contemporary theologians. This disdain is accompanied by a respectful attitude to context, to the idea of theology as a language game, and to meaning as use, and the like, and by a dislike of exactness of thought and

expression in theology as something that is sacrilegious, an attempt to box God in, to bring him down to our size, or to dominate him.

Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* is a standard textbook of CRT. "Berkhof," as people affectionately refer to it, comes in for more than its fair share of disparagement and misunderstanding nowadays. One of its features, though not one that is unique to the work, is that the author often offers definitions. Unlike Calvin in the *Institutes* he does not search for them, he finds them ready-made in the tradition of CRT inherited through Herman Bavinck and others. For instance, he offers a definition of divine omnipresence as "*that perfection of the Divine Being by which He transcends all spatial limitations, and yet is present in every point of space with His whole Being.*"[23]

Some seem to think that a definition of something says it all. A definition of divine omnipresence tells us all that there is to know about that aspect of the divine nature. But producing a definition is not like the manufacture of a chemical essence or extract, which takes everything that is of value from a plant or a rock and discards the rest. A definition of omnipresence does not turn Psalm 139, for example, into waste, like ash or pith. The systematic theologian, with a string of such definitions at his disposal, is not smarter than Scripture. So what is going on? In defining omnipresence has Berkhof mastered the concept? In defining it, has he bottled it up, boxed it in? Or has he himself become omnipresent, or does he now know what it is like to be omnipresent, or is he able to explain it? These suggestions seem weird, especially in theology.

No, a definition is none of these things. It's especially important to underline the last of these suggestions. Defining is *not* explaining. A theologian brandishing definitions is not like a scientist or a detective, filling in the gaps in our knowledge, solving problems, developing a technology. Berkhof's definition of omnipresence does not solve the problem or the mystery of God's omnipresence, of how it can be that God is wholly and indivisibly present to all of space. It may even be said to accentuate the problem. At such a point CRT prefers to say that at the very least the definition protects that problem, and the biblical data that express it, and it provides us a way of talking about God's presence by distinguishing it from other kinds of diffuse presence, like the presence of a gas or of a radio signal or of an elephant.

Why is a problem such as the mystery of divine omnipresence worth protecting? Because the problem that is protected is less of a challenge than any alternative, positive proposal. Could God's omnipresence be understood in spatial terms? Is there more of God in an elephant than in a flea?

23. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 60. Italics in the original.

No, obviously not. So his presence is non-spatial. Is his non-spatial presence local in character? Was part of God non-physically present partly in the church of Ephesus and partly in Corinth? No. The unity of God is such that he is indivisible. So God is wholly present here, and there, and at every point. Is this not very mysterious? To be sure it is. But the alternatives are also mysterious, and they have the added disadvantage of being manifestly at odds with God's infinity and perfection, which is also clearly taught in Scripture. We may be able to clarify the mystery further, but a Christian theologian is certainly not in the business of eliminating divine mysteries as a matter of principle.

At such points in their thinking the systematic theologians of the CRT are more like grammarians than like scientists or detectives. They attempt to show us (from Scripture, if they are being faithfully Christian) how to think, and how not to think, about God, and so how to talk about him. Or perhaps it is more faithful to the order of these things to say: taking our cue from Scripture we learn to talk in certain ways about God, and in learning to talk in these ways we learn to think reflectively in ways that our talk directs, and to avoid what it forbids (thinking of God as physically diffuse, or as merely local, say), and what it requires (thinking of all places as equally "open" to God), and what it allows (such as saying that God is "everywhere"). Definitions, drawn from Scripture and continually refined by the Scriptural data, tell us what to say and what not to say, in rather the way that grammarians codify a natural language, telling us what can and cannot make sense in that language, what is a mistake, which leads to the utterance of nonsense, and so on. Theological grammarians do not themselves control the things that we say: they attempt to indicate the rules of intelligible speech about revealed realities.

By drawing on scriptural data, a human definition of divine omnipresence (a fallible effort, of course) makes an attempt at saying what must be true if the assertions of Psalm 139 and other such assertions in Scripture are to be understood, or are not to be misunderstood. In a way that is surprising, we often take such definitions (or the intuitions that lie behind them) for granted. They undergird a lot of Scriptural exegesis and how we apply it. So, for example, the rhetorical force of "Where shall I go from your Spirit?" (with its implication, "absolutely nowhere") only indicates a truth about God's presence if it is true that God (who is spirit) is omnipresent in something like the Berkhofian fashion. Otherwise the question is no longer rhetorical. But Berkhof's definition is not an attempt to downgrade and replace the language of the Psalms or any other language, or to be cleverer than Scripture. His definition does not take us beyond Scripture, making Scripture second-rate. It is (at best) a skeleton, not the entire body. But it

supports serious theological thought, like the skeleton supports the flesh and sinews of the body, and of course it has significant religious implications, as we can see, for example, from Psalm 139.

Insofar as Berkhof's or anyone's definition is faithful to the biblical data, it will uphold the biblical teaching on divine omnipresence and will in turn warrant us in concluding that Psalm 139 is a celebration of such omnipresence and so not something else. We might otherwise be quite attracted to the idea that the language of the psalmist is hyperbolic, or that it records an ecstatic experience of the writer, and does not express (through the repetitions of Hebrew poetry) the sober truth of divine omnipresence and its consequences. So awareness of the definition, or of what the definition defines, which is intended to be drawn from scriptural teaching as a whole, serves to integrate that psalm into the other, variously expressed, biblical teachings on divine omnipresence. If we are not approaching the Scriptures with the help of the skeleton of systematic theology that Scripture supplies, then our "body of divinity" will be flabby and misshapen. This does not mean, as already noted, that the assertions of the systematic theologian are incorrigible. Scripture must continue to bear down on them, to force reconsideration, reflection, and reconstruction. A skeleton is not a carapace. But at any one time the activity of Bible interpretation, if it is to have a hope of being theologically faithful, must have scaffolding in place to build from, making connections between one part of the scaffolding and others parts. So, at least, CRT maintains.

In CRT, as in classical Christian theology more generally, the definitions are, or aim at being, what we may call "real definitions," definitions of realities. Of course, the definitions are also lexical, for they are definitions of words in terms of other words. But the revealed words are not only words, merely what human beings have chosen to say, of merely conventional power. By what he says the biblical writer seeks to epitomize a reality: "Sin is the transgression of the law," "God is spirit," "God is love," "God is light"; "love is the fulfilling of the law," "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." But sometimes divine realities are not defined in Scripture, nor is the language easily appropriated as a definition. So it is, for example, with "union with Christ." Union with Christ is a reality, but it is a many-sided, rich reality typically picked out by Paul's phrase "in Christ." Because of this complexity, it is not easily captured in a definition. Nevertheless, we may attempt a definition in order to distinguish the biblical idea of union with Christ from false ideas of union, union as identity with God himself, for example, or union as mere *camaraderie*, such as membership of a club or society, or as a physical connection, like that of a bimetallic strip.

Such definitions, whether given in Scripture itself, or attempted by the theologian, suppose that there are divinely revealed realities to be defined. Definitions are particularly important where in the course of church history words used in theological discussion come to have multiple meanings, some of which are significantly at odds with others, even meanings that contradict each other. In sorting out such confusion, not only essentialism, but also metaphysical realism, or at the very least the objectivity of the world, is being assumed.

So the forming of definitions are not bids for power, a kind of linguistic imperialism, an invasion of territory, through which one captures the mind of another. In theology, different definitions—for example, differing and incompatible definitions of "justification"—stand side by side. This is recognized as a basic fact of theological discourse. The perennial question for the Reformed systematic theologian is which of the available definitions best captures the relevant biblical reality. And as with doctrines, so with definitions; they must be revisable as the theologian revisits the biblical data.

More than once in discussing and delivering various definitions in his *Institutes*, Calvin hints at this metaphysical outlook. Definitions are not merely verbal, defining one term or terms by another. They are not terms of convenience, arbitrarily given. It would be hard to develop a case for nominalism from Calvin's procedure. Although on one occasion he writes approvingly of us being "lords" of words, this is a remark about Christians, not one about the relation between words and reality.[24] The terms he defines are not merely Christian usage, how the Christian community happens to employ various terms, but they are intended to represent divine realities revealed or depicted in Scripture. They are intended as "real definitions," the specification of necessary and sufficient conditions for something's being, say, a case of original sin, or of omnipresence.

In Calvin's *Institutes* the discussion of a topic invariably starts with or includes a definition of it. His typical practice is to take a term used in the Christian theological tradition, such as original sin, or free will, and to provide his own definition of that term, or occasionally endorse another definition, and to justify this definition in terms of Scriptural teaching. Sometimes he thinks that a biblical writer himself offers a definition, and of course he uses or at least endorses that. So his practice is not stipulative but descriptive, to provide descriptive definitions drawn from Scripture. He has no interest at all in laying down his own meaning of a term. Among his definitions are: the image of God in man (I.15.4), the soul and its faculties (I.15.6), original sin (II.1.8), free will (II.2.4), faith (III.2), repentance

24. Calvin, *Institutes,* IV.19.1

(III.3.5), justification (III.11.4), and conscience (III.9.15). In an era of warm controversy he employs them to avoid misunderstanding: in effect, he says to the reader, "when I refer to justification I am not using it in the Roman sense, or in Osiander's sense, or in some vague or indeterminate sense, nor am I proposing my own idea, but I am carefully formulating what I believe is the biblical sense, a form of words that I believe captures the biblical view." For Calvin and the other Reformers, the Reformation was about the recovery of biblical realities, and one main way in which this recovering is achieved is in first carefully defining those realities and then incorporating them into their theology and the teaching and preaching ministry of the church.

So the definitions are meant to assist clear thinking, to set the agenda for teaching and discussion. Definitions are not imperialistic attempts to annex territory, but by exact and full investigation and thinking, to depict what God has revealed. We can depict the essence of regeneration but, in Herman Bavinck's words, we do not by the fact of possession of such a definition take away the mystery of God breathing new spiritual life into a dead soul.[25] To depict a reality accurately by means of a definition is not to explain it, much less is it to explain it away. So it is necessary to distinguish what is essential to, say, regeneration, and what is not essential and so a contingent or accidental feature.

The systematic theologian has to say what he means. And part of this task consists in the use of definitions. What is justification? Answer: *it is being reckoned righteous in the sight of God on account of the work of Christ.* No doubt that particular definition may be improved upon. But the definitions of the systematic theologian are not just made up. They are not just arbitrary stipulations on their part, acts of creativity, in effect saying, this is my idea of justification, or this is my "model" of the atonement. Theology is not about theologians. Nor are definitions merely statements about how words are in fact used, the meaning that as a matter of fact people attach to them. Some people define justification so as to include sanctification; the two are merged. This is a bad definition, Hodge says, bad because it confuses together what Scripture keeps separate, even though what is separate is none the less intimately connected.[26] By developing such definitions the systematic theologian does not intend to say anything new, but to report what is divine revealed reality.

25. For an interesting approach to a definition of regeneration, see Bavinck, "Regeneration: An Attempt at Definition," *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV:75f.

26. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, III:17.

So the systematizing of systematic theology involves logical consistency, and connectedness of various kinds, and careful thought that involves definitions. But utilizing such resources does not ensure comprehensiveness in our understanding of God and his ways. Later on we shall meet theologians who think that the approach of CRT being sketched here claims that the result of such theology is a *comprehensive* understanding of revealed truth, and so aids and abets a kind of overturning of the creator-creature relationship. But this is far from being the case, partly because CRT respects the boundaries of the revelation. Not everything that could be known is revealed to us; obviously not. And just as obviously, much of what is revealed is mysterious, that we cannot fully grasp or comprehend: the Trinitarian being of God, the incarnation, creation, providence and human accountability, are among the central themes of Scripture about which theologians in the CRT tradition echo Paul's words in his doxology at the end of Romans 11.

Abstracting and Generalizing: Loss and Gain

So a good part of the work of the systematic theologian is endeavoring to draw out true and accurate statements of a general character from the particular statements of Scripture. For that is what Scripture largely is, sets of particular statements about particular events; these statements involve statements of fact (as in narratives), interpretations of these facts, arguments, objections, questions, commands, exclamations, promises, vows, and so on. However, to generalize from these particularities—to formulate Christian doctrine, the Christian view of the nature and the importance of the revealed events—is not to abstract from them some lowest common denominator, to draw out a series of vague generalizations. The bowl of fruit in front of me is just that, a bowl of fruit. It is certainly a matter of some significance to indicate what it is that makes an object a fruit and not a bowl, to say what the various fruit in the bowl have in common. I shall return to this point later on. But it is a matter of equal significance to identify and describe the variety of fruit, oranges and lemons, apples and pears, that the bowl contains.

It would be a poor systematic theology that contented itself with formulating a doctrine of God from what all statements about God in Scripture have in common. So when the systematic theologian generalizes from the Scriptural data about God, say, this does not mean reducing or leveling down. It means taking due note of the particularities of individual texts and ensuring that they make their contribution to the formulation of

the doctrine. So that, to continue with the doctrine of God for a moment, due account has to taken of the oneness of God and also due account of his threeness. The data that are evidence for the oneness of God cannot be allowed to swamp or nullify the data that are evidence for the threeness of God, any more than the textual evidence for the justice of God can be allowed to swamp the evidence for his love. The system must be elastic-sided enough to make proper provision for the different facets of revelation, and this requires the theologian continually to revisit the particular texts of Scripture to correct and refresh his general doctrinal statements.

So the work of the Christian systematic theologian is not first to think up a system and then to impose it on the data like a grid. That would be to adopt an unfortunate, *a priori* attitude to Scripture, to take for granted what God must be saying to us, without actually looking to see. Nevertheless from a logical point of view it does not matter whether the theologian starts with the text, and draws general conclusions, doctrine, from it, or starts with a general idea or concept and tests and refines that by the biblical data, provided that some general idea is not imposed on the particularities of the text, making them say what they do not in fact say.

Perhaps each method, the top down and the bottom up, has its place. Take the following illustration. An archaeologist may come across a pile of broken pottery. In an endeavor to reconstruct the original object or objects suppose he prepares a frame of flexible wire around which he tries to place the pieces, taking note of their shape, their pattern, their fit, and so on. As he continues with his task he must be prepared to modify the frame in the light of the impact of the data, in this case the shards of pottery. Various hypotheses are tested—that it's round, that it's oval; that it's one vessel, that its two; that some pieces are missing, that all the pieces are present. Ideally, all but one of these hypotheses will be rejected in the course of the reassembly, though as a matter of fact the data may be incomplete, and the hypotheses correspondingly tentative. The wire, shaped according to an original, tentatively held hypothesis, may have to be altered in the light of the impact of the data. But as the task develops, so the present shape of the wire may give a good clue as to where the remaining pieces that are lying around, or the missing pieces, may fit or would have fitted.

So it is with the Christian systematic theologian. Systematic theology conveys the overall "shape" of the biblical revelation. But the revelation is not shaped by what the theologian brings to it, forced into a mold of the thinker's own making, or of something that he takes from the surrounding culture, or even from the history of the church. This is one reason why Warfield insists that systematic theology has a much closer relation with

exegetical theology than it does with historical theology.[27] Obviously an individual theologian's particular interests, and also his personal idiosyncrasies, may show through. But whatever he brings to the data must be sufficiently flexible to bear its weight and variety. Unlike the archaeologist, who may finally succeed in reconstructing the bowl or vase, the systematic theologian never completes his task.

27. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," 65.