

Theology in the Second Person: Christian Dogmatics as a Mode of Prayer

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Working Draft

“[T]heological work does not merely begin with prayer and is not merely accompanied by it; in its totality it is peculiar and characteristic of theology that it can be performed only in the act of prayer.”

— Karl Barth

My aim in this talk is to explore the irreducibly second-personal dimension of theological inquiry. In the first (and longest) section I aim to sketch a component of a larger ontology of Holy Scripture, one that I argue is indicative of a second-person dimension to Holy Scripture, namely Scripture as divine speech or address. And if Holy Scripture as the principal ground of dogmatics is irreducibly second-personal at some level, then arguably the dogmatic task ought to be carried out in the manner of interpersonal relatedness to God, what I call “prayerful dogmatics”. In §2 I highlight some historical reflections from the work of Karl Barth on the inseparability of dogmatics and prayer. And I conclude in §3 by exploring how the notion of prayerful dogmatics can serve as a guardrail that keeps the theological life properly *theological* and thereby *formational* (2 Cor. 3:18).

1 An Ontology of Holy Scripture as Divine Speech

As I understand it here, the task of sketching an ontology of Holy Scripture involves outlining a biblically, philosophically, and historically informed account of both the *form* and *function* of Holy Scripture; what, fundamentally, *is* Scripture and what might its overall *teloi* or ends be in God’s redemptive economy. While I have neither the time nor the expertise to develop a full-fledged ontology of Holy Scripture in this sense, in this first section I want to focus in on a single, albeit fundamental, aspect of such an account that points

to the second-personal (interpersonal) nature of Holy Scripture. I then turn to examine the potential implications of such an ontology of Holy Scripture for the task of dogmatic theology.

To affirm with the 1689 London Baptist Confession that Holy Scripture is “the Word of God written”¹ is to affirm, in part, that it is a locus of God’s communication and self-disclosure to humanity. Being uniquely “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16-17, *theopneustos*) and thus ultimately the product of God’s communicative agency, Scripture ought to be accepted “not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God” (1 Thess. 2:13). Indeed, Scripture often closely associates, even identifies, the written words produced by human communicative acts with divine speech itself (Gal. 3:8; Rom. 9:17; Acts 4:24-25; Mt. 19-4-5).² While the written text of Scripture is indeed the immediate product of subordinate human authorship, Scripture has the triune God as its principal author; one can rightly say, in some sense, that what canonical Holy Scripture asserts, God asserts. Along these lines, English Puritan divine John Owen (1616-1683) remarked “[Scripture] is from God—entirely from him. As to the doctrine contained in it, and the words therein that doctrine is delivered, it is wholly his; what *that* speaks, *he* speaks himself. He speaks in it and by it; and so it is vested with all the moral authority of God over his creatures” (306).

In the Christian tradition, Holy Scripture is a unique medium of divine speech, utterance, or address to humanity. In reference to God’s “glorious self-revelation” in Holy Scripture, Hillary of Poitiers (AD 300-368) claimed that the Word of God is nothing less than God’s own utterance and self-witness:

Since then we are to discourse of the things of God, let us assume that God has full knowledge of Himself, and bow with humble reverence to His words. For He Whom we can only know through His own utterances is the fitting witness concerning Himself. *On the Trinity*, I.18

Moreover, John Chrysostom (349-407), in his *Homily on Psalm 95*, emphasized the notion that Scripture is divine utterance when he said, “But when the testimony of the voice of God is uttered from the scripture, it confirms at once the discourse of him who speaks, and the mind of him who hears.” Saint Augustine (354-430), likewise, pointed to the primacy of

¹1689 London Baptist Confession, chapter 1, article 2.

²See Warfield’s *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* for fuller treatment of this identification thesis. In the paper I ignore what Scripture itself says about its various ordained ends in God’s redemptive economy. A larger account of the ontology of Scripture would include the function of the word of God as being a vital source of human sustenance (Deut. 8:3, 32:47; Mt. 4:4); a source of salvific wisdom (2 Tim. 3:15) and sanctifying light to help illumine and change the very structure of the human soul (Ps. 19:7-11; Heb. 4:12); the means by which the universe was created (Heb. 11:3) and is currently sustained by God (Heb. 1:3); and the means by which believers engage the kingdom of darkness (Eph. 6:17).

Christ the Word, the second person of the Trinity, in God's communicative discourse in Holy Scripture:

There is but a single discourse of God amplified through all the scriptures, dearly beloved. Through the mouths of many holy persons a single Word makes itself heard. That Word, being God-with-God in the beginning, has no syllables, because he is not confined by time. Yet we should not find it surprising that to meet our weakness he descended to the discrete sounds we use, for he also descended to take to himself the weakness of our human body.
Expositions of the Psalms 103.4.1

Along the very same lines, the sixteenth century Reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) noted that one "must deal with Scripture in such a way that you think just as God Himself has spoken"; Luther likens the divine speech in Holy Scripture to human-to-human discourse, "God does not deal with us in accordance with his majesty but assumes human form and speaks with us throughout all Scripture as man speaks with man."³ John Calvin echoes something similar in his commentary on 1 Peter 1:25, where he emphasized the nature of Holy Scripture as divine speech by saying "We have to do with the Word which came forth from God's mouth and was given to us...God's will is to speak to us by the mouths of the apostles and prophets...Their mouths are to us as the mouth of the only true God." And in his *Institutes*, Calvin affirms that "...Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men" (*Institutes*.7.5).⁴

Scripture is "Holy" in that in it the *viva vox Dei*, the living voice of God, is heard. In fact, the notion of Holy Scripture as the medium of the *viva vox Dei* was foundational to the early Protestant polemic against the Roman Catholic contention that ecclesial authority was fundamental in authenticating the divine origin of Holy Scripture. The Cambridge theologian and English divine William Whitaker (1548-1595) in his *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, what is arguably the most sophisticated early Protestant polemic against Rome concerning Holy Scripture, remarks: "so we receive indeed the scriptures sent to us from God through the church, and yet do not believe it to be sent from God solely on the church's authority, *but on account of the voice of God, which we recognize speaking clearly and expressly in the scriptures.*" (298)⁵ Consequently, Holy Scripture is nothing less than divine

³Lectures on Genesis, chs. 21-25; Luther Works, 4:61.

⁴In his *Decades* 1:56-57, Heinrich Bullinger stated "Let us therefore in all things believe the word of God delivered to us by the scriptures. Let us think that the Lord himself, which is the very living and eternal God, doth speak to us by the scriptures."

⁵The Protestant notion that Holy Scripture is self-authenticating in virtue of its being the medium of

testimony, precisely because God himself speaks through the humanly-authored texts that make up the canon.⁶

But how exactly are we to understand the traditional notion that Holy Scripture is the medium of divine speech or address? How, exactly, does God personally address humanity by way of humanly-authored texts? In my estimation, we can do no better than to turn to the work of Nicholas Wolterstorff in his book *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*. Wolterstorff finds in contemporary philosophy of language, in particular speech-act theory as proposed by J.L. Austin and John Searle, the resources by which to unpack the traditional claim that Holy Scripture is the medium of the *viva vox Dei*.

The fundamental insight of Austinian speech-act theory is that speech in general is a performative action; one *does something* by speaking. In uttering or inscribing a linguistic token (e.g. a word or sentence), one thereby performs a *locutionary act*. In saying to my wife “Till death do us part” at our wedding ceremony, for example, I thereby perform the locutionary act of uttering the relevant English sentence. Or, by James’ inscribing “Arcadi was here” on the stall in the men’s restroom, he thereby performs a locutionary act (an uncharacteristic one at that).

It is by way of locutionary acts that one performs what Austin calls *illocutionary acts*, performative acts like promising, asking, asserting, declaring, warning, commanding, consoling, consecrating, and exhorting. By way of uttering the sentence “Till death do us part” during my wedding ceremony, I promise life-long loving commitment to my wife. Or, when James inscribes “Arcadi was here” on the bathroom stall, he thereby declares or announces to all passersby that he was at one time present in that place. By my performing an illocutionary act (promising) by way of a locutionary act (“Till death do us part”), I bring about the event of successfully informing my wife and those in attendance of my intentions of life-long marital commitment, what Austin refers to as the *perlocutionary act*.

The notion of “speaking” or “discoursing”, at its core, consists of one’s performing an illocutionary act or a series of such acts. Among the many categories of illocutionary acts include *assertives* (e.g. alleging, claiming, testifying), *directives* (e.g. asking, requesting, commanding.), *commissives* (e.g. promising, inviting, offering), *expressives* (e.g. thanking, expressing contempt, expressing relief), and *exercitives* (e.g. adjourning, pardoning,

the *viva vox Dei* (rather than deriving its authority from the church), is succinctly summarized by Henry Bullinger in the Second Helvetic Confession: “We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures.” (Chapter 1); See also Calvin’s *Institutes* I.vii.5

⁶For more on the theme of Scripture as divine testimony, see Mats Wahlberg, *Revelation as Testimony: A Philosophical-Theological Study*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.

nominating).⁷ There are, moreover, diverse and complex ways one might speak or address another by way of performing illocutionary acts. “Double agency discourse”, according to Wolterstorff, is the notion of an agent’s performing some illocutionary act by way of another agent’s locutionary or illocutionary act. Take first the case of an agent’s performing an illocutionary act by way of another agent’s locutionary act. By the president of the company’s signing a letter produced by the locutionary act of her secretary, a letter that says “Find a way to cut department-spending or you’re fired!”, she issues a warning to its addressee and thus performs an illocutionary act by way of the locutionary act of her secretary; in so doing the secretary’s locutionary act becomes the president’s medium of discourse or speech.

Wolterstorff offers two different ways of thinking about how one might perform illocutionary acts by way of another agent’s illocutionary acts. On the one hand, a person can say something by way of deputizing or delegating another to speak on one’s behalf, what Wolterstorff calls “delegated discourse”. If a US ambassador to Ireland has been commissioned to speak to on behalf of the president of the United States with respect to US-Irish foreign affairs, then the illocutionary acts performed by the ambassador on such matters—commands, verbal agreements, promises, etc.—count as the illocutionary acts of the president.

Alternatively, one can speak by way of appropriating another agent’s illocutionary acts as one’s own, what Wolterstorff refers to as “appropriated discourse”. Earmarks of appropriated discourse include one’s asserting: “I agree with what she said” or “He speaks for me” or “in the words of...” I might, for instance, enthusiastically declare my love for my wife by appropriating Dante’s discourse concerning his love for Beatrice in his *La Vita Nuova* (or I may do so with less bravado by giving my wife a pre-made greeting card for our wedding anniversary).

With respect to an ontology of Holy Scripture as fundamentally divine speech, Wolterstorff suggests that prophetic and apostolic discourse in particular is best characterized as delegated divine speech: the OT prophets and apostles were divinely commissioned or deputized to speak directly on God’s behalf to a particular audience. In this way, God speaks by way of the prophet Isaiah to king Hezekiah, or by way of the Apostle Paul to the churches in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:13) and Corinth (1 Cor. 14:37-38).

But with respect to the entirety of the Scriptural canon as a *single*, literary unit, Wolterstorff argues “All that is necessary for the whole [Bible] to be God’s book is that the human discourse it contains have been appropriated by God, as one single book, for God’s discourse...The event which counts as God’s appropriating this totality as the medium of God’s own discourse is presumably that rather drawn out event consisting of the Church’s

⁷See Alston (2000) and Searle (2010).

settling on this totality as its canon” (54). Thus to say that God is the principal author of canonical Holy Scripture is to say that God appropriates the various locutionary and illocutionary acts of the subordinate human authors as his own. The canon of Holy Scripture in its entirety, then, is the medium of the *viva vox Dei*; when one reads the humanly-authored texts that compose canonical Holy Scripture, one is confronted with nothing less than divine address, God’s intended medium by which he testifies, promises, commands, comforts, exhorts, restores, warns, and personally discloses himself to humanity.

Let me make two observations as to how the above ontology of Scripture is indicative of an irreducibly second-personal dimension to the written word of God. First, the act of discoursing itself, i.e. the performance of illocutionary acts whether human or divine, takes place within the second-person perspective in so far as it requires persons to relate to one another as *addresser* and *addressee*. Whether explicitly or implicitly, performative speech-acts are forms of interpersonal engagement and utilize second-person grammatical devices as markers of address: “I request that *you* be fair”, “I testify to all of *you* that what I say is true”, “I beg *you* to let me go with you”; “I command *you* to stop at once”. As such, an act of discourse is constituted by at least two individuals relating to one another as addresser and addressee; the nature of discourse itself, understood along the lines of speech-act theory, is *irreducibly second-personal*.

Bracketing off very important hermeneutical considerations (ones that would need to be worked out going forward), we can truly say that in Holy Scripture, God is the addresser, and his creatures are the addressee.⁸ Not only did God address both king Hezekiah in Judah’s pre-exilic period, and the first-century churches in Thessalonica and Corinth by way of delegated speech, God continues to address and speak to his creatures by way of his appropriated discourse in canonical Holy Scripture.⁹ Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), the Dutch reformed theologian, nicely captures this notion of Holy Scripture as the medium of God’s *ongoing* discourse and self-presentation to humanity:

Scripture was written by the Holy Spirit that it might serve him in guiding the church, in the perfecting of the saints, in the building up the body of Christ. In it God daily comes to his people. In it he speaks to his people, not from afar but from nearby. In it he reveals himself, from day to day, to believers in the

⁸Wolterstorff offers a two-fold hermeneutical schema to determine what God says within a particular text of Scripture. One first aims to determine the illocutionary act produced by the human author in producing the text, and then determine whether there is good reason to think God, the divine author, was saying something different from the human illocutionary act(s). This second stage involves treating the entirety of Holy Scripture as a divinely authored, unitary literary whole. Here Wolterstorff employs what he calls the “fundamental principle” which says, “the interpreter takes the stance and content of my appropriating discourse to be that of your appropriated discourse, unless there is good reason to do otherwise.”

⁹Wolterstorff (1995:54-57) unpacks this idea in terms of “presentational speech”.

fullness of his grace and truth. Through it he works his miracles of compassion and faithfulness. Scripture is the ongoing rapport between heavens and earth, between Christ and his church, between God and his children. It does not just tie us to the past; it binds us to the living Lord in the heavens. It is the living voice of God, the letter of the omnipotent God to his creature...Divine inspiration, accordingly, is a permanent attribute of Holy Scripture. It was not only “God-breathed” at the time it was written; it *is* “God breathing.”¹⁰

But the interpersonal dimension to speech or discourse cuts much deeper than the mere presence of an addresser and an addressee in acts of discourse. Proponents of what is known as a “normative theory of speech” such as Wolterstorff and more recently Terrence Cuneo in his 2014 book *Speech and Morality: On the Metaethical Implications of Speaking* (OUP), have argued that speech in general is a deeply *normative enterprise*; by performing a speech-act—promising, testifying, or asserting—one thereby acquires a normative standing within the moral economy.¹¹ My promising to remain faithful to my wife by uttering the sentence “Till death do us part” in the appropriate context is, as Wolterstorff puts it, normatively ascribed to me in that I have altered the moral relationship between my wife and me (and also between God and those in attendance); in performing a particular locutionary act I thereby generate a new normative standing in the moral economy: I am now morally obligated to be faithful to my wife (God, others) and ought to be treated by her (and others) as having made such a promise.

In his influential book *The Second-Person Standpoint*, Yale philosopher Stephen Darwall has emphasized the point that relations of obligation and accountability fundamentally obtain within the standpoint of the second-person perspective, i.e. a network of moral agents bound together by second-person relations generated primarily by speech-acts. As Darwall puts it, “whether explicit and voiced—“You talkin’ to me?”—or only implicit and felt, as in a resentful sulk, the I-you-me structure of reciprocal address runs throughout thought and speech from the second-person point of view” (Darwall 2006: 3). According to the normative theory of speech defended by Wolterstorff and Cuneo, the generation of interpersonal relatedness in acts of discourse (e.g. obligation, rights, responsibilities, accountability) is what marks the difference between merely *uttering* sentences (locutionary acts) and *speaking or discoursing* (illocutionary acts); in other words, second-person normative relations do the lion’s share in linking illocutionary acts to locutionary acts (Cuneo 2014: 105).

To see this, suppose Jordan addresses an academic audience and performs the illocutionary act of asserting, *Analytic theology is all the rage these days in contemporary*

¹⁰I owe this citation to Green and Quan (2012).

¹¹See also Wolterstorff’s *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology*, chs. 4-5.

theology, call this assertion “AT”. Note that Jordan’s merely uttering the English sentence “Analytic theology is all the rage these days in contemporary theology” doesn’t in and of itself *count as* (or as Cuneo puts it “count-generate”) his asserting AT (he could be doing a microphone-check prior to his talk or reading out-loud to himself, for instance). Rather, on the normative theory of speech, Jordan *asserts* AT only if certain second-person normative relations can be appropriately ascribed to Jordan and the audience (which likely extends beyond the immediate audience to include an implied audience, perhaps the academic guild in general). Jordan now takes on the responsibility for the fact that he has made a strong claim about the degree to which contemporary theologians are receptive to the project of Analytic Theology; he is now liable to those whom he has addressed and thus subject to blame and correction if his assertion does not reflect the current state-of-play in contemporary theology. Moreover, the audience now acquires a second-person right and obligation to hold Jordan accountable if his assertion is, in fact, false. As Cuneo puts it: “[S]econd person accountability, if the normative theory of speech is correct, lies at the very heart of speech; it is, in part, what accounts for the hook-up between locutionary and illocutionary acts” (105)(e.g. between uttering the sentence “Analytic theology is all the rage these days in contemporary theology” and asserting AT).

What might a normative theory of speech look like with respect to Holy Scripture as divinely appropriated human discourse? The divine appropriation of human discourse *counts as* God’s asserting, requesting, commanding, promising, testifying to, etc. *only because* God has freely and graciously chosen to alter God’s normative standing with respect to those to whom He speaks. In appropriating human discourse as his own speech, God freely brings into existence new normative relations between himself and his creatures; interpersonal relations that would not have obtained had God remained silent.

Consider 1 John 3:1-2 where the apostle John states, “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are...Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is” (3:1-2). In this single text, John performs a variety of illocutionary acts such as *directing* his audience to the love of God (directive: “See how great a love...”), *testifying* to the glorious reality of regeneration for those in Christ (assertive: “and such we are...now we are children of God”), and *promising* that those who are in Christ will be transformed to be like Christ at the consummation of all things (commissive: “we will be like Him...”). In his overseeing that the apostle John’s discourse be included within the canon of Holy Scripture, God thereby appropriates John’s illocutionary acts as his own speech and, in this case, arguably performs the very same illocutionary acts of directing, testifying, and promising as the apostle John, the human author.¹² In doing so, God is now responsible for *having testified to and made*

¹²Wolterstorff (1995: 208-216) provides a nice discussion of five different ways in which the illocutionary

promises about certain present and future soteriological realities and is therefore internally obligated by his own perfect and loving character to be faithful and true to his creatures. In virtue of addressing his creatures by way of performative speech acts, which is itself an act of divine grace and accommodation,¹³ God acquires the normative status of being an appropriate subject of reactive attitudes with respect to those whom He addresses (e.g. gratitude, approbation, adoration, and blame, resentment, reproach).¹⁴

2 Christian Dogmatics and the Second-Person Perspective

Traditionally, at least within the Protestant tradition, Holy Scripture has served as the fundamental source or foundation for theological inquiry and practice. Along these lines, Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) remarked that “The rule of Theological Verity is not two-fold, one *Primary* and the other *Secondary*; but it is one and simple, the Sacred Scriptures.”¹⁵ Protestant scholastic theologians in general identified two fundamental *principia* or foundations for dogmatic theology: God and Holy Scripture.¹⁶ Both the content and the very possibility of theological knowledge has as its foundation the gracious self-disclosure of the triune God (*principium essendi*); without the existence of a self-communicating being there would be no grounds for theological inquiry.¹⁷ And it is the written divine Word of that self-communicating being that serves as the (external) way by which we acquire theological knowledge (*principium cognoscendi externum*). Theological inquiry would be impossible without these two *principia* firmly in place.

Here I follow Herman Bavinck (2003:38) in defining Christian dogmatics as “the knowledge that God has revealed in his Word to the church concerning himself and all creatures as they stand in relation to him.” If one adopts the above ontology of Holy Scripture, then one might minimally construe the task of Christian dogmatics as “second-order reflection on first-order divine speech.”¹⁸ But if dogmatics takes divine speech as its *principium ex-*

act of the divine author of Holy Scripture may differ from the subordinate human authors.

¹³Calvin (*Institutes* 1.13.1) notes, “For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.”

¹⁴See Darwall (2006: ch. 4) for a more detailed account of how reactive attitudes involve a form of second-personal address.

¹⁵“On the Scripture and Human Traditions” in *Certain Articles Diligently Examined and Weighed* p. 706 in *Works*.

¹⁶Here I leave aside the internal work of the Holy Spirit as the *principium cognoscendi internum*, or the inner cognitive principle or ground of theological knowledge.

¹⁷Webster: “As with the church, so with theology; its ontological ground, its *ratio essendi*, is the divine work of self-manifestation” (HS, 123).

¹⁸See Michael Allen, “The Knowledge of God” in *Christian Dogmatics* (2016: 23).

ternum, what implications are there for *the manner* or *mode* in which we carry out the dogmatic task itself?

One implication for the manner in which one engages the dogmatic task stems from the expectation of reciprocity that is central to personal address or speech. When one addresses or speaks to another person one operates on the expectation of what Wolterstorff calls “a reciprocity of orientation” (2015: 60).¹⁹ As I currently address all of you in this room, for instance, I orient myself toward you in the expectation that you will in turn orient yourselves toward me by listening, and as a result respond to my discourse appropriately. This is, again, to underscore the notion that acts of discourse are themselves irreducibly second-personal. To hear the *viva vox Dei* in Holy Scripture and yet fail to appropriately respond by orienting oneself towards God, is to neglect a fundamental aspect of what makes the theological task properly *theological*.²⁰ Consequently, if Christian dogmatics has divine address as its fundamental *principium*—or as Bavinck put it “the principle into which all theological dogmas are distilled is: God has said it” (2005:30)—then the dogmatic task cannot be exclusively carried out within the third-person perspective (I-God); to neglect the interpersonal relatedness (I-you) that obtains in virtue of God’s addressing his creatures in Holy Scripture, is to misconstrue both the fundamental nature of Christian dogmatics as well as Holy Scripture itself.

Theological existence and practice, then, must at some level or other be firmly grounded within the second-person point of view, and predicated on the understanding that God’s address in Holy Scripture aims, as do all forms of address, for a reciprocity of orientation; in canonical Holy Scripture, the triune God orients himself towards his creatures in the expectation that they will respond to his personal address and self-disclosure (Heb. 3:7-12). “Theology”, says John Webster, “is awed testimony to the critical and consoling presence of God in the Spirit’s power, set before the church in Holy Scripture.” (2003: 124, 126). For the great Puritan divine William Ames, the second-person perspective was so integral to dogmatics that he could simply state that “the nature of theological life is living *to* God.”²¹

I now want to briefly explore the second-personal nature of the dogmatic task in the work of Karl Barth, in particular his understanding of the inseparable relation between dogmatics and prayer.

2.1 Karl Barth on Prayerful Dogmatics

Karl Barth, the great Swiss Reformed theologian of the twentieth century, was of the mind that a continual, prayerful openness to the triune God was an indispensable part of the

¹⁹See Wolterstorff *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* for a fascinating treatment of God as addresser and listener in liturgical acts.

²⁰See John Webster’s “What Makes Theology Theological?” in *The Journal of Analytic Theology*.

²¹William Ames, *Marrow of Theology* (1997: 77)

dogmatic task from beginning to end, I'll refer to this notion as "prayerful dogmatics" hereafter. Barth commences his *Göttingen Dogmatics*, his first attempt at dogmatic theology in the form of lectures at the University of Göttingen in 1924-25, with the following prayer from Thomas Aquinas: "Merciful God, I ask that thou wilt grant me, as thou pleasest, to seek earnestly, to investigate carefully, to know truthfully, and to present perfectly, to the glory of thy name, Amen."²² Barth went on to note that "The manner in which Thomas pursued dogmatics leaves the impression of a holy, lofty, beautiful, and joyful work of art" (4). In these earliest lectures in dogmatics (as well in his later work), Barth considers the dogmatic task to be a "mortally dangerous undertaking", one in which "we have reason not only at the beginning but also in the middle and at the end to take the last resort of invoking the name of the Most High" (3). He lamented the operative manner in which dogmatics was pursued in his time as "burdensome" and devoid of "presuppositions that a Thomas, an Augustine before him, and a Calvin after him could quietly take for granted" (4).

What, for Barth, were these presuppositions that necessarily undergird the dogmatic task? Barth pinpoints several operative presuppositions of "dogmatics as a work that praises its master", the most relevant for our discussion being the mode of interpersonal relatedness between God and his creatures, in particular "the personal knowledge of serious, disciplined dealings with God; a knowing and fearing and loving of his name that claims our human existence. How little acquainted we are with these things without which no one can really do dogmatics! How artificial, empty, and useless our work will be if we try to do dogmatics without these presuppositions!" (4).

Barth reaffirms his view that prayer is the "attitude without which there can be no dogmatic work" (I/1, p. 23) at the very outset of his monumental *Church Dogmatics*, and offers two sections devoted principally to the topic of prayer. But we find Barth's most concentrated discussion of what he calls "the unity of prayer and theological work" (ET, p.161) in his work published in 1963 under the title *Evangelical Theology*, which consists of the final lecture series that marked the end of his academic career. There, Barth faithfully reaffirms his earlier view that "the first and basic act of theological work is *prayer*" (ET, 60), and even goes so far as to say that (as stated in the epigraph) "[T]heological work does not merely begin with prayer and is not merely accompanied by it; in its totality it is peculiar and characteristic of theology that it can be performed only in the act of prayer" (160). According to Barth, it is impossible for proper Christian dogmatics to be pursued exclusively from the third person standpoint (i.e reflection *about* the divine nature and actions); theological inquiry can only take place "within this I-Thou relation, in which one speaks and another is spoken to, in which there is communication and reception." When

²²Karl Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics*, p. 3-4.

one sequesters the second-personal point of view from the dogmatic task, Barth points out, we view revelation as “noninvolved spectators” and “we do not think of revelation as such, that is, one person speaking and another spoken to, God revealing himself to us and we to whom he reveals himself...to receive revelation is to be addressed by God” (GD, 58).

If dogmatics is orderly reflection on first-order divine speech, the suggestion here is that dogmatics ought, at some level, to be responsive both to the second-personal nature of speech itself, in addition to the fact that Almighty God himself addresses us in the reception of his Word; as John Webster has emphasized, “the ‘object’ to which theological reason directs itself is subject, the free, personal, gratuitous presence of the holy God” (HS, p. 124). Ultimately, theological inquiry is neither self-initiated, nor is it self-sustained. As Aquinas stated and was later wholeheartedly re-affirmed by the Protestant scholastics, “Theology is taught *by* God, teaches *of* God, and leads *to* God.”²³

For my purposes here, let me suggest a working (though minimal) definition of human prayer as the humanly-initiated activity of sharing attention with God, where the notion of shared attention is a second-person, higher-order relation of awareness that obtains between conscious persons (e.g. Jordan and James’ being aware of one another as persons, and both being aware of this mutual awareness).²⁴ For Barth, an interpersonal relatedness between creatures and their Creator, namely prayer as a posture of openness to and utter reliance upon the triune God, is partially *constitutive* of the theological task itself: “it is imperative”, Barth says, “to recognize the essence of theology as lying in the liturgical action of adoration, thanksgiving, and petition. The old saying, *lex orandi, lex credendi* [“the law of prayer [is] the law of belief”], far from being a pious statement, is one of the most profound descriptions of theological method.”²⁵

In *Evangelical Theology*, his final lectures, Barth elegantly illustrates the inseparability of prayer and dogmatics by invoking the imagery of the theological task as open to both the world in front, and heaven above:

Proper and useful theological work is distinguished by the fact that it takes place in a realm which not only has open windows...facing the surrounding life of the Church and world, but also and above all has a skylight. That is to say, theological work is opened *by* heaven and God’s work and word, but it is also open *toward* heaven and God’s work and word.(ET, 161)

²³Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Baker, 1985) “Theologia a Deo docetur, Deum docet, et ad Deum ducit”, p. 299.

²⁴See Stump (2010: 75). In general, shared attention is a polyadic relation that can be either dyadic or triadic, i.e. where two persons are jointly aware of another another as persons, or where two or more conscious persons are jointly-aware of some third object.

²⁵Barth, “The Gift of Freedom: Foundation of Evangelical Ethics” in *The Humanity of God*. I owe this citation to Cocksworth (2015: 3).

Along these same lines, Barth explicitly employs the language of “second-person” and “third-person” as it pertains to the dogmatic task, stating that “there remains a veil of theological thought and speech in the third person” (164). By contrast, “True and proper language concerning God will always be a response to God, which overtly or covertly, explicitly or implicitly, thinks and speaks of God exclusively in the second person. And this means that theological work must really and truly take place in the form of a liturgical act, as invocation of God, and as prayer” (164). While one might quibble with Barth’s claim that theological work must take place *exclusively* within the second person perspective, we can wholeheartedly agree in his emphasis on the *necessity* of the second person standpoint for Christian dogmatics.

3 Prayer and Theological Habitude

The primary aim of my above remarks was to offer theological and philosophical considerations as to why the dogmatic task involves, at some level, an irreducible second-person relatedness to God. I’d like to turn now to inquire how prayerful dogmatics—a dogmatics that is initiated and sustained by shared attention with God—relates to what the Lutheran dogmatician John Theodore Mueller called a well-formed “theological habitude”, that is, the virtuous character dispositions and behaviors that are befitting of those who endeavor to make progress in Christian dogmatics.²⁶

In the Christian theological tradition it is not infrequent to find sustained reflection on the formational habits of character (moral and intellectual virtues and vices) that were considered both constructive and destructive to the theological task. The great Cappodocian father Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390), for instance, sharply rebuked the Eunomians [a form of extreme Arianism in the Eastern church from 350-381] for their lack of humility, reverence, and modesty in carrying out the theological task. To “philosophize about God”, Gregory noted, is “not to all men, because it is permitted only to those who have been examined, and are passed masters in meditation, and who have been previously purified in soul and body, or at the very least are being purified. For the impure to touch the pure is, we may safely say, not safe, just as it is unsafe to fix weak eyes upon the sun’s rays.” By Gregory’s lights, the ill-formed theological habitude of the Eunomians consisted fundamentally in their treating the dogmatic task as nothing more than “pleasant gossip” or the kind of amusement one acquires from “the races, or the theatre, or a concert, or a dinner, or still lower employments”.²⁷

²⁶For an interesting interpretation of Aquinas which situates all virtues within a second-personal perspective, see Pinsent (2012).

²⁷Gregory of Nazianzus, First Theological Oration 3 (NPNF 7:285-287). See also Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, p.110

In precisely the same vein, the premier philosopher-theologian of the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), offered the following pastoral warning to would-be dogmatists in his letter *On the Incarnation of the Word*:

Let no one, therefore, be in a hurry to plunge into the thicket of divine questions unless he has first sought in firmness of faith the weight of good character and wisdom, lest he should run carelessly and frivolously along the many side-roads of sophistries and be snared by some obstinate falsehood.” (IOW, p. 217).

In the same work, Anselm unpacks a host of character traits that he considers to be integral for proper inquiry into the divine nature, including obedience to God’s commands, an abiding and ongoing trust in God and his illuminating work, and a deep humility that fosters a teachable spirit and keeps one anchored on one’s knees before God; it is “only then can [one] investigate perceptively the deep things of faith” (216). As for those who set out to engage in the dogmatic task without regard for such formational character traits, “They presume to rise to the very loftiest questions of the faith before they have developed spiritual wings through the firmness of their faith. This is how it comes about that they absurdly attempt to climb up through their understanding to those things that first require the ladder of faith: as Scripture says ”Unless you believe, you will not understand.” (p. IOW, 215).

And, of course, we see Anselm masterfully engaged in an explicit form of prayerful dogmatics throughout his *Proslogion*; it’s as if Anselm lets the reader listen-in on his interpersonal and ever-joyous constructive dialogue with God; each paragraph has a life of its own, and each spills over with praise, humility, and adoration to the tri-personal God as the object of theological inquiry.²⁸

The great sixteenth century Magisterial reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, followed suit in giving a pride-of-place to the notion of a well-formed theological habitude in carrying out the theological task. Luther famously prescribed the dictum *oratio, meditatio, tentatio* [prayer, meditation, trial] as the proper way to engage the dogmatic task. Luther states,

I want you to know how to study theology in the right way. I have practiced this method myself...The method of which I am speaking is the one which the

²⁸In the words of Marilyn Adams in her 1995 article “Praying the *Proslogion*: Anselm’s Theological Method”, “Anselm’s method sees philosophizing as a way of praying, and praying as a way of philosophizing...he insists that intellectual inquiry is one dimension of the soul’s stretch for God.” She goes on to say, “Anselm’s cognitive psychology contrasts with that of later medieval Aristotelians, because it denies the existence of “unaided natural reason” and treats all creative problem solving as essentially collaborative: the creature seeks, the Creator discloses, the creature articulates what it has seen” (37).

holy king David teaches in Psalm 119....Here you will find three rules. They are frequently proposed throughout the psalm and run thus: *Oratio, meditatio, tentatio* [prayer, meditation, trial]....

For Luther, prayer and meditation were integral to the practice of Christian dogmatics. Commenting on this three-fold dictum, John Theodore Mueller remarks that “sincere and constant prayer is an indispensable factor in the acquisition of the theological habitude”, and goes on to say that Luther’s dictum “is the best description of theological methodology which has ever been attempted” (1934: 86).

As for Calvin, one can’t make it through a few pages of the *Institutes* without being made aware of Calvin’s deep concern with combatting a vicious form of dogmatic inquiry, a mode of theological speculation he calls *curiositas*, following the rich Latin medieval tradition carved out by Augustine and Aquinas.²⁹ Calvin rebukes those with “an intemperate delight in speculation” (159) with regards to the Trinity, and later offers the following remarks as it pertains to inordinate theological speculation regarding divine predestination:

[L]et us willingly refrain from inquiring into a kind of knowledge, the ardent desire for which is both foolish and dangerous, nay, even deadly. But if a wanton curiosity agitates us, we shall always do well to oppose to it this restraining thought: just as too much honey is not good, so for the curious the investigation of glory is not turned into glory [Prov. 25:27, cf. Vg.]. For there is good reason for us to be deterred from this insolence which can only plunge us into ruin. (ibid., 923-4).

In his insightful discussion of the vice of *curiositas* in the theological domain, John Webster maintains that *curiositas* enters the task of dogmatics “when theology neglects the particular object of theology and instead gives itself promiscuously to whatever sources of fascination present themselves, particularly if they are novel; and so theology becomes restless and unstable. Curiosity enters when theology ignores or detaches itself from its location in the sphere of divine instruction and considers itself...busy about the acquisition of all sorts of new knowledge but no longer shaped by the curriculum of the school of revelation. Curiosity enters when theology terminates on surfaces, *failing to complete the intellect’s course in running to God*” (2015:26).³⁰ Christian dogmatics becomes *deformational* when it attempts to operate exclusively in the third-person, wholly detached from a second-person relatedness to God. But dogmatics that proceeds from a posture of ongoing shared attention with God, that is, one that is opened *by* heaven and directed *toward*

²⁹See my “Epistemic Temperance and the Moral Perils of Intellectual Inquiry” in *Philosophia Christi*. See also John Webster “Curiosity” in *Domain of the Word*.

³⁰John Webster, “What Makes Theology Theological?” in JAT.

heaven, keeps one calibrated to the appropriate objects, measure, and ends of theological practice.

Lastly, Richard Muller (2003: 212-213) has pointed out that the Protestant scholastics repeatedly emphasized the importance of personal piety in the task of theology, principally in the form of humility and the fear of God. Muller notes, that “Primary among the character traits of the theological student is personal piety or spirituality. This piety, essentially a fear of God, is, as Scripture teaches, the primary ground of both true knowledge and wisdom.” In commenting on the work of Protestant scholastic Franz Burman (1628-1679) regarding the character qualities required for the theological task, Muller notes “to this piety must be added the qualities of teachableness and zeal or diligence, manifest, at least in part, through the absence of perverse love, hate, anger, pride, and despair”.³¹ While certain natural gifts are required to carry out the dogmatic task, the Protestant scholastics also were of the opinion that “all these gifts are to be maintained and augmented through prayer, temperance, and reverent exercise, in the service of theological study.” Prayer is the proper formational context in which one makes progress in developing and maintaining the habits of character necessary to the theological task.

In sum: for Gregory, Anselm, Luther, Calvin and the Protestant scholastics, theological reflection that is initiated and sustained by prayer, a “prayerful dogmatics”, serves as the necessary guardrail that keeps the theological life virtuous, formational, and robustly theological (2 Cor. 3:18).

3.1 A Concluding Note to Seminarians

In his delightful manual (what he calls a “spiritual exercise”) for beginning students in dogmatics titled *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, the German theologian Helmut Thielicke offered the following warning to students of divinity, “the man who studies theology, and especially he who studies dogmatics, might watch carefully whether he increasingly does not think in the third rather than the second person” (23).³² This subtle transition from the second-person to the third person perspective in dogmatics, Thielicke says, is “exactly synchronized with the moment that I no longer read the word of Holy Scripture as a word to me, but only as the object of exegetical endeavors. This is the first step towards the worst and most widespread ministers’ disease” (Ibid). Thielicke’s point, I think, is not that the student of dogmatics ceases doing dogmatics when they think in the third person, i.e. give an orderly account of what Scripture says *about* the nature and action of God in the economy of redemption. Rather, his point, similar to my point above, is that the dogmatic task—whose very lifeblood is the *vive vox Dei* ringing out in the text of Holy

³¹Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, volume 1, *Prolegomena to Theology*, 212

³²Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*

Scripture—involves an irreducibly second-personal dimension between God and his creatures. And the first step towards this “minister’s disease” is nothing less than the neglect of this interpersonal dimension to theological inquiry.

The transition from the second-person to an exclusively third person standpoint in dogmatics is all too common for those of us who live out our theological lives within a seminary context. The transition is subtle, yet pernicious; theology exclusively in the third-person misconstrues the fundamental nature of Holy Scripture as divine speech, it evacuates theology of its distinctly theological content, and it threatens to *deform* those who strive to carry it out.

In his 1911 address to students at Princeton theological seminary titled “The Religious Life of Theological Students”, B.B. Warfield (1851-1921) was at pains to dismantle the widespread yet tacit assumption that robust Christian formation was in some way at odds with the rigorous pursuit of the theological task within the seminary context. Warfield made the following remarks:

Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. “What!” is the appropriate response, “than ten hours over your books, on your knees?” Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God? (182)

One’s theological studies, argued Warfield, brings one daily into the very presence of God; “his ways, his dealing with men, the infinite majesty of his Being form their very subject-matter. *Put the shoes from off your feet in this holy presence!*” (186).