

FOUNDATIONS OF  
EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

# GOD THE SON INCARNATE

THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST



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THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST



STEPHEN J.  
WELLUM

 **CROSSWAY®**  
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To my dear wife, Karen,  
Who in every way imaginable has faithfully  
encouraged me to see this work completed,  
And who most of all delights and glories in Christ Jesus our Lord,  
As heirs together of God's sovereign grace in Christ.

To our precious children, Joel, Justin, Joshua, Janae, and Jessica,  
Further evidence of God's blessing, mercy, and grace in my life.  
May the Lord of Glory be your salvation, delight, and glory, and  
may each of you in your own way live under Christ's Lordship  
and proclaim him who is the way, the truth, and the life.





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Why another series of works on evangelical systematic theology? This is an especially appropriate question in light of the fact that evangelicals are fully committed to an inspired and inerrant Bible as their final authority for faith and practice. But since neither God nor the Bible changes, why is there a need to redo evangelical systematic theology?

Systematic theology is not divine revelation. Theologizing of any sort is a human conceptual enterprise. Thinking that it is equal to biblical revelation misunderstands the nature of both Scripture and theology! Insofar as our theology contains propositions that accurately reflect Scripture or match the world and are consistent with the Bible (in cases where the propositions do not come *per se* from Scripture), our theology is biblically based and correct. But even if all the propositions of a systematic theology are true, that theology would still not be equivalent to biblical revelation! It is still a human conceptualization of God and his relation to the world.

Although this may disturb some who see theology as nothing more than doing careful exegesis over a series of passages, and others who see it as nothing more than biblical theology, those methods of doing theology do not somehow produce a theology that is equivalent to biblical revelation either. Exegesis is a human conceptual enterprise, and so is biblical theology. All the theological disciplines involve human intellectual participation. But human intellect is finite, and hence there is always room for revision of systematic theology as knowledge increases. Though God and his Word do not change, human understanding of his revelation can grow, and our theologies should be reworked to reflect those advances in understanding.

Another reason for evangelicals to rework their theology is the nature of systematic theology as opposed to other theological disciplines. For example, whereas the task of biblical theology is more to describe biblical teaching on whatever topics Scripture addresses, systematics should make a special point to relate its conclusions to the issues of one's day. This does not mean that the systematician ignores the topics biblical writers address. Nor does it mean that theologians should warp Scripture to address issues it never intended to address. Rather it suggests that in addition to expounding what biblical writers teach, the theologian should attempt to take those biblical teachings (along with the biblical mind-set) and apply them to issues that are especially confronting the church in the theologian's own day. For example, 150 years ago, an evangelical

theologian doing work on the doctrine of man would likely have discussed issues such as the creation of man and the constituent parts of man's being. Such a theology might even have included a discussion about human institutions such as marriage, noting in general the respective roles of husbands and wives in marriage. However, it is dubious that there would have been any lengthy discussion with various viewpoints about the respective roles of men and women in marriage, in society, and in the church. But at our point in history and in light of the feminist movement and the issues it has raised even among many conservative Christians, it would be foolish to write a theology of man (or, should we say, a "theology of humanity") without a thorough discussion of the issue of the roles of men and women in society, the home, and the church.

Because systematic theology attempts to address itself not only to the timeless issues presented in Scripture but also to the current issues of one's day and culture, each theology will to some extent need to be redone in each generation. Biblical truth does not change from generation to generation, but the issues that confront the church do. A theology that was adequate for a different era and different culture may simply not speak to key issues in a given culture at a given time. Hence, in this series we are reworking evangelical systematic theology, though we do so with the understanding that in future generations there will be room for a revision of theology again.

How, then, do the contributors to this series understand the nature of systematic theology? Systematic theology as done from an evangelical Christian perspective involves study of the person, works, and relationships of God. As evangelicals committed to the full inspiration, inerrancy, and final authority of Scripture, we demand that whatever appears in a systematic theology correspond to the way things are and must not contradict any claim taught in Scripture. Holy Writ is the touchstone of our theology, but we do not limit the source material for systematics to Scripture alone. Hence, whatever information from history, science, philosophy, and the like is relevant to our understanding of God and his relation to our world is fair game for systematics. Depending on the specific interests and expertise of the contributors to this series, their respective volumes will reflect interaction with one or more of these disciplines.

What is the rationale for appealing to sources other than Scripture and disciplines other than the biblical ones? Since God created the universe, there is revelation of God not only in Scripture but in the created order as well. There are many disciplines that study our world, just as does theology. But since the world studied by the non-theological disciplines is the world created by God, any data and conclusions in the so-called secular disciplines that accurately reflect the real world are also relevant to our understanding of the God who made that world. Hence, in a general sense, since all of creation is God's work, noth-

ing is outside the realm of theology. The so-called secular disciplines need to be thought of in a theological context, because they are reflecting on the universe God created, just as is the theologian. And, of course, there are many claims in the non-theological disciplines that are generally accepted as true (although this does not mean that every claim in non-theological disciplines is true, or that we are in a position with respect to every proposition to know whether it is true or false). Since this is so, and since all disciplines are in one way or another reflecting on our universe, a universe made by God, any true statement in any discipline should in some way be informative for our understanding of God and his relation to our world. Hence, we have felt it appropriate to incorporate data from outside the Bible in our theological formulations.

As to the specific design of this series, our intention is to address all areas of evangelical theology with a special emphasis on key issues in each area. While other series may be more like a history of doctrine, this series purposes to incorporate insights from Scripture, historical theology, philosophy, etc., in order to produce an up-to-date work in systematic theology. Though all contributors to the series are thoroughly evangelical in their theology, embracing the historical orthodox doctrines of the church, the series as a whole is not meant to be slanted in the direction of one form of evangelical theology. Nonetheless, most of the writers come from a Reformed perspective. Alternate evangelical and non-evangelical options, however, are discussed.

As to style and intended audience, this series is meant to rest on the very best of scholarship while at the same time being understandable to the beginner in theology as well as to the academic theologian. With that in mind, contributors are writing in a clear style, taking care to define whatever technical terms they use.

Finally, we believe that systematic theology is not just for the understanding. It must apply to life, and it must be lived. As Paul wrote to Timothy, God has given divine revelation for many purposes, including ones that necessitate doing theology, but the ultimate reason for giving revelation and for theologians doing theology is that the people of God may be fitted for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17). In light of the need for theology to connect to life, each of the contributors not only formulates doctrines but also explains how those doctrines practically apply to everyday living.

It is our sincerest hope that the work we have done in this series will first glorify and please God, and, second, instruct and edify the people of God. May God be pleased to use this series to those ends, and may he richly bless you as you read the fruits of our labors.

*John S. Feinberg*  
General Editor



When I first agreed to undertake this project, I had no idea how difficult, challenging, and rewarding it would be. Looking back, it is not a surprise that this would be the case, given the vast scope of the subject matter. To understand our Lord Jesus Christ rightly is to understand the heart of our triune God's plan, Scripture, and the gospel itself. As an exercise in "faith seeking understanding," to think through and reflect upon our Lord's identity, the nature of the incarnation, and why he alone is the Lord and Savior, is not only challenging but glorious. It is my prayer that this work will encourage the reader to know Christ better, to be led to greater love and trust of and obedience to the Lord of Glory, and to count it a privilege to proclaim him as he truly is, the only Lord and Savior, especially in our pluralistic and postmodern age.

Many people need to be thanked, without whom this work would never have seen the light of day. We all stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. My understanding of the gospel, and being taught from my earliest years about the glory of Christ, is due to my faithful and godly parents, Colin and Joan Wellum. From my first breath, our Lord Jesus in all of his beauty and majesty was impressed upon my mind and heart. In addition, during my youth and teenage years, my faithful pastor, William Payne, never tired of proclaiming Christ and him crucified, and instead of capitulating to the latest fads, exhorted me to glory in Christ and him alone. This continued in my undergraduate days under the preaching ministry of John Reisinger, and later in my seminary education at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS). There are simply too many people to thank for their influence in my life, thinking, and theology.

In addition, I want to thank the administration and trustees of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for granting me a number of sabbaticals to work on this project. Without their generous sabbatical policy it would have been difficult to do the research and writing of this work. I also want to thank my colleagues at Southern who have contributed to this work, especially those in the theology and tradition department—Bruce Ware, Gregg Allison, Michael Haykin, and Tom Nettles; and Peter Gentry, who teaches in the area of biblical studies. To my students over the years, first at Northwest Baptist College and Seminary and the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Toronto Baptist Seminary, and now for these last seventeen years at Southern, I want to thank you for thinking through the glory of Christ with me in classes

devoted to his person and work. May each of you never grow tired of knowing Christ who is life eternal. In addition, specific thanks go to Michael Wilkinson, one of my doctoral students at Southern, who, in a labor of love, spent countless hours editing the final work and made it a far better one, even though I take responsibility for its content. Special thanks go to John Feinberg, the editor of this series and one of my beloved theology professors at TEDS. Years ago, John invited me to be a part of the Foundations of Evangelical Theology Series, and he took a risk in doing so, for which I am truly grateful. Thank you, John, for allowing younger men like me to have an opportunity to write for the series.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my family: my wife, Karen; and our children, Joel, Justin, Joshua, Janae, and Jessica. Without their constant love, patience, and encouragement this work would not have been done. There is nothing more important in life than to know, trust, love, and obey Jesus Christ our Lord. May he be your portion, delight, and joy all the days of your life. And as Francis Schaeffer many years ago challenged a new generation, may you live your lives to the glory of our triune covenant God as radicals for truth and as those who are ambassadors of the King of kings and the Lord of lords. May Christ Jesus our Lord, God the Son incarnate, receive all praise and glory, for he is worthy!

## A B B R E V I A T I O N S

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ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> , ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
EBC	<i>The Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>
IJST	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
NDBT	<i>New Dictionary of Biblical Theology</i> , ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NPNF <sup>2</sup>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 2, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, 14 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>





The well-known church historian Jaroslav Pelikan famously begins his book *Jesus through the Centuries* with a comment about the historical importance of Jesus Christ: “Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries.”<sup>1</sup> Pelikan’s observation is not hyperbole. Even to this day, for example, a large portion of the human population continues to divide world history into BC and AD by reference to Jesus’s birth in history. The importance of this particular Nazarene, however, goes far beyond natural historical observation.

Since the first few centuries AD, Jesus has been the dominant figure in religion and theological reflection. Whether out of devotion and worship or suspicion and critique, the person of Christ has held the attention of the church and the world for most of those two thousand years. And this attention is well placed. The person of Christ stands at the center of the Scriptures that reveal the purpose and plan of God for humanity and the rest of creation. According to its own claims, Scripture is God’s self-revelation given progressively through the writings of human authors. As *God’s* word, then, the diversity of texts come together as a unified divine communicative act<sup>2</sup> of the one who creates, sustains, plans, and governs all things. *This* word of *this* God declares that Jesus Christ is the focus and fulfillment of divine desire and glory and the hope of all humanity.

Jesus himself understood and taught that both Scripture and God’s plan of salvation are Christocentric. Jesus chided the men on the road to Emmaus for not believing all that the prophets had spoken concerning his identity and work: “‘Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:26–27).<sup>3</sup> Jesus confronted the religious leaders for not identifying him as the goal of God’s revelation: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39–40). Jesus knew that

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<sup>1</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>2</sup>This term is taken from Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” in *NDBT*, 52–64.

<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Scripture are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

he was the only way to life with God: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). And Jesus’s apostles agreed that he is the focal point and fulfillment of God’s plan of revelation and redemption. The book of Hebrews begins by underscoring the superiority and finality of God’s self-disclosure in his Son: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1–2a). In Ephesians, Paul explains that, in Christ, God has made known his eternal will, “which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:9–10).

*The most important figure in the fullness of God’s work, then, is the person of Jesus Christ.* Paul can even describe the importance of Christ in terms of his cosmic preeminence: “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:16–17).

The importance of the person of Christ, moreover, places Christology at the center of all theological reflection and formulation. As Herman Bavinck so aptly reminded us a century ago in his magisterial *Reformed Dogmatics*, “The doctrine of Christ is not the starting point, but it certainly is the central point of the whole system of dogmatics. All other dogmas either prepare for it or are inferred from it. In it, as the heart of dogmatics, pulses the whole of the religious-ethical life of Christianity. It is ‘the mystery of godliness’ (1 Tim. 3:16).”<sup>4</sup> The idea of a center point does not create a doctrinal hierarchy but confesses that all things theological fit together according to the pattern of Scripture. As J. I. Packer instructs, Christian theology should be viewed as “an organism, a unity of interrelated parts, a circle in which everything links up with everything else.”<sup>5</sup> And in the center of that circle sits the discipline of Christology—the study of the person of Christ. So Packer gives us another apt metaphor: “Christology is the true hub round which the wheel of theology revolves, and to which its separate spokes must each be correctly anchored if the wheel is not to get bent.”<sup>6</sup> We should expect, then, that when theological formulation misunderstands or distorts the identity of Christ, the entire set of related theological convictions will eventually contort or collapse completely.

Historic Christianity’s most distinctive convictions are decisively shaped and determined by a proper understanding of the identity of Christ.<sup>7</sup> For exam-

<sup>4</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 274.

<sup>5</sup>J. I. Packer, “Uniqueness of Jesus Christ,” *Churchman* 92/2 (1978): 110.

<sup>6</sup>J. I. Packer, “Jesus Christ the Lord,” in *The J. I. Packer Collection*, comp. Alister McGrath (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 151.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

ple, the doctrine of the Trinity, the distinguishing feature of a Christian view of God, developed because the church rightly affirmed the incarnation of Christ from heaven, his status and title as Lord, and his relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit. Regarding the doctrine of humanity, historic Christianity teaches that we cannot fully understand who we are apart from the identity of Christ as the Son and true image of God, his incarnation into our humanity, his life as the last Adam, and his crucifixion and resurrection for us. And the doctrine of the atonement puts Christ on the cross at the center of the triune God's work to redeem humanity. In his classic work *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott argues well that fully understanding the biblical language regarding the *death* of Christ requires correct conclusions regarding the *person* of Christ.<sup>8</sup> After surveying a number of options, Stott concludes that the core teaching of penal substitution is rooted in the proper identity of Christ:

If the essence of the atonement is substitution . . . the theological inference is that it is impossible to hold the historic doctrine of the cross without holding the historic doctrine of Jesus Christ as the one and only God-man and Mediator. . . . At the root of every caricature of the cross lies a distorted Christology. The person and work of Christ belong together. If he was not who the apostles say he was, then he could not have done what they say he did. The incarnation is indispensable to the atonement.<sup>9</sup>

In short, we cannot afford to get Christology wrong. We simply must know and confess the person of Christ in truth.

The work of Christology, then, has crucial significance for the church and for the world. The question of Jesus's identity is not merely academic, something for theologians to ponder. Knowing who Jesus is in truth, rather, is a matter of the utmost urgency—it is literally a matter of life and death. And this great task becomes even more urgent today because the church is living and thinking amid much Christological confusion created by the misidentification of Christ. Similar to the first century (although for different reasons), our own day has seen the rise of a rampant philosophical and religious pluralism. There are many beliefs that distinguish Christianity from other worldviews, but none as important as the identity of Christ. The claim that Jesus Christ is both divine and human and the only Lord and Savior is viewed with suspicion, doubt, and even outright anger. Regardless of the response, however, the discussion always centers on the question of Jesus's identity. As Harold Netland reminds us so well, “No serious discussion of the relation of Christianity to other faiths can proceed very far without coming to grips with the towering figure of Jesus. Sooner or later, the blunt question put by Jesus to his followers—‘Who do

<sup>8</sup>See John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 149–163.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 160.

people say I am?’ (Mark 8:27)—must be confronted.”<sup>10</sup> The Jesus of the Bible is unique to Christianity, and *this* Jesus demands and deserves all of our commitment, obedience, and trust.

Given the importance of the person of Christ and Christology, this work aims to articulate a contemporary orthodox Christology that equips the church for edification in Christ and proclamation of the name of Christ. Orthodox Christology remains the most faithful to the biblical presentation of Christ and the most coherent theological formulation of his identity and significance. Such a classic Christology, however, must be articulated amid a new cultural disposition toward Christ and defended against current challenges born out of confusion regarding the identity of Christ.

The scope of such a work could stretch across multiple volumes, and it could be written for a range of readers, from laypeople to seminary students to professional academics. As part of the Foundations of Evangelical Theology series, however, the main goal here is to help equip Christians in local churches and evangelical seminaries to know the biblical presentation of Jesus Christ so that we might proclaim him with greater clarity, and delight in him with joy inexpressible and filled with glory.

Indeed, the church exists to proclaim the glory of the one who brought us out of darkness and into his marvelous light, according to which we are also conformed to that same glory and excellence. Yet as the church, our sanctification and proclamation are always situated: all that we do and say is done and said in a certain culture at a particular time in church history. What we say, moreover, is either accepted or rejected by our culture (both inside and outside the church) and either consistent or inconsistent with what the church has already said. To say anything about Jesus, then, we need to be warranted both philosophically/epistemologically and historically/ecclesiologically.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, of course, we want to be biblically warranted in what we say about Jesus. The biblical presentation of Jesus Christ is the authoritative identification of our Lord, whether accepted or rejected by culture or affirmed or denied in church history. Our theology must first be correct. But it must also be cogent and must be communicated in the church’s current context so that our proclamation will be both true and persuasive. We need to be extensively warranted in our conclusions regarding the one who is God and who became a man for the salvation of humanity and the glory of God.

The first three parts of this work are an effort to provide philosophical/epistemological (Part I), biblical/exegetical (Part II), and historical/ecclesiological

<sup>10</sup>Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 235.

<sup>11</sup>Throughout this work, I am using warrant/warranted in the sense of providing grounds, i.e., reasons to believe what we say about who Jesus is and the identity of his person.

(Part III) warrant for the Christological conclusions at the end (Part IV). That conclusion, and the thesis of this entire volume, is that Jesus Christ is *God the Son incarnate*, one person subsisting in and acting through a fully divine nature and a fully human nature according to the attributes of each. The glorious import of this Christological identification is that, in Jesus, God himself rules sovereignly over his creation to judge the world in righteousness and that he becomes a human representative substitute for a redeemed humanity to live in covenant with God.

In Part I, we will establish the epistemological warrant for Christology. In our current context, we cannot take it for granted that everyone agrees on how we can and do come to know who Jesus is. In fact, the possibility of objective *truth* is questioned openly in today's world. It is difficult to jump into the propositional statements about the identity of Jesus Christ without first providing a well-reasoned account for how we can know anything about him. Chapter 1 will unearth the epistemological roots of current confusion regarding the identity of Jesus Christ, while chapter 2 will argue that a Christology "from above," namely a Christology rooted and grounded in Scripture, is what is necessary for a truly evangelical Christology.

In Part II, we will turn to biblical warrant for Christology by following the Bible's own presentation of who Jesus is. The Bible presents itself as one story that moves across four parts and through six covenants, unfolding the promises of God in the Old Testament and their fulfillment in the New Testament. To have biblical warrant for Christology today, what the Bible says about Jesus Christ must be read and understood according to this authoritative structure. Chapter 3 will describe the redemptive-covenantal structure of the Scriptures and place Jesus's identity within that storyline. Building on the Bible's storyline, chapter 4 will sketch the Bible's overall presentation of Christ by considering Jesus's self-understanding of who he is and how his apostles identify him according to his words and works. Chapter 5 will explore the biblical data regarding the deity of Christ, while chapter 6 will explore the full humanity of Christ by focusing on the biblical presentation of the incarnation and the rationale for God the Son adding to himself a human nature and thus becoming the man Christ Jesus.

After establishing the biblical warrant for Christology, in Part III we will develop the ecclesiological warrant. Scripture alone has magisterial authority, but the church's understanding of Scripture throughout history has ministerial authority for us today. Chapter 7 will consider the era from the first century to the Council of Nicaea and will investigate the issues and heresies that first created the need for an orthodox Christology. Chapter 8 will explore the Christological developments between Nicaea and the Council of Chalcedon,

while chapter 9 will describe post-Chalcedonian developments which establish a received orthodox Christology.

In Part IV we will conclude our investigation by developing a contemporary articulation of classical Christology for evangelicals today. Chapters 10–12 take up the contemporary challenges to orthodox Christology by what has come to be known as kenotic Christology. After critiquing kenotic Christologies for failing to provide a “newer,” “better,” and more faithful Christology in contrast to the “older” formulation, chapters 13–14 will describe and defend a classical Christology for evangelicals today.

With that roadmap before us, we now turn to the glorious yet sobering task of thinking through the identity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even though the task is formidable, given its importance it must be done anew for every generation. The work here can only serve as an introduction, but it is my goal to survey the crucial components of a robust evangelical Christology for today’s church. My ultimate aim is not only to lay out the biblical data that grounds the church’s Christology, to think through how the church has formulated Christology in the past, and to wrestle with current evangelical Christologies; I also want to proceed in such a way that we are led afresh to know Jesus Christ and to proclaim him as he truly is, the Lord of Glory who is life eternal.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL WARRANT  
FOR CHRISTOLOGY TODAY





In general, epistemological warrant in the realm of theology amounts to a well-reasoned account of how humans can know God. Epistemological warrant for Christology should provide sound reasoning for how we can know God in the person of Jesus Christ.

In our current Christological climate, we cannot take it for granted that everyone agrees on how we can and do come to know who Jesus is. In fact, the possibility of objective *truth* is questioned openly in today's epistemological culture. It would not serve the reader, then, to jump into propositional statements about the identity of Jesus Christ without first providing a well-reasoned account for how we can know anything about him at all. Moreover, we must be able to connect *how* we can know about Jesus with *what we say* about him.

Since this is not a work on epistemology itself, the attempt at epistemological warrant here will not address the core issues and breadth of concerns related to the nature of knowledge and the means by which it can be obtained. As the Christology volume in the Foundations of Evangelical Theology series, this work begins with certain presuppositions regarding epistemology: e.g., the existence of the visible world we experience; the existence of an invisible world beyond our direct experience; the ability to know about these worlds in truth; the objectivity of truth, which is unchanged by the way we experience or know about the visible and invisible worlds. Yet building on these evangelical assumptions in epistemology, we need to give a well-reasoned account of how we can know God (invisible) in Christ (visible).

Chapter 1 will unearth the epistemological roots of current confusion regarding the identity of Jesus Christ. Epistemology shapes theological method, which then determines what we say about God. The post-Reformation changes in epistemology and method are largely responsible for the divergent views that persist in Christology today. Chapter 2 will then reach back to the insights of the Reformation to return to a Christology "from above." Revelation *from God* is the only way we can know anything *about God*. And this requires a certain attitude toward his word in Scripture and a particular method for reading it.



## CONTEMPORARY CHRISTOLOGY

Jesus of Nazareth has been and still is an enigma to many people. Even though he has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries, a majority of people are still confused regarding his identity. A famous poem once tried to capture something of the enigma and significance of Jesus:

He was born in an obscure village,  
    the child of a peasant woman.  
He grew up in still another village  
    where he worked until he was thirty.  
Then for three years  
    he was an itinerant preacher.  
He never wrote a book.  
He never held an office.  
He never had a family or owned a home.  
He didn't go to college.  
He never traveled more than 200 miles  
    from the place he was born.  
He did none of the things  
    one usually associates with greatness.  
He had no credentials but himself;  
    he was only thirty-three  
    when public opinion turned against him.  
His friends ran away.  
He was turned over to his enemies  
    and went through the mockery of a trial.  
He was nailed to the cross  
    between two thieves.  
While he was dying  
    his executioners gambled for his clothing,  
    the only property he had on earth.  
When he was dead

he was laid in a borrowed grave  
 through the pity of a friend.  
 Nineteen centuries have come and gone  
 and today he is the central figure  
 of the human race,  
 the leader of mankind's progress.  
 All the armies that ever marched,  
 all the navies that ever sailed,  
 all the parliaments that ever sat,  
 all the kings that ever reigned,  
 put together,  
 have not affected  
 the life of man on earth  
 as much as that  
 One Solitary Life.<sup>1</sup>

Who do we say that Jesus Christ is? The question itself is not new; it has been asked ever since Jesus's earthly ministry. The writers of the four Gospels labored to impress upon us the revelation of Jesus of Nazareth, and they persist in pressing the point of his identity: *Who is this Jesus?* *Who is he* who is born the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1)? *Who is he* who announces the dawning of the kingdom (Matt. 4:12–17)? *Who is he* who resists every temptation of the Devil (Luke 4:1–13)? *Who is he* who commands wind and water and turns water into wine (Luke 8:22–25; John 2:6–11)? *Who is he* who pronounces the forgiveness of sins (Mark 2:1–12)? *Who is he* who raises the dead and rises from the grave (John 11:38–44; 20:1–18)?

Even Jesus himself asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13). Similar to our own day, the responses of the people then were diverse and confused. Some identified him superstitiously with John the Baptist come back from the dead, while others thought of him as one of the great Old Testament prophets. So Jesus asked his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 15). Speaking for them, Peter answered correctly, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). But even then, Peter did not fully grasp Jesus's identity. Immediately after his confession, Peter objected to Jesus's prediction and explanation of his own suffering and death. Peter could not yet conceive of a suffering Messiah, thinking instead of a victorious king. It was not until after the resurrection that Peter and the disciples began to understand who Jesus truly was as the Son and the Messiah. *The question of Jesus's identity could not be fully answered until all of the great events of redemptive history were fully aligned with Jesus's own life, death, and resurrection.*

<sup>1</sup> Cited in George Gallup Jr. and George O'Connell, *Who Do Americans Say That I Am?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 14–15. The poem is an adaption from James Allan Francis, *The Real Jesus, and Other Sermons* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1926).

Even after Easter, the first-century question remains today, and unfortunately so does the confusion. Similar to the answers of old, a wide variety of responses are given today to Jesus's question about his identity: he is a sage, a prophet, a revolutionary, a cynic, and, for some, simply a failed religious leader.<sup>2</sup> Almost without fail, every Christmas and Easter (at least in North America) popular magazines (e.g., *Time*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Maclean's*) and cable networks (e.g., A&E, History Channel) devote time to the question, Who is Jesus of Nazareth? Repeated Gallup polls show that people often affirm some kind of belief in Jesus, but probing deeper usually reveals that their belief is ill-informed, confused, and often contradictory to other beliefs they affirm.<sup>3</sup>

For Christians, this kind of confusion and uncertainty is not a benign issue. Scripture presents Jesus of Nazareth as God's own eternal Son and as a man who is appointed by God the Father to judge the living and the dead. As Stephen Clark rightly notes, Scripture is unified in its presentation of who Jesus is. As he notes, despite the diversity of the biblical material, there is a "uniform conviction that Jesus Christ is God and man."<sup>4</sup> In light of Scripture, the church has confessed consistently that to identify Jesus correctly we must affirm that he is the divine Son who has become incarnate, that to know him is life eternal, and that to know him not is judgment unto death. Biblically speaking, getting Christ right is a matter of life and death.

Yet even with this urgency, we must resist the temptation to move directly to the biblical foundations, historical formulations, and contemporary discussions of Christology within evangelical theology. Systematic theology does not merely *articulate* doctrines in timeless propositions; systematic theology, rather, is best understood as the *application* of Scripture to all areas of life. This articulation and application involves not only exegesis and biblical theology in light of historical theology, but also the attempt to help the church apply the biblical teaching to our current context.<sup>5</sup> The nature of systematic theology necessitates that we understand our present-day situation and the particular challenges it poses.

In his instructive book *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, David Wells makes this precise point, arguing for Christology within a twofold reality: first, "the disintegration of the Enlightenment world and its replacement by the postmodern ethos"; second, the increase of religious pluralism.<sup>6</sup> These two intellectual

<sup>2</sup>For helpful discussions of some of these current views of Jesus, see N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992); Gregory A. Boyd, *Cynic, Sage, or Son of God?* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1995); Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup>For example, see Gallup and O'Connell, *Who Do Americans Say That I Am?*, 41–59.

<sup>4</sup>Stephen Clark, "Introduction," in *The Forgotten Christ: Exploring the Majesty and Mystery of God Incarnate*, ed. Stephen Clark (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 9.

<sup>5</sup>See John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 76–88.

<sup>6</sup>David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 5. Wells develops this argument here (see *ibid.*, 60–262). But he has also made similar points in his previous three

and cultural developments have posed a number of serious implications for doing orthodox Christology, certainly the most important being the need for a plausible defense of the uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus Christ in a day of philosophical pluralism.<sup>7</sup> As Wells rightly notes, our theology must not remain merely internal to the church or to the academy; it must also address and help the church to meet the challenges we face in presenting Christ to a skeptical age that simply regards the uniqueness of Christ as highly implausible.<sup>8</sup>

The conditions of belief in the medieval and Reformation eras have been eclipsed today by an entirely different set of *plausibility structures*.<sup>9</sup> The contemporary culture does not begin with the basic propositions of Christian theology. The secularization and pluralization of the West has altered the way people think because the conditions of belief have changed. In his magisterial work on the cognitive impact of secularization, Charles Taylor traces these epistemological changes over three distinct time periods, pivoting around the Enlightenment: before the Enlightenment, people found it impossible not to believe the Christian worldview; starting with the Enlightenment, it became possible not to believe in the basic truths of Christianity; three hundred years after the Enlightenment and with the rise of postmodern pluralism, most people find it impossible to believe in the objective truths and ultimate concerns of the Christian worldview.<sup>10</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr. helpfully summarizes Taylor's argument:

In the first stage there was no rival explanation for any reality—for life, for the past, for the present, or for the future—other than Christianity. But now it is the absolute opposite. Now there are not only alternatives to the biblical worldview available, but these alternatives are declared to be superior. Indeed if nonbelief was an oddity in the first stage—so much that it was considered eccentric and even dangerous—in this third stage it is *theism* that is considered eccentric and dangerous.<sup>11</sup>

Obviously, what Taylor has observed in Western thought impacts how Christology will be viewed in terms of its plausibility, credibility, and logical

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books, which reflect on the intersection of theology with contemporary culture: idem, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993); idem, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); idem, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> "Philosophical pluralism" can mean different things. I am using the term (along with "religious pluralism") in the same way as D. A. Carson, who uses it as an overarching term to capture the idea that "any notion that a particular ideological or religious claim is intrinsically superior to another is necessarily wrong. The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism. No religion has the right to pronounce itself right or true, and others false, or even (in the majority view) relatively inferior" (D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996], 19).

<sup>8</sup> See Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers*, 6–12.

<sup>9</sup> See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967); cf. Robert Wuthnow, *Rediscovering the Sacred: Perspectives on Religion in Contemporary Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 9–35.

<sup>10</sup> See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Atheism Remixed: A Christian Confronts the New Atheists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 37.

coherence. The current conditions of belief also challenge us to think through anew how best to do Christology in order to present Christ faithfully to a skeptical, pluralistic world. It would be unwise simply to work through the biblical, historical, and systematic data of Christology; doing evangelical *theology for today* requires attention to the specific *challenges of the day*. At this point, we need to remember Martin Luther's instruction to stand for the truth precisely at the point where it is being undermined and attacked:

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battle front besides, is merely flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.<sup>12</sup>

Exhorted by Luther and obliged by the nature of systematic theology, we need to probe the plausibility structures that operate today, shaping the way people think. The present conditions of belief do not determine the identity of Christ that comes to us in Scripture. But where the dominant ways of thinking and knowing would make it difficult or impossible to know Christ from Scripture, we need to do some demolition work and construct the Bible's own structure of belief in an open and coherent manner. *In short, we need to lay the foundation of epistemological warrant to build an argument for an orthodox Christology for today.*

The rest of this chapter will argue that the two major trends in contemporary Christology are causing significant confusion regarding the identity of Christ because they are rooted in presuppositions that inevitably lead away from the true Jesus as he is revealed in Scripture. The epistemological changes in the Enlightenment and in postmodernity have grown throughout the areas of philosophy, science, religion, and hermeneutics to produce a skepticism toward the Bible and a rejection of its ability to identify Jesus accurately. Christology today, then, must address *how we can know* Jesus before we can say *who he is*.

## TWO MAJOR TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTOLOGY

Throughout the ages, the church's confession has been uniform: Jesus is God the Son, the second person of the eternal Trinity, who at a specific point in history took to himself a human nature and was born as Jesus of Nazareth in order to accomplish our redemption. In the language of the Chalcedonian

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Francis A. Schaeffer, *No Final Conflict*, in *A Christian View of the Bible as Truth*, vol. 2 of *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1985), 122. There is a legitimate dispute as to whether this was actually said by Luther. Regardless, it makes a significant point and it is the truth of the statement that I am emphasizing.



Definition, our Lord Jesus is God the Son incarnate—one person who subsists in two natures, fully God and fully man—who alone is Lord and Savior and worthy of our worship, trust, and obedience. Even though there have been various naysayers throughout church history, the Chalcedonian Confession remains the classic Christological statement accepted by virtually all segments of Christianity; the church has always confessed this basic orthodoxy as its starting point and touchstone for understanding the identity of Christ.

Today, however, the orthodox Definition is problematic for many. For a variety of reasons, many people no longer consider the orthodox understanding of Jesus's identity to be credible or plausible. Without trying to be reductionistic, we can identify two major non-orthodox trends in Christology today: first, the continued attempt to discover the historical Jesus in distinction from the biblical Jesus; second, the attempt to make Christ fit within the paradigm of religious pluralism.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, although proponents within these trends may differ in their motivation, methodology, and conclusions, the trends themselves lead equally to the same break from the central tradition of the church as summarized by Chalcedon. A brief description of each trend will provide for a better comprehension of the Christological confusion outside of the orthodox confession of the church.

### *The Paradigm of Historical Jesus Research*

Many today seek to unearth the “historical Jesus” or the “real” Jesus of history.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of the specific viewpoint, the approaches in this trend all start with the same assumption: the “Jesus of history” is *not the same* as the “Jesus of the Bible,” let alone the “Christ of Chalcedon.” As Francis Watson rightly observes, modern historical Jesus research is part of “a scholarly project operating within a shared paradigm—that is, a set of assumptions, priorities, and methodological tools that inform and direct the process of research.”<sup>15</sup> Alongside this particular project, many biblical scholars are utilizing various historical-critical tools to comprehend the literary interrelationship of the Gospels (even the entire Bible) and to discover how the ancient Christian community shaped the oral and written traditions behind the Gospels. As Watson reminds us, “Historical Jesus research is closely related to these other scholarly projects, which together constitute the modern, *wissenschaftlich* study of the Gospels.”<sup>16</sup> Although the proponents may have different goals, they all start

<sup>13</sup>For a discussion of these two trends in Christology, see Carson, *Gagging of God*, 315–317.

<sup>14</sup>For the use of the term “real,” see Robert B. Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus: An Introductory Survey of the Historical Roots of Gospels Criticism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995).

<sup>15</sup>Francis Watson, “*Veritas Christi*: How to Get from the Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith without Losing One's Way,” in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 98.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

with the same working hypothesis that underlies the entire historical-critical approach to Christology: the historical Jesus is not the same as the constructed “Jesus of the Bible” or the “Christ of faith.”

According to this kind of historical Jesus research, the Jesus of the Bible is simply the product of the creative imagination of the early church interpreted through the grid of a first-century cultural mind-set, which, for the most part, is not credible to us today. The biblical text in its final form cannot directly warrant our Christological reflection, as the “precritical” era of the church assumed. Instead, we must use critical tools to *get behind* the documents, peeling off layers of “dogmatic construction and legendary elaboration” that the Christian community has created. The historical-critical research is *the only valid way to discover the real Jesus* who lived in first-century Palestine.<sup>17</sup>

The historical Jesus research paradigm, then, produces what can be called a *critical* Christology. The historical-critical methodology it employs takes a critical, suspicious stance toward Scripture and progresses independently of the Bible’s own terms. Such a critical approach stands opposite of a *confessional* Christology that commits to the full accuracy and authority of Scripture. This commitment to the reliability of the Bible’s presentation of Jesus includes a rejection of any attempt to reconstruct the “real” Jesus—he has been revealed by God himself in God’s own word written to man. But because the historical Jesus research paradigm operates with different theological beliefs, convictions, and worldview structures, it rejects confessional Christology as no longer credible.<sup>18</sup> A critical Christology assumes that Scripture actually obscures the real Jesus and that he can be identified only through historical reconstruction, not revelation.

Within the last thirty years, the historical Jesus research paradigm has been famously epitomized by two examples: *The Myth of God Incarnate* and the Jesus Seminar.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, both originated in the academic world but had their greatest impact in popular culture.

*The Myth of God Incarnate* was a 1977 symposium of essays that reflected the entire stream of historical-critical efforts in Christological construction, from the Enlightenment period through the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> The seven

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of this point, see A. T. B. McGowan, “Affirming Chalcedon,” in *Forgotten Christ*, 39–40.

<sup>19</sup> At the popular level, this critical approach is found in Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003). For more scholarly treatments, see Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. William Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1968); James C. Paget, “Quests for the Historical Jesus,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 138–155; Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought, 1778–1860* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985); Alister E. McGrath, *The Making of Modern German Christology, 1750–1990*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005); Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*; James Beilby and Paul Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

authors had a twofold thesis: first, the *real, historical* Jesus, was not the Jesus of the Bible, but was a mere man approved by God for a special role; second, the orthodox conception of Jesus as God the Son incarnate is a mythological way of expressing his ultimate value for us.<sup>21</sup> The category of *myth* was employed to explain that the incarnation language of Scripture was part of a “story composed for the purpose of communicating a truth,”<sup>22</sup> not for the affirmation of historical reality.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, the authors argued, the church missed the myth and interpreted the biblical language to mean that God the Son literally became incarnate. But any credible view of Jesus today must reject the anachronous metaphysical categories of Chalcedon as the result of an outmoded way of thinking.

From 1985–1991, about two hundred mainline New Testament scholars gathered throughout the United States twice a year as the Jesus Seminar.<sup>24</sup> The Seminar gathered to determine which of the approximately five hundred sayings attributed to Jesus in the New Testament were actually spoken by the historical Jesus, and which ones were later “put into his mouth” by the Christian community.<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, the Seminar concluded that 82 percent of the words attributed to Jesus were never actually said by him. More significantly for our purposes here, the participants drew upon the noncanonical and apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* and their own historical reconstructions to conclude that Jesus was primarily a preacher viewed by the authorities of his day as a political subversive, which eventually led to his death.<sup>26</sup> Simply put, they *demythologized*

<sup>21</sup> There were a number of responses to the book. For a positive response, see Michael Goulder, ed., *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979); for a critical response, see Michael Green, ed., *The Truth of God Incarnate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977).

<sup>22</sup> David F. Wells, *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of the Incarnation* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1984), 1.

<sup>23</sup> The notion of *myth* is not unique to these authors; it has its roots in the work of a number of people, but especially the work of David Strauss (1808–1874). In 1835, Strauss wrote *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, in which he introduced the notion of *myth* into Gospel criticism (for a recent publication, see David Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, ed. Peter Hodgson, trans. George Eliot, Lives of Jesus Series [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972]). For Strauss, the Gospels are not descriptions of events that actually happened; they are *myths*, i.e., a literary category applied to the Gospels as entire narratives. Strauss followed the lead of Georg Hegel, who argued that the religion of Christianity was one step in the development of human beings expressing universal *Ideas* of philosophy in symbolic ways. In this sense, *myths* are a suitable form of communication for human beings at an earlier stage of our development, but something we must grow beyond by *demythologizing* the truths of Christianity and demonstrating through philosophical analysis that the Gospels are simply imperfect representations of the eternal *Ideas* of reason. As applied to Christology, the God-man concept is important, not because the incarnation literally happened but because the *Idea* entered the world. In this way, the *myth* of the incarnation can be seen as true only if it is seen as a *symbol* of the truth concerning human beings as a whole, not as the real life of one individual man.

<sup>24</sup> The literature on the Jesus Seminar is legion. For a helpful overview and critique of it, see Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds., *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995); see also Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); James R. Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 23–32; Witherington, *Jesus Quest*, 42–57.

<sup>25</sup> For a statement regarding this purpose of historical investigation, see Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1994), 162.

<sup>26</sup> For an evaluation of the *Gospel of Thomas*, see Darrell L. Bock and Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture's Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007); Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*.

Jesus,<sup>27</sup> denying his deity, virginal conception, miracles, and bodily resurrection. All of these teachings are simply the result of the church's ideological construction of Jesus according to a worldview that is no longer acceptable to modern and postmodern people.<sup>28</sup> The cofounder of the Seminar, Robert Funk, sums up the entire stream of historical-critical Jesus research: "It is no longer credible to think of Jesus as divine. Jesus's divinity goes together with the old theistic way of thinking about God."<sup>29</sup>

These two examples of the historical Jesus research paradigm illustrate that a critical Christology has taken root in contemporary culture. This move away from a confessional Christology leads us away from the true identity of Christ. But the more instructive point for us here is this: *the move to a critical Christology could not have happened without a prior epistemological shift away from the biblical worldview and the basic assumptions of Christian theism.* The *Myth of God Incarnate* and the results of the Jesus Seminar did not change the plausibility structures for culture at large through excellent scholarship and ground-breaking research.<sup>30</sup> These two and the other instances of the historical-critical approach received remarkable attention, both scholarly and popular, because the fundamental restructuring of what counts as possible, plausible, reliable, and significant had already taken place.

### *The Paradigm of Pluralism*

Although they differ situationally, the paradigms of historical Jesus research and pluralism relate symbiotically.<sup>31</sup> In fact, we can say that historical Jesus research is a "correlative of pluralism": the historical-critical research for the *Jesus behind* the Bible is partly a cause and partly an effect of *pluralism beyond* the Bible.<sup>32</sup> As a *cause*, the historical Jesus paradigm makes pluralism more

<sup>27</sup> The language of "demythologization" comes from Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert Miles Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); idem, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, The Scribner Library (New York: Scribner, 1958).

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994); idem, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> See Robert W. Funk, "The Coming Radical Reformation: Twenty-one Theses," *The Fourth R* 11/4 (July–August 1998), <http://www.westarinstitute.org/resources/the-fourth-r/the-coming-radical-reformation/>, accessed May 19, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Most of the conclusions were the continuation and culmination of classic liberal theology, on which see Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, *Twentieth-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 51–62. Regarding the popularity of the Jesus Seminar in particular, James Edwards makes an astute comment: "What is novel about the Jesus Seminar is not its low opinion of the historical reliability of the Gospels. Our review of critical biblical scholarship since the Enlightenment, especially in its more radical forms, reveals that similar conclusions have been reached for the past two and one-half centuries. The novelty of the Seminar consists rather in its public relations expertise and marketing savvy. The Jesus Seminar has made an end run around the sequestered scholarly guild of biblical scholars and made Jesus into a media event on television talk shows and specials at Christmas and Easter" (Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, 26).

<sup>31</sup> See Carson, *Gagging of God*, 316. Carson argues that "the sheer multiplicity of ostensibly 'historical' reconstructions has over time greatly eroded confidence in traditional Christological formulations. With confidence eroded, the stage is set to construct whatever Christology seems needed to line up with whatever the priorities of the hour happen to be. At the moment, those priorities happen to be whatever is perceived to advance pluralism" (ibid.).

<sup>32</sup> For "correlative of pluralism," see ibid., 37. Carson does not describe historical Jesus research as a correlative of pluralism; rather, I am employing his category and drawing my own conclusion.

plausible because the critical assumptions often lead to a denial of the biblical and historical confession of Jesus's uniqueness as the Word made flesh and the only Lord and Savior. As an *effect*, historical Jesus research naturally flows out of a paradigm that assumes philosophical pluralism and then asks "what kind of Christology would be necessary, or what kind of changes would have to be introduced into traditional Christology, in order to fit the 'given' of that pluralism."<sup>33</sup>

While much could be said about the paradigm of pluralism itself, we can focus here on its status as a precommitment that affects how one approaches Christology. In this regard, one of the best examples is the work of John Hick.<sup>34</sup> We get a sense of his prior commitment to pluralism from Hick's argument that "those who have come to see the great religions and cultures of the world, including Christianity, as different but (so far as we can tell) more or less equally valuable forms of response to the Transcendent, are inclined to read the evidence of Christian origins differently."<sup>35</sup> He rightly acknowledges that a traditional Christology grounds its beliefs "in the superiority of Christianity as embodied in the church and in Western civilization."<sup>36</sup> And, as Harold Netland observes, the superiority of Christianity is grounded in the Bible's historical claim that God the Son became incarnate: "If Jesus really was in fact the eternal creator God become man, then it becomes very difficult indeed to treat Jesus, the New Testament, and Christian faith as being on the same level as phenomena from other religious traditions. There would seem to be something inherently superior and normative, to say the least, about Jesus and the Christian faith."<sup>37</sup> Hick's prior commitment to pluralism (for various reasons),<sup>38</sup> however, commits him to a different approach to the Bible that leads him to divergent conclusions regarding the identity of Christ.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>34</sup> For examples, see John Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," in *Myth of God Incarnate*, 167–185; idem, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982); idem, "An Inspirational Christology for a Religiously Plural World," in John B. Cobb et al., *Encountering Jesus: A Debate on Christology*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 5–38; idem, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); idem, "A Pluralist View," in John Hick et al., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 27–59; John H. Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

<sup>35</sup> Hick, *Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 175.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 242.

<sup>38</sup> Additional reasons that Hick and other religious pluralists give for their commitment to pluralism include: (1) a traditional understanding of Christ is incoherent; (2) there is nothing unique about the Bible; (3) the sheer diversity of religions in the world, the link between ethnicity and religion, the lack of missionary success in other cultures, and the similarity of all religions in terms of their basic outlook on life are all evidence that one's adoption of religion has more to do with one's upbringing and culture than its truthfulness; (4) the universe is religiously neutral, i.e., none of the arguments for any particular religion are uniquely compelling, and even trying to argue such a case is implausible given our limited knowledge of the universe. For a helpful discussion of the challenge of pluralism for the church, see J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, eds., *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999).

For example, regarding the uniqueness and exclusivity of Christ, Hick urges that “in the light of our accumulated knowledge of the other great world faiths [Christian exclusivism] has become unacceptable to all except a minority of dogmatic diehards. For it conflicts with our concept of God, which we have received from Jesus, as the loving heavenly Father of all mankind; could such a Being have restricted the possibility of salvation to those who happen to have been born in certain countries in certain periods of history?”<sup>39</sup> The only alternative to this unthinkable conclusion is to modify the orthodox understanding of Christology to reflect the philosophical *given* of pluralism:

The alternative to traditional orthodoxy need not be to renounce Christianity. Another more constructive possibility is to continue the development of Christian self-understanding in the direction suggested by the new global consciousness of our time. To what extent is this likely to happen? Will Christians come to see Christianity as one among several authentic ways of conceiving, experiencing and responding to the Transcendent; and will they come to see Jesus, in a way that coheres with this, as a man who was exceptionally open to the divine presence and who thus incarnated to a high degree the ideal of human life lived in response to the Real?<sup>40</sup>

The examples could be multiplied, but the point is this: *the paradigm of pluralism leads to a critical Christology; an a priori commitment to pluralism entails an equally a priori rejection of a confessional Christology*. This rejection of orthodoxy is the common conviction that pluralism shares with historical Jesus research. Both maintain that it is not possible to believe either what the Scriptures affirm or what the church has confessed about the identity of Jesus Christ. A basic distrust of the Bible’s reliability and a dismissal of the Bible’s universal authority directly effect a fundamental shift in theological convictions.

As we recognized with historical Jesus research, pluralism as a paradigm for Christology is possible only because of prior epistemological shifts. We can easily survey the landscape of current Christological discussion and describe the surface level disagreements and confusion. To produce the fruit of clarity and coherence in Christology today, however, we need to trace the roots of the current confusion to its source—we need an excavation of epistemology. Making famous the expression “ideas have consequences,” Francis Schaeffer often traced the development of Western thought to demonstrate that the current mind-set did not spring up spontaneously.<sup>41</sup> To understand, critique,

<sup>39</sup> Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Hick, *Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 176.

<sup>41</sup> For example, see Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, in *The Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: The Three Essential Books in One Volume* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990); idem, *Escape from Reason*, in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy*; idem, *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*, L’Abri 50th anniversary ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).

and correct our intellectual present, then, we must first connect it with our intellectual past.

## TWO ROOTS OF CONFUSION IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTOLOGY

Our present-day confusion regarding the identity of Christ has a long history that is best understood by looking at pivot points that led thinking and theology away from orthodox Christology.

Historic Christianity has uniformly affirmed that Jesus is the eternal Son of God made flesh, who, as a result of the incarnation, now subsists as “one person in two natures.” And until the Enlightenment era, the church invariably agreed that the “Jesus of history” is identical to the “Jesus of the Bible” or the “Christ of faith.” These still dominant material understandings, along with the other tenets of orthodox Christology, follow from certain methodological convictions: Traditionally, in doing Christology, the biblical text in its final form has served as the warrant for our dogmatic constructions. Orthodoxy has been established by a “Christology from above,” from the vantage point of divine revelation, where Scripture not only provides the raw data for our Christology but also provides the structure, categories, and theological framework for understanding who Jesus is. The church has argued that we can grasp Jesus’s identity correctly only when he is viewed in light of the entire biblical storyline, and that any attempt to do otherwise only leads to a Jesus of our own imagination.

For many today, however, orthodoxy and its methodology are no longer viewed as credible. Those who have adopted the epistemology and hermeneutics of the Enlightenment or the postmodern period that has followed it presuppose a radically different methodology that cannot support orthodox Christology. The Enlightenment and postmodern ways of thinking and reading the Bible do not merely disagree with the way the church has understood the identity of Christ. The epistemological and hermeneutical turns characterizing the Enlightenment and postmodernism fundamentally reject orthodoxy as implausible and incoherent.

### *The Impact of the Enlightenment on Christology*

The Enlightenment era (c. 1560–1780) saw a sea change in epistemology and methodology that spared no sector of society. But our interest in Christology limits our present investigation to the *displacement* of the medieval and Reformation worldview and the gradual *secularization* of thought and institutions in Western Europe.<sup>42</sup> The Enlightenment serves as the hinge that swung the

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., W. Andrew Hofferger, “Enlightenments and Awakenings: The Beginnings of Modern Culture Wars,” in *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought*, ed. W. Andrew Hofferger (Phillipsburg,

medieval-Reformation era into the modern era, opening the door to what is now called “modernism.” In noting the significance of this era, Alister McGrath observes, “With the benefit of hindsight, the Enlightenment can be said to have marked a decisive and irreversible change in the political, social, and religious outlook of Western Europe and North America.”<sup>43</sup>

Many scholars today use “Age of Reason” to describe the *nature* of the Enlightenment. In his 1784 article, “What Is Enlightenment?,” Immanuel Kant sought to capture something of the *Zeitgeist* of this era:

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] “Have courage to use your own understanding!”—that is the motto of enlightenment.<sup>44</sup>

The Enlightenment was the “Age of Reason,” not because reason was inoperative in the Reformation and prior to it, but because reason was elevated from a ministerial instrument to a magisterial rule, especially over Scripture and tradition.<sup>45</sup> So Kant viewed the “enlightened” person as one who reasons autonomously, without dependence upon the authorities of the past. The mind-set of “faith seeking understanding” yielded to the motto, “I believe what I can understand.”<sup>46</sup>

A further contrast with the thought and theology of the Reformation will show us the *significance* of the Enlightenment. The Reformation is important to church history for many reasons, but here we can focus on the theological framework and epistemology of the Reformers. Even though they held many doctrinal convictions in common with the passing medieval era, as Scott Amos reminds us, “the Reformers nevertheless rejected the medieval synthesis of the human and the divine in its balance of reason and revelation.”<sup>47</sup> This led the Reformers to emphasize *sola Scriptura*, which entailed that all beliefs, creeds, and dogmas, including church tradition, must be tested by Scripture. And this

NJ: P&R, 2007), 240–280; cf. John D. Woodbridge, “Some Misconceptions of the Impact of the Enlightenment on the Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 241–270.

<sup>43</sup> McGrath, *Making of Modern German Christology*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Immanuel Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?,” cited in Hoffecker, “Enlightenments and Awakenings,” 265.

<sup>45</sup> McGrath makes this same point, noting that the Middle Ages were just as much an “Age of Reason” as the Enlightenment (McGrath, *Making of Modern German Christology*, 15). However, “the crucial difference lay in the manner in which reason was used, and the limits which were understood to be imposed upon it. . . . Most medieval theologians insisted that there was a set of revealed truths, to which access could not be gained by human reason” (ibid.). On the distinction between the ministerial and the magisterial use of reason, see William Lane Craig, “Classical Apologetics,” in William Lane Craig et al., *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 36–38.

<sup>46</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 62.

<sup>47</sup> Scott Amos, “The Reformation as a Revolution in Worldview,” in *Revolutions in Worldview*, 207.



commitment to Scripture meant that the Reformers constructed their Christology from a theological framework that was founded on the centrality and sovereignty of the triune God of Scripture. As a result, they had no problem affirming the Son's preexistence, virgin conception, bodily resurrection, and the uniqueness of his identity and work. Their understanding of Jesus was of one piece with their entire theological understanding of the world centered in their doctrine of God.

The Reformers, then, never separated the "Jesus of history" from the "Christ of faith." As Hans Frei observed, the Reformers believed that the Gospel narratives actually corresponded to the real world as "history-like narratives."<sup>48</sup> This does not deny that the biblical authors gave us an interpreted Jesus. The Reformers believed, rather, that *the interpretive framework of the biblical authors is God's own interpretive framework for the identity of Jesus*—what Scripture says about Jesus, God says about Jesus.<sup>49</sup> Regarding the Gospels in particular, Francis Watson sums up the Reformers' hermeneutical assumption regarding the identity of Christ: "the Jesus of whom [the Gospels] tell is maximally identified with Jesus as he really was. If the Johannine Jesus turns water into wine and speaks of himself as the light of the world, then so too did Jesus himself: the text is a window onto the historical reality."<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, the Reformers grounded objective truth and knowledge in the comprehensive plan of God and argued that as image-bearers we come to know truth by reasoning from divine revelation (both general and special). The Reformers, then, emphasized *a revelational epistemology in which the ministerial use of reason served theology under the authority of Scripture*. The Bible is the lens by which we rightly interpret God, the self, and the world: the word of God gives us a true (even if not exhaustive) "God's-eye point-of-view." Without this revelation, human subjectivity blinds us to the truth, and the objectivity of truth becomes questionable as the basis for theology. For the Reformers, the human creature is never autonomous, neither metaphysically nor methodologically.<sup>51</sup> John Calvin emphasizes this order of being and knowing in his *Institutes*, where he demonstrates that without the knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self.<sup>52</sup>

This relationship between knowing God and knowing self is perhaps the best point at which to begin our contrast with Enlightenment thinking. In the

<sup>48</sup> Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 17–50.

<sup>49</sup> For a further treatment of these points, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); idem, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 207–235.

<sup>50</sup> Watson, "Veritas Christi," 99.

<sup>51</sup> For this point, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Human Being, Individual and Social," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 158–159.

<sup>52</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:35.

“turn to the subject” by Enlightenment philosophers such as René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, Calvin’s maxim was reversed: “There is no knowledge of God except through knowledge of the self.”<sup>53</sup> This turn gave human subjectivity a foundational status not just for theology but also for epistemology in general. And this section argues that the Enlightenment shift from a revelational epistemology to a rational epistemology created a revolution in philosophy, science, religion, and hermeneutics that made the orthodox understanding of Jesus since the early church and creeds simply incredible and incoherent.

#### ENLIGHTENMENT EPISTEMOLOGY AND WORLDVIEW

The epistemological changes that came during the Enlightenment did not come overnight; seeds were planted in the Renaissance, especially in the rise of humanism as an intellectual movement.<sup>54</sup> But in the Enlightenment, these seeds produced a radical disruption of the Reformation’s theological and Christological views. The story of these changes has been told in detail elsewhere.<sup>55</sup> Here we need only to register how a “turn to the subject” created “a decisive shift in worldview from theocentric thinking to various degrees of anthropocentrism.”<sup>56</sup>

As Stanley Grenz correctly reminds us, “[the Enlightenment] came as the outgrowth of various social, political, and intellectual factors that led up to and transpired during this traumatic era in human history.”<sup>57</sup> At this time, Europe was embattled in religious wars between Protestants and Roman Catholics, and there was a desire to get beyond these debates and to arbitrate the differences through rational means. In fact, many Enlightenment thinkers came to believe that human rationality was the only way to solve problems where theology had failed. One of the reasons for this confidence stemmed from belief in “the principle of the omniscience and universality of human reason.”<sup>58</sup> As a result, many began to assert that theology also derived from reason and was therefore open to critical examination. McGrath pinpoints the impact of this elevation of reason: “The ability of reason to judge revelation was affirmed. As human reason was omniscient it was argued that it was supremely qualified to judge Christian beliefs and practices, with a view to eliminating any irrational or superstitious elements.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Vanhoozer, “Human Being, Individual and Social,” 159. In the phrase, “turn to the subject,” the subject is the human subject. This is another way of speaking about the Enlightenment project, which sought to make the human subject the standard in epistemological judgment instead of God and his revelation.

<sup>54</sup> On humanism as an intellectual movement, see James A. Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality: The Eclipse of the Western Religious Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 49–54; cf. also Carl True-man, “The Renaissance,” in *Revolutions in Worldview*, 178–205.

<sup>55</sup> See, e.g., Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*; cf. Hoffecker, “Enlightenments and Awakenings.”

<sup>56</sup> Hoffecker, “Enlightenments and Awakenings,” 241.

<sup>57</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 63.

<sup>58</sup> See McGrath, *Making of Modern German Christology*, 20.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. McGrath illustrates this point with Herman Reimarus in Germany and the *philosophes* in France. Both placed reason above revelation and introduced a critical spirit leading to the reconstruction of Christology.

We can understand the epistemological revolution—reason over revelation as the ultimate source of knowledge—by tracking changes in philosophy, science, and religion.<sup>60</sup>

#### THE REVOLUTION IN PHILOSOPHY

Often named “the father of modern philosophy,” René Descartes (1596–1650) stands as the pivotal figure in philosophy who moved it from a medieval to a modern mind-set, especially through the influence of his *Discourse on the Method* (1637). Working against Pyrrhonism and its skepticism that threatened our ability to know anything with certainty, Descartes devised a method to discover indubitable truths. Instead of starting with God as the ground for his philosophy, Descartes stripped away all of his beliefs about God, the world, and the self. He was left with only one truth that he could not doubt: he existed as a thinking subject. From that starting point, then, Descartes’ famous *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) served as the foundation for building all knowledge in every field of inquiry.

Descartes’ use of the *cogito* argument, however, was not the first; in fact, it was a significant departure from Augustine’s prior appropriation. “Cartesian rationalism effectively inaugurated the ‘modern self’ or the ‘subjective turn,’ a shift from knowledge as objectively rooted in biblical revelation (both general and special) to knowledge as authenticated and demonstrated by human reason.”<sup>61</sup> Andrew Hoffercker contrasts this turn to the self with Augustine’s *cogito* that centered on God:

Augustine formulated the *cogito* in the *context* of objective Christian belief, in which knowing God took preeminence. Certainty of his own existence served the higher end of knowing God. His *cogito* formed but a small part of thought that would center on God, who alone is self-existent and self-sufficient.

Descartes’ use of the *cogito*, on the other hand, launched the whole project of modernity. Self-authenticating, rational self-sufficiency was the basis of Cartesian foundationalism. No matter what form epistemology took in the ensuing seventeenth- and eighteenth-century discussions, its formulators used assumptions that furthered Descartes’ break from the past. Descartes’ radically new method—*dubito, cogito ergo sum*—provided a subjective, rational starting point—the intellectual fulcrum of human autonomy—that set the agenda for all future philosophical discussion. Although Cartesianism was but the first of many systems that occupied European thought, it placed the debate on new ground—a human centered, secular perspective.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> My presentation is indebted to Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 63–67.

<sup>61</sup> Hoffercker, “Enlightenments and Awakenings,” 254.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

Descartes' methodological turn set the agenda for philosophy over the next few centuries, but not without serious problems. Now known as "classical foundationalism," the Enlightenment schools of epistemology—Cartesian rationalism, Continental rationalism, and British empiricism<sup>63</sup>—all contended that our *derived beliefs* are justified only if they are supported by an *infallible foundation*, i.e., "basic beliefs" that need no justification. Under this system, however, many beliefs—like memory beliefs, belief from logical induction, and belief in God—would not qualify as knowledge.<sup>64</sup> And many Enlightenment philosophers urged this kind of agnosticism, with Immanuel Kant questioning the legitimacy of the entire project of metaphysics as knowledge.

Probably no single person has had more impact on modern philosophy and theology than Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Trying to mediate between rationalism and a strict empiricism, and working against the destructive force of Humean skepticism, Kant proposed a new approach to epistemology—his famous "Copernican revolution." Rationalism seemed arbitrary and speculative, while a consistent empiricism led to the conclusion of David Hume (1711–1776) that even such basic notions as substance, causality, and the self are questionable and can be assumed only because they cannot be established empirically. In response, Kant reversed the traditional understanding of the relationship between the subject (mind) and the object (world) in the knowing process. Instead of our minds passively conforming to objects outside of them, our minds actively schematize the sense data from the world (contra rationalism) to conform the objects of the world to our a priori categories (contra empiricism).

Working out this approach to human understanding in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant limited knowledge to objects as they appear to us, which excluded the knowledge of God.<sup>65</sup> Human reason is limited by the fact that the a priori categories of the mind do not work beyond the sense world: mental categories without sense experience are *empty*; sense experience without categories is *blind*. The human mind is not equipped to grapple with anything beyond the range of immediate experience, and attempts to do so inevitably result in irresolvable contradictions and antinomies. Kant made a strict distinction between objects present in our experience ("phenomena") and objects lying beyond our experience ("noumena"). We can know only the phenomena; we have no *direct* knowledge of the noumena. Since the knowledge of God,

<sup>63</sup> Continental rationalism is identified with Descartes (1596–1650), Spinoza (1632–1677), and Leibniz (1646–1716); British empiricism is identified with Locke (1632–1704), Berkeley (1685–1753), and Hume (1711–1776).

<sup>64</sup> See, e.g., Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988); Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); John S. Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True? Christian Apologetics in a Modern and Postmodern Era* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 37–76, 143–194.

<sup>65</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans., Norman K. Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929).

the self, and all other ultimate realities as they are in themselves apart from our experience of them belongs to the realm of the noumena, we must remain metaphysically and theologically agnostic.<sup>66</sup>

According to its major forms of philosophical thought, then, the Enlightenment constrained *knowledge* in the modern world to our *experience* of the modern world. As John Feinberg has noted, many moderns functioned in the world as if the only beliefs truly capable of being justified are the beliefs of science and not theology.<sup>67</sup> Theology became a *sub*-rational discipline open to critical assessment and subject to the canons of science.<sup>68</sup>

But this philosophical turn to science begs the question of *which* science. Is it a science grounded in a theistic view of the world, or one that is decidedly deistic and/or naturalistic? After all, science as a discipline is not presuppositionless; like theology, science is dependent upon worldview commitments. So what kind of science did the Enlightenment assume?

#### THE REVOLUTION IN SCIENCE

It is hard to overestimate the effects of science on the Enlightenment understanding of the world. Historic Christianity is not against science, properly understood. In fact, one can make a strong case that Christian theology provided the necessary presuppositions for an empirical science.<sup>69</sup> The Enlightenment, however, brought a particular combination of beliefs that set science over theology. The belief that God had created the universe in a rational, orderly, and knowable fashion was combined with the belief in reason's independent ability to understand the structure of the world. And the result was that the scientific method was applied to all disciplines of knowledge, including the human sciences—even ethics, metaphysics, and theology: “if this way of obtaining knowledge about the universe was so successful, why not apply the same method to knowledge about God?”<sup>70</sup>

In this regard, Isaac Newton (1642–1727) looms large in the Enlightenment and beyond. Newton was interested in both theological and scientific questions. It was his view of the physical universe, however, that transformed the thinking of the age. Newton's universe was that of a grand, orderly machine; its movements could be known because they followed certain observable

<sup>66</sup> Kant allows only a moral theology: “Now I maintain that all attempts to employ reason in theology in any merely speculative manner are altogether fruitless and by their very nature null and void, and that the principles of its employment in the study of nature do not lead to any theology whatsoever. Consequently, the only theology of reason which is possible is that which is based upon moral laws or seeks guidance from them” (ibid., 528).

<sup>67</sup> John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 88.

<sup>68</sup> See ibid., 84–95.

<sup>69</sup> See, e.g., Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy*, Turning Point Christian Worldview Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994).

<sup>70</sup> James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 47.

laws. Yet, while Newton was a committed theist, his successors were not. They looked at the same orderly universe but interpreted it according to a radically different worldview that separated God from his creation. Hoeffcker observes that “Newton’s disciples outstripped themselves as they invented metaphors to redefine the character of the universe: a vast machine or a watch designed so wisely by a watchmaker that it runs on its own without outside intervention. Nature no longer was an organism; now it had a mechanical nature and operated according to Newton’s laws.”<sup>71</sup>

This mechanistic view of the world paved the way for the rise of deism and a more naturalistic approach to science. When coupled with the revolution in philosophy, the stage was set for a growing critique of orthodox theology. Belief in “God” remained; but belief in the triune God of Scripture who creates, upholds, and acts in the world to accomplish his plan of redemption was rejected. According to the deistic view, if God acts at all in the world, it is only by upholding the natural processes, the laws of nature that he established in the first place; God does not act extraordinarily in the world. James Edwards summarizes the end result of the epistemological revolution on the mind-set of the Enlightenment:

Committed to explaining all reality by means of the scientific method, the Enlightenment reduced all reality to naturalism, empiricism, and rationalism. Committed to naturalism as the sum of reality, the Enlightenment could not admit the possibility of a God (if there was one) who would “violate the laws of nature” by breaking into the natural order. Things that could not be explained by the scientific method—whether historical events, morality, human affection, or the existence of God—were explained *away* by it.<sup>72</sup>

#### THE DEVOLUTION OF RELIGION

Robert Funk’s observation that Jesus’s divinity depends upon the traditional theistic way of thinking about God is important to remember when considering that deism is already far removed from Christian theism.<sup>73</sup> No doubt, as Frederick Copleston notes, deism is not a *school* of thought or even an organized *religion*; rather, in the Enlightenment, deism was associated with a number of influential thinkers who (while disagreeing at points) formed a basic *system* of thought that moved the larger society from a theistic mind-set to a more secular approach.<sup>74</sup> At its heart, deism views religion as *natural* rather than revealed and *supernatural*. Despite their diversity, therefore, all religions can be reduced to common, universal truths warranted by rational means alone.

<sup>71</sup> Hoeffcker, “Enlightenments and Awakenings,” 247.

<sup>72</sup> Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, 13.

<sup>73</sup> On this point, see Sire, *Universe Next Door*, 45–58.

<sup>74</sup> See Frederick Copleston, *The British Philosophers from Hobbes to Hume*, vol. 5 in *A History of Philosophy*, new rev. ed., (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 162–163.

Most deists affirmed at least four basic points contrary to orthodox theology and Christology.<sup>75</sup> First, a transcendent God created the universe, but he is not now providentially active in the world: “God is thus not immanent, not fully personal, not sovereign over human affairs, not providential.”<sup>76</sup> Second, because this transcendent God created it, the universe is rational, orderly, and law-governed, but it is best viewed as a *closed* system with no expectation that God acts in it. In fact, as Sire comments, “any tampering or apparent tampering [by God] with the machinery of the universe would suggest that God had made a mistake in the original plan, and that would be beneath the dignity of an all-competent deity.”<sup>77</sup> Even stopping here, it is quite clear that rejecting God’s activity and the miraculous raises serious doubts concerning the Bible’s most significant events, including its unique and singular presentation of Jesus.

Third, humans, though personal, are part of the closed system of the universe such that, morally speaking, they are not fallen or abnormal but basically good. As McGrath notes, “Voltaire (1694–1778) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) criticized the doctrine [of original sin] as encouraging pessimism in regard to human abilities, thus impeding human social and political development and promoting *laissez-faire* attitudes.”<sup>78</sup> Fourth, the purpose of religion is to order moral behavior: “The chief role of religion, [deists] maintained, is to provide a divine sanction for morality.”<sup>79</sup> This focus on morality enabled deists to dismiss as unreasonable and unnecessary various dogmas that traditional theology had argued were grounded in divine revelation. If deists allowed for any notion of “divine revelation,” it was only that these truths were “simply a rational reaffirmation of moral truths already available to enlightened reason.”<sup>80</sup>

Alongside the revolution in epistemology, then, religion in the Enlightenment era really underwent a *devolution*. After creating the universe, a transcendent God transferred his power to the immanent natural laws he established, thereby surrendering cosmic control to the local authority of physics, chemistry, biology, and the like. Rather than caused by or merely coordinated with the epistemological revolution, this religious devolution likely came about through an interplay of religious thought and the massive shifts in philosophy and science. Significantly for our purpose here of understanding the causes of current Christological confusion, we must learn from this brief examination of Enlightenment epistemology that theology is never insular. For good or for ill,

<sup>75</sup> Use of these points is indebted to Sire, *Universe Next Door*, 48–55.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>78</sup> McGrath, *Making of Modern German Christology*, 24–25.

<sup>79</sup> Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 72.

<sup>80</sup> McGrath, *Making of Modern German Christology*, 20.

the prevailing intellectual conditions will influence theological construction, beginning with how we understand the nature and function of the Bible.

#### ENLIGHTENMENT HERMENEUTICS

Not surprisingly, the massive shift from a revelational to a strictly rational epistemology and worldview was accompanied by an equally transformative turn in the way people received and read texts. Presuppositions matter to the *way we think*, and the way we think affects *how we read* and *what we think* about what we read. Here we will look specifically at how the combination of rationalism and naturalism affected how people received and read the Bible in relation to the rise of biblical criticism and the rule (and rules) of the historical-critical method.

#### THE RISE OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM

For the first time since Constantine, Christian doctrine was derided openly during the Enlightenment. Not just philosophers and committed deists but also those in biblical studies scorned orthodox Christianity. In the late eighteenth century, a critical examination of the Bible, especially the four Gospels, began in earnest and culminated in yet another major shift away from the Reformation's Christianity. Prior to this time, differences between the Gospels were acknowledged, but it was assumed that such differences could be harmonized. With the epistemological revolution well under way in the Enlightenment, however, many abandoned an attitude of trust and confidence toward the Bible as God's word and viewed Scripture with suspicion. These "enlightened" hermeneuts began to criticize the reliability of the Gospels, focusing on difficulties with the miracle stories and questioning the fulfillment of prophecies, how the New Testament authors used the Old Testament, and discrepancies in the Gospel narratives. Many attribute the rise of this "biblical criticism" to the work of Richard Simon (1638–1712) and Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677),<sup>81</sup> but two of the most famous and significant biblical critics in the eighteenth century were Herman Reimarus (1694–1768) and Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781).<sup>82</sup>

As C. Stephen Evans argues, Reimarus advanced biblical criticism through two assumptions about the Bible: first, he treated the Gospels "as ordinary historical documents, with no presumption of divine inspiration or even reliability";<sup>83</sup> second, he approached the text with suspicion, assuming that "to learn what really happened one must look through the texts and not take them

<sup>81</sup> See Woodbridge, "Some Misconceptions of the Impact of the Enlightenment," 253–257.

<sup>82</sup> See McGrath, *Making of Modern German Christology*, 28–35; Strimple, *Modern Search for the Real Jesus*, 16–24; Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought, 1778–1860*, 1–55.

<sup>83</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 18.



at face value.”<sup>84</sup> With these assumptions, the “Jesus of history” versus “Christ of faith” distinction began in earnest. And with that distinction came an entire approach to Scripture that treats it “like any other book,”<sup>85</sup> not as what it claims to be: the God-given, reliable interpretation of the historical Jesus.

Lessing’s singular contribution to the shift in Christology came when he questioned the epistemic value of history. Prior to the Enlightenment, the church argued that the identity and significance of Jesus was based upon specific historical events, like his virgin conception, miracles, death and resurrection, and his second coming. All of these events bear witness to the uniqueness of who Jesus is. In fact, the church argued that it was precisely these historical events that not only establish his *unique identity*, they also demonstrate Jesus’s *universal significance* for all people. Both the uniqueness and the universality of the historical Jesus, however, came under scrutiny in the Enlightenment through interpreters like Lessing.

Lessing argued that Enlightenment epistemology inserted “an ugly, broad ditch” between the particular facts of history and the universal truths of reason.<sup>86</sup> In Christology, Lessing introduced the problem of how to start with the New Testament’s presentation of Jesus as a historical figure who lived and ministered at a particular point in time, and then move to affirm truths about him that have universal significance for all people and all times. For Lessing and other Enlightenment interpreters, a historically mediated knowledge of God is patently unjust, and historical persons and events cannot yield universal truths: the “scandal of historical particularity”<sup>87</sup> is too much to overcome. The Enlightenment allowed only reason to provide the basis for establishing necessary and universal truths; the “accidental truths of history can never become the proof of the necessary truths of reason.”<sup>88</sup>

For Lessing, this unbridgeable divide—this “ditch”—was dug by both chronology and metaphysics. In agreement with the church, Lessing acknowledged that in order to know the historical Jesus we are dependent upon written *accounts* based upon the testimony of others. In contrast with the church, however, he questioned the historical *accuracy* of these accounts. Lessing argued that human testimony cannot make a past event credible, unless we have a present experience of the exact same kind of event. So, not having firsthand experience of resurrection, we should not believe the New Testament’s clear affirmation that Jesus rose from the dead, because it “rests upon the authority

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> This is an expression taken from Benjamin Jowett (1817–1893), who in an influential article in *Essays and Reviews* (1860) argued that the Bible should be treated as any other book and thus as subject to criticism.

<sup>86</sup> G. E. Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and Power,” in *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, comp. and trans. Henry Chadwick, A Library of Modern Religious Thought (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1956), 53, 55.

<sup>87</sup> McGrath, *Making of Modern German Christology*, 32.

<sup>88</sup> Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and Power,” 53.

of others, rather than the authority of our own experience and rational reflection upon it.”<sup>89</sup> Moreover, Lessing argued that the same testimony that *imports* the facts cannot reliably *interpret* the facts. The Gospel accounts, then, cannot prove that Jesus is unique or universally significant because historical facts are accidental and contingent, open to a variety of interpretations that must ultimately be evaluated by reason alone as conceived by the Enlightenment. We simply have no warrant to draw metaphysical conclusions from historical facts alone.

#### THE RULE(S) OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

Reimarus and Lessing illustrate the effect of Enlightenment thinking on how and why we read the Bible. They were standouts among many who “donned critical investigation into the origins of the Bible and the life of Jesus with intellectual legitimacy.”<sup>90</sup> And with that recognition among the elite, the biblical criticism that began to rise during the Enlightenment reached a place of prominence in later modernity. Still today, the starting point for all biblical studies is that the Bible is untrustworthy and thus subject to critical evaluation. Evans puts it “bluntly and simply, . . . we have become unsure whether the events happened, and uncertain about whether we can know that they happened, even if they did.”<sup>91</sup>

The rise of a general biblical criticism led to the rule and rules of a particular historical-critical method (as it has come to be called). Scholars developed and used various tools (e.g., source, form, and redaction criticism) to subject the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, to historical-critical analysis.<sup>92</sup> The particular use of these tools differed, and some scholars were less skeptical of the historicity of the biblical documents than others (thus, ironically, making the “assured results of scholarship” not very sure). But *they all assumed* that the Gospels do not accurately record history and that the “Jesus of history” is not the “Jesus of the Bible.” Much could be said about the various critical methods employed, but our concern here is the control assumptions that led to the development and use of the various tools. No system of exegesis, including a self-consciously critical one, can proceed without presuppositions; instead, they take for granted specific philosophical and/or theological assumptions.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>89</sup> McGrath, *Making of Modern German Christology*, 30. Regarding miracles, for example, Lessing explains that “since the truth of these miracles has completely ceased to be demonstrable by miracles still happening at the present time, since they are no more than reports of miracles . . . , I deny that they can and should bind me in the least to a faith in the other teachings of Jesus” (Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and Power,” 53–55).

<sup>90</sup> Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, 14.

<sup>91</sup> Evans, *Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, 13.

<sup>92</sup> On these critical tools, see, e.g., I. Howard Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977).

<sup>93</sup> See Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis Possible without Presuppositions?,” in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, comp. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (New York: Meridian, 1960), 289–296.

Taken as a whole, the historical-critical method functions on the basis of three Enlightenment principles: (1) the principle of methodological doubt; (2) the principle of analogy; and (3) the principle of correlation.<sup>94</sup> The principle of methodological doubt states that all historical judgments (including biblical ones) are only statements of probability and, as such, are always open to doubt, criticism, and revision. The next two principles work in tandem to determine a text's historical accuracy. The principle of analogy assumes that all historical events are in principle qualitatively similar; the principle of correlation views all historical phenomena as existing in a causal nexus, i.e., in a closed cause-effect relationship. All historical events, then, are interrelated, interdependent, and qualitatively similar.

With these three Enlightenment principles in place, only one question can legitimately lead to a proper judgment regarding a text's historical accuracy: given the causal nexus of history, is the supposed historical event analogous to our present experience? If analogous, we have warrant for historicity; if not analogous, however, we have no warrant to think that the event actually occurred. Regarding the factuality of events recorded in Scripture, specifically supernatural ones, Ernst Troeltsch argued, "Jewish and Christian history are thus made analogous to all other history."<sup>95</sup> So, for Christology, if presently we do not witness virgin conceptions, people walking on water, and resurrections from the dead, we must judge such things to be implausible and the biblical texts to be in error.

As many critics of the historical-critical method have observed, the nature of the historical-critical method presupposes a methodological naturalism that rejects Christian theism without examination or analysis. The three principles of the Enlightenment hermeneutic undermine three foundations of orthodox theology: (1) divine truth resides in a unique, divine revelation; (2) this divine revelation concentrates on a single redemptive incursion into the world; and (3) original sin prevents an appeal to general and necessary truths of reason as a sufficient basis for knowledge.<sup>96</sup> The principles underneath historical criticism, however, are not demonstrably true; they can be assumed only by first adopting a naturalistic (even if deistic) worldview that denies the possibility of unique, extraordinary, supernatural events in history. Every hermeneutical method makes assumptions; first principles are not the problem. The problem is not admitting those principles and opening them to fair scrutiny.

Even a quick critique of the first principles of the historical-critical method demonstrates their incompatibility with the self-presentation of Scripture.

<sup>94</sup> See Ernst Troeltsch, "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology (1898)," in *Religion in History*, trans. James Luther Adams and Walter E. Bense (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 11–32.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>96</sup> See A. O. Dyson, "Ernst Troeltsch and the Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Ernst Troeltsch and the Future of Theology*, ed. J. P. Clayton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 85–86.

Van A. Harvey identifies two ways in which they are incompatible: “(1) No critical historian can make use of supernatural intervention as a principle of historical explanation because this will shatter the continuity of the causal nexus, and (2) no event can be regarded as a final revelation of the absolute spirit, since every manifestation of truth and value is relative and historically conditioned.”<sup>97</sup>

These insights confirm that presuppositions matter to the *way we think*, and the way we think affects *how we read* and *what we think* about what we read, including the Bible. The rise of biblical criticism represents a momentous shift in how the Bible was approached, how Christology was practiced, and ultimately how Jesus’s identity was understood. Historical-critical assumptions leave the church unable to demonstrate anything qualitatively unique about Jesus. Walter Wyman states it this way: “In so far as many religions make analogous claims to being founded on the self-revelation of God, it is extremely improbable that in one case (e.g., Christianity) the claim is true, but in all other cases it is false.”<sup>98</sup> It is no wonder that Troeltsch regarded historical criticism as a complete overturn of the pre-Enlightenment worldview: biblical criticism is “a new scientific mode of representing man and his development, and, as such, shows at all points an absolute contrast to the Biblico-theological views of later antiquity.”<sup>99</sup> Troeltsch also characterized the rise of biblical criticism as leavening the whole of theological methodology: if the critical assumptions are admitted at one point, it changes everything and finally destroys “the dogmatic form of method that has been used in theology.”<sup>100</sup>

#### THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND CHRISTOLOGY

Our brief excavation has turned up the Enlightenment roots of a revolution in epistemology, a devolution in worldview, and a suspicion toward the biblical text. We should now be able to see how these same roots are feeding today’s confusion in Christology by focusing on three primary influences: Kantianism, deism, and historical criticism.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF KANTIANISM

Following Descartes’ methodological turn to *centering* all knowledge in the reasoning power of the autonomous human subject, Immanuel Kant then *con-fined* all knowledge to the human subject’s experience of the world according

<sup>97</sup> Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 29–30.

<sup>98</sup> Walter E. Wyman, *The Concept of Glaubenslehre: Ernst Troeltsch and the Theological Heritage of Schleiermacher*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series, vol. 44 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 7.

<sup>99</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, “Historiography,” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 6, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912–1915), 718.

<sup>100</sup> Cited in Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 55.

to a priori categories of the mind. To be sure, Kantianism has changed through criticism and reconsideration. For example, his critics have rightly charged that Kant overstepped his own philosophy by claiming to know that all of us have the same mental categories. And many post-Kantian philosophers influenced by Darwinian theory now argue that our mental categories cannot be the same because they are the product of evolution and social construction. But even as revised, Kantianism today remains true to its anti-metaphysical bias, which directly affects Christology: human autonomy is primary; knowledge of metaphysics is impossible apart from experience; and theology must be done according to an *extratextual* interpretation of Scripture. This strictly rational epistemology rejects a God's-eye viewpoint of Christ in favor of a critical approach that dichotomizes the "Jesus of history" from the "Jesus of the Bible."

In one move, Kantianism dismisses all theology throughout history, including classical Christology with its metaphysical statements. If not grounded in perception, no metaphysical or theological claim can be considered knowledge. Revelation, miracles, direct divine activity in human history, statements regarding substances and the nature of things, including the natures of Christ, are all ultimately unknowable. Since God is a *noumenal* reality, we can never *know* if God is sovereign, if he is the Creator, or whether he has disclosed himself to us. And even if God has revealed himself to us in the world, that revelation is always subjected to a natural explanation supplied by the categories and active construction of the human mind, so that any theological pursuit must proceed by methodological naturalism.

As seen in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*,<sup>101</sup> the application of Kant's philosophy to religion and Christology necessarily denies and reinterprets the claims that Scripture makes for itself and about Christ. Kant is left to argue that religion is important in preserving human freedom and morality, but without God in Christ defining and providing freedom and morality for us. For Kant, religion provides the ultimate goal of morality, where it speaks of a powerful moral Lawgiver whose will ought to be man's final end. In his discussion of Christianity, however, Kant (in line with other biblical critics of his day) reinterpreted the gospel in light of his "religion of reason." Jesus was the exemplar of the morally perfect human race, but not in the sense that Jesus is necessary to show us what the moral law requires—reason can do that—and certainly not as the one who meets those requirements for us. Jesus shows us, rather, that moral perfection—again, according to reason—is attainable in this life. Since we are not the authors of this idea, we may say that it has come down to us "from heaven" and has "assumed our humanity." But this kind of

<sup>101</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

incarnation has nothing to do with, and in fact specifically rejects, the claim of Scripture that the Son of God took on human flesh in history to reveal true knowledge of God otherwise unattainable by reason.

For many theologians after Kant, every major doctrine of Christianity is made to fit the a priori pattern of current experience and the rules of naturalism. After Kantian reconstruction, the truth claims of orthodox Christology regarding the identity and significance of Christ are rejected as invalid and irrelevant: the revelation of Scripture cannot be trusted and cannot tell us anything we could not discover by reason alone, apart from Scripture.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF DEISM

It should not surprise us that, following the Kantian turn to reason and experience, deism also radically changes how we view Jesus's identity and significance. As McGrath reminds us, "Much traditional Christian apologetic concerning the identity and significance of Jesus Christ was based upon the 'miraculous evidences' of the New Testament, culminating in the resurrection."<sup>102</sup> But it is exactly those unique, extraordinary, unexpected events that the closed, law-governed, machinelike universe of deism rejects. One result of such a rejection is a different understanding of salvation, in terms of both the need for it and the role Jesus plays in it. Scripture's presentation of the person and work of Christ cannot be taken on its own terms: the incarnation of the Son of God into humanity and history is impossible under deism, and the biblical link between sin and its solution in a divine-human Redeemer is incomprehensible.

In light of this thinking, at least two significant and startling entailments result for Christology. First, by engaging in a radical critique of "revealed religion" on the grounds that it is not reasonable—according to their presupposed worldview—deists discard the doctrines of the Trinity, original sin, the deity of Christ, and his substitutionary atonement for sinners. In place of orthodoxy, deists reconstruct Christology (and other doctrines) out of the observable components of the natural (albeit created) world and its inherent rationality, quite apart from Scripture and tradition and the rationality of the faith. Second, due to their conviction that rational truth must possess the qualities of necessity and universality, it is axiomatic for deists that true knowledge cannot be attained through historical religions, specifically not Christianity. Unless historical facts can be verified and generalized in the form of unchanging, universal scientific laws, they have no philosophical significance under deism. So the uniqueness of Jesus in the specific historical events of his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection cannot establish universal truths. The uniqueness and particularity of Jesus as the Son of God and the Son of Man—being the exact

<sup>102</sup> McGrath, *Making of Modern German Christology*, 23.

imprint of God's nature, and being made like humans in every respect except sin—are the very things that disqualify him under the deistic worldview from revealing anything universally true about God and man.

Methodologically, deism's approach to Christology is a perfect example of what Hans Frei labels "extratextual."<sup>103</sup> In such an approach, priority is given to an alien ideology, so that Christological (and all theological) claims are valid only if they fit within the *extratextual* scheme. By contrast, traditional Christology approaches the Bible *intratextually*, seeking to identify Jesus according to *the Bible's own terms*—its own categories, claims, and worldview.<sup>104</sup> These two methodological approaches are inherently irreconcilable because they result from two completely divergent worldviews. Deism and Christian theism both start with a God who is *ontologically* separate from his creation; but deism also maintains an *economic* separation in the sense that God does not act in his creation. Orthodox Christianity, however, confirms the witness of Scripture to God's personal governance and redemption of his creation in and through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM

The Kantianism and deism of the Enlightenment each produces its own effects on Christology today, but they also combine to exert an enormous influence on the hermeneutics of Christology in particular. Kantianism privileged the power of autonomous human reason and helped develop the philosophical underpinnings of a deistic worldview, all of which creates an inherent suspicion regarding the claims of divine revelation in a historically remote and culturally unfamiliar set of writings. This root of suspicion has produced the historical-critical method that has ruled the theological landscape with its naturalistic rules for the last three centuries. And this method of biblical criticism has given us Lessing's "ugly ditch" between particular historical facts and universal truths, along with many failed attempts to cross the chasm that divides the "Jesus of history" from the "Christ of faith."

We cannot overstate the impact of Lessing's strict separation between historical testimony to particular facts and any reliable interpretation of those facts in the absence of firsthand experience. If embraced, such a separation creates a radical suspicion of Scripture that rejects its reliability and undermines the very possibility of doing orthodox Christology that attempts to draw metaphysical conclusions about Christ from the biblical documents. Many

<sup>103</sup> See Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); cf. David F. Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 1–15.

<sup>104</sup> I am using *intratextual* over against *extratextual*. Intratextual means that Scripture must be read on *its own terms*, not conformed to and read in light of a prior worldview. Scripture demands to be received with divine authority and read according to its own structure and categories and within its own worldview framework.

since Lessing have tried to overcome his historical-theological ditch through rigorous historical investigation.

Describing the hermeneutical impact of the historical-critical method (and not yet laying out our own method), it is sufficient in this section to note its divergence from the church's traditional way of reading the Bible and making theological conclusions regarding Jesus Christ. The church has not argued for the identity and significance of Jesus merely on the basis of historical events but has done Christology within an entire biblical-theological framework. That framework includes a specific conception of God, creation, providence, history, humans, sin, eschatology, and so on. This framework also includes an understanding that Scripture not only recounts historical persons and events but also interprets the meaning and significance of those persons and events in light of the eternal plan of God. Christian theologians have been able to make metaphysical and universal statements from history because the Scriptures are *God's own interpretation* of the persons, events, and facts of history—an interpretation that is necessarily accurate and authoritative. Orthodox Christology must demonstrate that Lessing's historical-theological ditch in modern Christology is an invention and assumption of the Enlightenment that is incompatible with the self-revelation of God in the Scriptures.

Specifically, it is the historical-critical method's *extratextual approach* to Christology that begins its radical departure from orthodoxy. Instead of doing Christology within the worldview of Scripture like the Reformers, modern critics do Christology apart from the Bible's own terms and under an Enlightenment worldview that not only is alien to the Scriptures but also is opposed to it as God's word written. Scripture at times declares and everywhere assumes that all humanity is utterly dependent upon its Creator; that our ability to reason is corrupted by sin and inherently unreliable; but that God overcomes our weakness by giving knowledge of himself and his creation through divine revelation. Rejecting Scripture's own terms at every point, the historical-critical method begins with an autonomous humanity that has the inherent power to reason reliably to the truth according to methodological naturalism, which denies even the possibility of supernatural revelation.

#### THE LOSS OF THE REVEALED AND REAL JESUS

To conclude our argument that the epistemological revolution of the Enlightenment continues to cause Christological confusion today, we can look briefly at the assumptions, methodology, and results of the so-called "Quests for the historical Jesus."<sup>105</sup> The goal of the Quests has been to recover the "Jesus of

<sup>105</sup> The specific developments within and individuals associated with the Quests are detailed in many places. See, e.g., Colin Brown, "Historical Jesus, Quest of," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 326–341; idem, *Jesus in*



history,” who is different from the “Jesus of the Bible,” by peeling back the biblical layers of legend and myth via the historical-critical method. The starting point and conclusion of the Quests represent a sharp turn away from orthodox Christology.<sup>106</sup>

Beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, the Old Quest (1778–1906)<sup>107</sup> refused to interpret the biblical text in terms of its own claims, factual content, and interpretive framework. These theologians, rather, assumed that the Bible is wholly unreliable and proceeded to reconstruct the “historical” Jesus without reliance upon and almost without reference to the biblical presentation. The first half of the twentieth century brought an interim period (1906–1953)—some call it the No Quest<sup>108</sup>—in which some theologians determined that historical facts were not necessary for the Christian faith. The difficulty of establishing any historical knowledge according to an Enlightenment epistemology and the tools of the historical-critical method shifted the problem momentarily from the Bible’s historicity to its mythology. Probably the best example, Rudolf Bultmann simply replaced (demythologized) the New Testament’s mythological framework with an existential structure, asking only, “What is man?”<sup>109</sup> This anthropocentric framework was more congenial to modern thought and consistent with the assumed primacy and power of human reason in Enlightenment hermeneutics.

The New Quest (1953 to present) focuses on the *kerygma* about Jesus in Scripture, being dissatisfied with the doubts of the Old Quest and the disregard of historicity during the No Quest.<sup>110</sup> These theologians agree with the other Quests that the Gospel traditions are interpretations of the early church, but

*European Protestant Thought*; Witherington, *Jesus Quest*; Paget, “Quests for the Historical Jesus”; McGrath, *Making of Modern German Christology*; N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*; idem, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 in *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). For the present taxonomy of the Quests, I am following N. T. Wright’s description in *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 1–124; cf. also Paget, “Quests for the Historical Jesus,” 138–155.

<sup>106</sup> As Albert Schweitzer observes regarding the Quests, “The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma. Afterwards when it was freed from this *pathos* it sought to present the historic Jesus in a form intelligible to its own time” (Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. William Montgomery [New York: Macmillan, 1968], 3). N. T. Wright agrees: “Let us be clear. People often think that the early ‘lives of Jesus’ were attempting to bring the church back to historical reality. They were not. They were attempting to show what historical reality really was, in order that, having glimpsed this unattractive sight, people might turn away from orthodox theology and discover a new freedom. One looked at the history in order then to look elsewhere, to the other side of Lessing’s ‘ugly ditch’, to the eternal truths of reason unsullied by the contingent facts of everyday events, even extraordinary ones like those of Jesus” (Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 17–18).

<sup>107</sup> As the first, the Old Quest received its name from the English title of Schweitzer’s book, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*. For the most part, the Old Quest starts with Reimarus, ends with Schweitzer, and includes a veritable who’s who in biblical studies and classical liberal theology: e.g., David Strauss (1808–1874); F. C. Baur (1792–1860); Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889); Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930); William Wrede (1859–1906); Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920).

<sup>108</sup> W. Barnes Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus: A Guidebook* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 71.

<sup>109</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert Miles Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 5–6; cf. idem, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 11–21.

<sup>110</sup> For example, see Ernst Käsemann, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (1964; repr., London: SCM Press, 2012), 15–47; Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Irene McLuskey, Fraser McLuskey, and James M. Robinson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); James M. Rob-

they argue that this subjectivity did not prevent the Gospels from preserving authentic historical material. Yet the New Quest remains firmly committed to Enlightenment presuppositions. These theologians determine what the historical Jesus really said by applying extratextual rules: e.g., consistency and multiple attestation; the criteria of dissimilarity; various linguistic and cultural tests.

At the same time, the Third Quest (early 1980s to present)<sup>111</sup> applies its own, modified version of historical-critical criteria; in general, it applies the rules for authenticity more generously in an attempt to take the New Testament texts more seriously as literary documents with basic (but not full) reliability.<sup>112</sup> These theologians also take seriously the Jewish context of early Christianity—a context disregarded or even denigrated in the other Quests.<sup>113</sup> But these conciliatory efforts still come within an a priori commitment to Enlightenment epistemology and hermeneutics that cannot truly accommodate the God-givenness of Scripture and accept its accuracy and authority. James Edwards notes the problem: “to assume that a social setting—even a correctly perceived one—captures the meaning of a person in it is like supposing that a job résumé captures the essence of a person. Résumés are good at conveying *what*, but they inevitably fall short of portraying *who*. Stage sets are necessary, but on their own they cannot replace plot or actors in a play.”<sup>114</sup>

The Quests give us a prime example of the Enlightenment’s impact on Christology. As one of the major trends in Christology, the historical Jesus research paradigm separates the historical and the theological Jesus to seek the former at the expense of the latter. Seeking to excavate the historical Jesus behind the biblical text, the Quests and other critical-extratextual approaches dig deeper into Lessing’s “ugly ditch” and lose the revealed Jesus made known to us through exegesis in submission to the biblical text. In his satirical critique of the Quests in *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis uses the instruction of a veteran demon to his nephew apprentice to make the point that our Christology must take the Scriptures at face value if we are going to avoid the ultimately subjective enterprise:

You will find that a good many Christian-political writers think that Christianity began going wrong, and departing from the doctrine of its Founder, at a very early stage. Now this idea must be used by us to encourage once again the conception of a “historical Jesus” to be found by clearing away later

inson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1983); Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

<sup>111</sup> N. T. Wright is a major figure in the Third Quest. In addition, see Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series, vol. 48 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985); J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1 in *Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>112</sup> See Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought*, 338.

<sup>113</sup> Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, 13.

<sup>114</sup> Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, 20.

“accretions and perversions” and then to be contrasted with the whole Christian tradition. In the last generation we promoted the construction of such a “historical Jesus” on liberal and humanitarian lines; we are now putting forward a new “historical Jesus” on Marxian, catastrophic, and revolutionary lines. The advantage of these constructions, which we intend to change every thirty years or so, are manifold. In the first place they all tend to direct men’s devotion to something which does not exist, for each “historical Jesus” is unhistorical. The documents say what they say and cannot be added to; each new “historical Jesus” therefore has to be got out of them by suppression at one point and exaggeration at another, and by that sort of guessing (*brilliant* is the adjective we teach humans to apply to it) on which no one would risk ten shillings in ordinary life. . . . The “Historical Jesus” then . . . is always to be encouraged.<sup>115</sup>

Specific attempts within a paradigm of historical Jesus research may differ in emphases, but they all fail to find the *real Jesus* for the same reason: they reject the *revealed Jesus* because they are beholden to Enlightenment principles that are alien to the Bible and its authoritative presentation of Jesus’s identity. We only know the “Jesus of history” through the biblical texts that identify him as the “Christ of faith.” Focusing on just two problems with the shift from a confessional to a critical epistemology will provide a quick summary of how the Enlightenment continues to cause confusion in Christology today.

*First, assuming that the historical Jesus must be a desupernaturalized Jesus and cannot be the Jesus of the Bible prevents us from ever identifying the real Jesus.* The strictly rational epistemology of the Enlightenment demands a hermeneutic that simply begins with an a priori and unwarranted rejection of Scripture. And, as B. B. Warfield reminds us from a century ago, the rejection of Scripture means a rejection of the real Jesus: “It is the desupernaturalized Jesus which is the mythical Jesus, who never had any existence, the postulation of the existence of whom explains nothing and leaves the whole historical development hanging in the air.”<sup>116</sup> The futility of the historical-critical approach is captured by Aloys Grillmeier in a few words: “The nineteenth century used all its energy to work out a purely historical picture of Jesus by means of the techniques of historical investigation. In this investigation, the dogma of the incarnation was not to be accepted as a basic presupposition: the life of Jesus was to be treated as a purely human life which developed in a human way. The attempt came to nothing.”<sup>117</sup>

*Second, committing to a historical-critical Christology prevents us from ever saying anything theological about Jesus—who he is and the meaning*

<sup>115</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 116–119.

<sup>116</sup> B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1950), 22.

<sup>117</sup> Aloys Grillmeier, *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, vol. 1 in *Christ in Christian Tradition*, trans. John Bowden, 2nd rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 3.

and universal significance of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. As Francis Watson correctly observes, “Historical research is unlikely to confirm an incarnation or a risen Lord.”<sup>118</sup> And even if some reconstructed Jesus is a figure of some significance, “he cannot be identified with the Christ of faith acknowledged by the church.”<sup>119</sup> The heirs of the Enlightenment only exacerbate the problem of reconstructing the past by assuming that historical events are self-interpreting and transparent to historical investigation. Merely human historical research can never yield an objective and infallibly true interpretation of Jesus’s identity and significance. Correctly identifying Jesus, rather, requires God himself to give us both the historical facts and the theological interpretation of those facts.

We can now say that much of the current Christological confusion regarding Jesus’s identity is the rotten fruit of an Enlightenment epistemology and worldview. A strictly rational epistemology has grown through a critical hermeneutic into a paradigm of historical Jesus research that rejects the reliability of the biblical texts or reinterprets them based on extrabiblical criteria, reducing Jesus to a mere man who cannot be identified as God the Son incarnate. It remains to be seen at the close of this chapter whether the postmodern challenges to the modern epistemology can move us from a critical Christology back to a confessional Christology for today.

#### THE IMPACT OF POSTMODERNISM ON CHRISTOLOGY

In Western culture, most acknowledge an important shift from a modern to a postmodern society. The exact nature of the shift and its implications for theology are hotly debated, but it is certainly the case that something significant has occurred.<sup>120</sup> Even the terms “postmodern” and “postmodernism” are difficult to define because of their diverse use. In this regard, Kevin Vanhoozer’s warning is apt:

Those who attempt to define or to analyze the concept of postmodernity do so at their own peril. In the first place, postmoderns reject the notion that any description or definition is “neutral.” Definitions may appear to bask in the glow of impartiality, but they invariably exclude something and hence are complicit, wittingly or not, in politics. A definition of postmodernity is as likely to say more about the person offering the definition than it [says] of “the postmodern.” Second, postmoderns resist closed, tightly bounded “totalizing” accounts of such things as the “essence” of the postmodern. And third,

<sup>118</sup> Watson, “*Veritas Christi*,” 104.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>120</sup> For example, see six evangelical approaches to postmodernism in Myron B. Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005). For the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, see Penner’s three options in *ibid.*, 18–19. I adopt the second one, which views postmodernism as different than modernism but starting from the same point, namely, human autonomy. Postmodernism, then, ought to be viewed as the logical end of modernism’s assumptions, not as distinct and conceptually *beyond* modernism.

according to David Tracy “there is no such phenomenon as postmodernity.” There are only postmodernities.<sup>121</sup>

Our purposes here, however, require not an exact definition but an educated understanding of postmodernism—an understanding actually aided by the refusal of postmodernity to be defined. James Sire notes that the term “postmodernism” was first used in reference to architecture and art. When French sociologist Jean-François Lyotard used the term to signal a shift in cultural values, however, “the term became a key word in cultural analysis.”<sup>122</sup> Lyotard gave what is postmodern the now often-quoted descriptor “incredulity toward metanarratives.”<sup>123</sup> The term acquired the prefix “post” because it refers to a move away from the “modern” that is associated with the prior Enlightenment ideals of rationality and progress.<sup>124</sup> And in this move away from modern ideals, postmodernism rejects at least three conditions of modern knowledge: “(1) the appeal to metanarratives as a foundationalist criterion of legitimacy, (2) the outgrowth of strategies of legitimation and exclusion, and (3) a desire for criteria of legitimacy in the moral as well as the epistemological domain.”<sup>125</sup> In this light, postmodernism, especially in the area of epistemology, may be viewed as a mind-set that is suspicious of “grand narratives” and universal, objective truth; and as such, postmodernism moves away from the authority of universal science toward narratives of local knowledge.

Even though postmodernism rejects Enlightenment-modern methodology, however, it begins with the same “turn to the subject/self,” only to end with the same problems. As did modernism before it, postmodernism elevates the autonomous human subject. At the same time, postmodern thought acknowledges what earlier thinkers such as Kant already taught, namely, that there are limitations to human reason, especially in making universal statements on matters such as metaphysics, ethics, and theology. Postmodernism clearly and openly critiques and rejects the hubris of the Enlightenment. But by joining modernism at the same starting point of human autonomy, postmodernism offers no better alternative. Postmodernity merely takes the Enlightenment turn to its logical conclusions:<sup>126</sup> starting with an independent and limited human subject leads to only a local and subjective knowledge. A postmodern

<sup>121</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God),” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>122</sup> Sire, *Universe Next Door*, 213.

<sup>123</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 24.

<sup>124</sup> Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity,” 7.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>126</sup> For a discussion of whether postmodernism is a turning away from modernism or is modernism turning in on itself, see Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, 16–19; Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity,” 8–9.

epistemology provides no rational way of achieving a God's-eye viewpoint of the world and history: "no longer can we aspire to the knowledge of angels, much less a God's-eye point of view."<sup>127</sup>

We can now trace the effects of postmodernity in contemporary culture to see its impact on Christology. This last section argues that for all of its challenges to the Enlightenment and modern mind-set, postmodernity's own assumptions and methodology still leave us on the wrong side of Lessing's ditch. With what can be called an "artificial" epistemology, we are unable to say anything certain or significant about Jesus because the Bible remains unreliable and unable to ground any theological conclusions about Jesus's identity.

#### *POSTMODERN EPISTEMOLOGY AND WORLDVIEW*

Epistemology again provides the lens through which we can see the most fundamental intellectual shifts as we move from a premodern to a modern and now to a postmodern world.<sup>128</sup> The premodern era was rooted in a revelational epistemology: truth is universal and objective because it is grounded in the triune God who is the source and standard of all knowledge and whose plan encompasses all things because he is the sovereign Creator and Lord of his universe. In the language of Reformed orthodoxy, God's knowledge is *archetype* (i.e., original and thus the standard) and, as his finite image-bearers, our knowledge is *ectype* (a subset of God's original knowledge and thus derivative). Our knowledge, even though limited, is a subset of his knowledge, and as we "think his thoughts after him" in nature and in Scripture, it is possible to have finite but still objective and true knowledge.

In the modern era, philosophy took a decisive "turn to the subject." Rooted in classical foundationalism, human reason sought to operate apart from divine revelation, with the goal of achieving a universal, unified explanation of all reality. Modernism believed that if human reason simply followed the correct methods, starting in human autonomy, reason could arrive at a grand theory or "metanarrative." This grand narrative would ultimately explain all reality, albeit a reality now constrained by the limits of Enlightenment thought. Myron Penner provides a helpful summary of the modern project:

The primary objective of rational explanation in modernity is to establish a set of infallible beliefs that can provide the epistemological foundations for an absolutely certain body of knowledge. It is not that the metaphysical concern has dropped out of view, for metaphysics is very much alive in modernity (as epistemology is in premodernity); it is rather that modern metaphysics is at the mercy of theories about what knowledge is and how it is acquired. That

<sup>127</sup> Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity," 10.

<sup>128</sup> For a helpful discussion of these shifts, see Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True?*, 37–76.

is, modern theories of reality are bounded by the limits that modern theories of knowledge place on the scope and substance of human knowledge. In the end, the shift is quite dramatic. Reason (*logos*) acquires certain metaphysical rights, so to speak, in a way that premoderns did not designate. The ontological assumption of reason is intensified to the point where reason becomes its own ground. The boundaries of what may be rationally thought are determined by the nature of human rational faculties, not the extra-human rational structure of them both.<sup>129</sup>

This epistemological rationalism brought with it a methodological naturalism to form a whole mind-set at odds with the premodern worldview. This modern mind-set has led to a massive distrust of Scripture, including a denial of the biblical Jesus as the historical Jesus and a rejection of Chalcedonian orthodoxy and its metaphysical commitments.

Now in its own turn (to the subject-self), postmodernism rejects modern foundationalism, not by returning to premodern revelational epistemology but by pressing forward in the assumptions of rationalism. Taking seriously Kant's argument that the mind is active in structuring knowledge, and his conclusion that our minds are not objective in the knowing process, postmodernism extends this modern principle to deny the modern assumption of a common and correct set of mental categories. With subjective minds, thinking in what could be very different mental categories, we are unable to gain anything close to universal, objective truth. In place of a strict rationalism, a postmodern epistemology takes the form of coherentism or pragmatism.<sup>130</sup>

This is not to say that postmodernism rejects all rationality—far from it. Rather, a universal explanation is not reasonable because universal reason is not a reality. Postmodernism rejects not rationality but *Reason*. “They deny the notion of universal rationality,” concludes Vanhoozer: “reason is rather a contextual and relative affair. What counts as rational is relative to the prevailing narrative in a society or institution.”<sup>131</sup> This is why postmodernism is often associated with the attempt to undo or deconstruct anyone who thinks that they have a universal viewpoint or metanarrative.

Specifically, postmodernism attempts to break the link between language and reality, a “logocentrism” that once characterized Western thought. In the premodern era, this logocentrism was grounded in Christian theology; it was then carried over into the modern era as borrowed capital from Christianity. With the rise of Darwinism, however, and the attendant self-conscious rejection of Christian theism, the basis for logocentrism was more difficult to establish. In place of a referential view of language, postmodernism posits a constructivist

<sup>129</sup> Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, 22.

<sup>130</sup> See Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True?*, 37–76.

<sup>131</sup> Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity,” 10.

view.<sup>132</sup> Rather than conceiving of the mind as a “mirror of nature” consistent with a correspondence theory of truth, postmodernism argues that human beings view reality through the lens of language and culture. As a result, all of our theorizing is perspectival, provisional, and incomplete. In place of comprehensive theories we now have relative confessions about how things look to us. In the end, it is all about interpretation, not about what is real, true, or good.

The movement from a modern to a postmodern outlook has also brought a corresponding change in science, beginning with the view of nature—“it is naturalism, but . . .”<sup>133</sup> According to the predominant scientific paradigm of modernism, the world is a closed system of causal laws. In the twentieth century, however, science switched paradigms to quantum and relativity theories that view the world as integrated, contingent, and continuously changing. John Feinberg helpfully summarizes this change in perspective:

[I]n contrast to Newtonian physics, which saw the universe as composed of static, changeless bits of matter that interact according to set natural laws, the new science claims that things in our world are interrelated in a continuous process of change and becoming. Even in the most solid bits of matter (at the atomic and subatomic levels) things are not static but in motion. . . . Moreover, as opposed to Newtonian physics which held that physical things interact according to set physical laws, quantum physics claims that there is a certain indeterminacy at least at the atomic and sub-atomic levels of existence.<sup>134</sup>

At the same time that scientific paradigms have changed, however, the view of evolution remains entrenched. For most postmoderns, evolution is nonnegotiable and any opposition to it is fiercely resisted. As in the modern era, the establishment of evolution as a basic presupposition comes as a necessary part of the larger move to an a priori definition of science that rules out any consideration of the supernatural and nonmaterial. With the acceptance of quantum mechanics and relativity theory, however, some believe the door has opened for a return to an affirmation of God acting in our world.<sup>135</sup> But even so, most postmoderns still view the universe as a basically closed system and thus assume a methodological naturalism in their approach to all academic disciplines. The primary reason for this adherence to naturalism is a refusal to return to a full-blown Christian theism, which alone can provide the proper underpinnings for the miraculous. For its conception of God, rather, postmodernism adopts a more panentheistic alternative.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>132</sup> See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 43–147.

<sup>133</sup> This phrase and concept is taken from Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 104.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 104–105.

<sup>135</sup> See, e.g., Evans, *Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, 137–169; cf. Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 107–112.

<sup>136</sup> See John W. Cooper, *Pantheism, the Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); see also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 81–138.



Although panentheism comes in many varieties, the most rigorous theological view sees God as the universe in constant progression (as opposed to permanence), with historical events as the basic building blocks (instead of substances).<sup>137</sup> This kind of panentheism pictures all reality as a series of events, each of which has two poles. The mental or primordial pole is all the possibilities that actual entities can become; the physical or consequent pole is the world, God's body, which is the progressive realization of the various possibilities. In this metaphysical scheme, God is viewed as an event who is *in* everything. There is, then, no Creator-creature distinction. God and the world are not identical but neither are they inseparable; they are mutually dependent without one being subordinate to the other. The world is viewed as a moment within the divine life. In fact, because God is not only connected with but immanent to the world, he is undergoing a process of self-development and growth. God is not the supernatural, transcendent Creator of the world and Lord of history; he is (in) the natural processes of evolution by which the world and history take shape.

This view of God in the world not only fits well with current scientific conceptions of the world, but it also supports many familiar postmodern confessions of God: e.g., "a God who is immanent and relational; a God whose very being interpenetrates all things and hence underscores the connectedness of all things; a God who is not static but is constantly changing as he responds to our needs; and a God to whom we can contribute value as well as one who enhances our existence."<sup>138</sup> Feinberg rightly reminds us that this "process" conception of God "poses a formidable threat to traditional Christian understanding of God, and it also offers a way to synthesize various non-evangelical postmodern notions about God."<sup>139</sup> This process view of God predominates in non-evangelical theology today. Yet even within evangelicalism, movements such as "open theism" have embraced some tenets of postmodern panentheism.<sup>140</sup>

#### POSTMODERN HERMENEUTICS

Another contrast between modernity and postmodernity centers on the role of language and the place of hermeneutics in philosophical reflection. The modern era is identified with the "subjective turn"; the postmodern era may be identified more specifically with the "linguistic turn." Modernity assumes that reason is universal and impervious to differences of culture and language;

<sup>137</sup> See, e.g., John B. Cobb Jr. and David R. Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

<sup>138</sup> Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 142.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> On open theism, see Clark H. Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998); Boyd, *God of the Possible*. For responses, see Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000); John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

postmodernity rejects this assumption as impossible. With Kant, postmoderns argue that our mental categories do not mirror the world but mold it by imposing distinctions on experience that may or may not be intrinsic to reality itself, continuing the distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*. Postmoderns disagree with Kant, however, when it comes to the nature of our mental categories: the Kantian categories are *universal* and *necessary*; the postmodern categories are *linguistic* and *arbitrary*. It follows “that there is no commonly agreed way of interpreting reality. The distinctions that make up the ‘natural order’ are neither ‘natural’ nor ‘given’ but rather artificial and man-made. There is no such thing as an absolute, God’s-eye point of view on reality, only a number of finite and fallible human perspectives.”<sup>141</sup>

Postmodernism’s linguistic turn and artificial (man-made) view of reality has produced an artificial approach to meaning and the biblical texts. The premodern biblical interpreters sought to discover the author’s intent because they believed that thereby they would discover God’s intent. As Calvin put it, “It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.”<sup>142</sup> Modernism rejected the Bible’s inspiration and reliability and sought to discover the real Jesus behind the text, but still with the goal of interpreting the text according to the author’s intent.<sup>143</sup> Both the premodern and modern eras, then, held to a hermeneutical realism: “the position that believes meaning to be prior to and independent of the process of interpretation.”<sup>144</sup> The postmodern era, however, approaches the Bible with hermeneutical *non*-realism; the reader brings meaning to the text in the process of interpretation. As such, this artificial approach guarantees universal subjectivity. Vanhoozer helpfully summarizes this hermeneutical philosophy:

Hermeneutic philosophers no longer consider knowledge as the result of a disinterested subject observing facts, but rather as an interpretive effort whereby a subject rooted in a particular history and tradition seeks to understand the strange by means of the familiar. Instead of “uninterpreted fact” serving as grist for the mill of “objective reason,” both fact and reason alike are what they are because of their place in history and tradition. Hermeneutics is a cousin to historical consciousness; the realization that we do not know things directly and immediately suggests that knowledge is the result of interpretation. Reality is a text to be interpreted, mediated by language, history, culture, and tradition.<sup>145</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 49.

<sup>142</sup> Preface to John Calvin’s *Commentary on Romans*, cited in Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 47.

<sup>143</sup> Vanhoozer explains the difference between intent and truth: “In historical critical exegesis, then, the original sense is authoritative, not in the sense of being necessarily true, but insofar as it remains the norm for establishing the meaning of a passage (which may be true or false)” (Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 48).

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

In the end, then, postmodernism agrees with modernism's rejection of the Bible's universal authority. Modernism denies the text's truthfulness and therefore rejects its authoritativeness. Postmodernism takes the Scriptures as authoritative, but only according to the reader's or community's interpretive experience. Rather than taking the text as the objective and universally true word of God written, the postmodern hermeneutic transforms the text into "an echo chamber in which we see ourselves and hear our own voices."<sup>146</sup> The modernist critic reads the Bible according to the author's intent, but then rejects the Bible's factual and theological claims. The postmodernist interpreter argues that "the text has no stable or decidable meaning, or that what meaning is there is biased and ideologically distorted. The result is that the Bible is either not recognized as making claims or, if it is, that these claims are treated as ideologically suspect."<sup>147</sup>

#### POSTMODERNISM AND CHRISTOLOGY

Postmodernism has not returned us to a revelational epistemology that will support a warranted Christology. In fact, the artificial epistemology of postmodernity moves us away from warrant as a goal or even as a possibility. The postmodern epistemology, worldview, and hermeneutic inevitably lead to a paradigm of pluralism that must accommodate all Christologies as individual stories, thereby (ironically or intentionally) rejecting orthodox Christianity.

Postmodernism has increased the confusion in Christology that first started in the Enlightenment-modern era: the problems are the same but they have been further complicated. For the most part, the Enlightenment adopted deism and a Newtonian view of physics and thereby moved to a strict naturalism, away from even the possibility of the miraculous. While the miraculous is possible in postmodernity, its possibility rests not on God's activity but on the dynamics of quantum/relativity theory. The shift from deism to Darwinism and from Newton to Einstein has moved from a *simple to a complex form of naturalism*. This new complexity has increased confusion in at least two significant aspects of Christology: the nature of humanity and the identity of Jesus.

The nature of humanity has been transformed by postmodernity's rejection of the substance-nature view of reality in favor of relationality, becoming, and emergence. In *Christology and Science*, F. LeRon Shults accepts the current views without question and challenges orthodox Christology to change from a substance-nature view to an evolutionary-biological view of the incarnation.<sup>148</sup> The traditional formulations of Christology that rely on the link between Jesus's personhood and the human nature of Adam before the fall must

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>148</sup> F. LeRon Shults, *Christology and Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

be abandoned. Christology within the “new science” needs to be completely reformulated in ways acceptable to current thought, which, for Shults, will provide new insights and place Christ within an “emergent holist understanding of human persons.”<sup>149</sup> Overall, Shults’s reformulation entails that we must: (1) reject the notion of substance for a relational view; (2) reject a “literal reading of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden” because it has lost its plausibility in light of discoveries about “the process of human evolution within the cosmos”; and (3) reject the virgin birth as necessary on the basis of critical scholarship and evolutionary insights.<sup>150</sup> Christology, rather, should aim to “uphold the intuition that Jesus Christ reveals the origin and goal of the human experience of knowing God, which is wholly dependent on the creative initiative of divine grace and cannot be achieved by human effort alone. We can accept these *theological* points of Genesis and Matthew without accepting the ancient *scientific* cosmogony and gynecology of the original authors and redactors.”<sup>151</sup>

Christology today has been placed within an evolutionary model linked to the modern world but surpassing it in complexity and confusion. Postmodernism has not returned Christology to orthodoxy but moved it further away. The postmodern emphasis on becoming over being, existence over essence, and dynamic emergence over transcendence demonstrate that every Christology assumes a larger theology and worldview. Every Christology is constructed upon a presupposed conception of God, self, and the world.<sup>152</sup> To articulate and defend an orthodox Christology today, we will also need to articulate and defend an entire Christian worldview set against the overarching evolutionary paradigm of contemporary thought. The current uneasiness over the terms “substance,” “nature,” “person”—terms closely associated with orthodoxy—is tied to specific theological conceptions that need to be defended anew. The way forward for evangelical theology is not an appeal to current views of science but an explication and defense of a Christian-theistic view of the universe that allows for and makes sense of the personal, triune God acting uniquely and extraordinarily in his world.

Yet even more than with the transformation of human nature, postmodernity has further confused Christology by surrendering the uniqueness of Christ. During the nineteenth century, the uniqueness of Christ had already become a matter of degree only, not kind; but there was still an attempt to elevate Christianity as a religion and Jesus as a religious figure and personality.<sup>153</sup>

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>150</sup> See *ibid.*, 21–44.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>152</sup> For a helpful elaboration on this point, see Wells, *Person of Christ*, 148–154.

<sup>153</sup> Examples include the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (Christ exhibits the highest order of God-consciousness) and the entire view of classic liberalism (Christ is the highest ideal of ethical teaching).

For example, classic liberalism rejected the historic position of the church in regard to Christ, but it still tried to maintain a unique identity for Jesus Christ in moral categories. As postmodernism has taken hold, however, Troeltsch's view now predominates so thoroughly that *Jesus is no different in kind or degree from other religious figures*. And because Jesus Christ is only one religious figure among many, Christology must be done within a pluralistic paradigm.

In fact, almost every aspect of the postmodern outlook embraces pluralism. For example, postmodernism's rejection of metanarratives also rejects a Christology from the Scriptures. The Bible cannot be received as God's word written because such a transcendent, universal perspective is a priori impossible. Without such an interpretive word grounded in God's comprehensive knowledge and plan for the world, we cannot judge between true and false, right and wrong, and so we cannot say anything definitive or unique about Christ. And the same is true with the postmodern hermeneutic applied to Christology. Modernism believed that it could reconstruct history in an objective manner, peeling off the layers of myth to rediscover the real Jesus of history. Postmodernism takes this error even further: now there is "no historical Jesus nor indeed a Christ of faith, nor any historical evidence for a clear delineation of the relationship between them. There is only Bultmann's, Schweitzer's, Käsemann's, Pannenberg's, Wright's or Crossan's constructed histories of the narratives, stories and loose causal identities that form our perception of the past."<sup>154</sup> Under postmodernity's epistemology and worldview and according to its hermeneutic, a pluralistic Christology is inevitable.

### ONE RESPONSE TO CONTEMPORARY CHRISTOLOGY

The two major trends in Christology today have produced much confusion regarding the identity of Jesus Christ. The paradigms of historical Jesus research and pluralism create this confusion because they are created by epistemologies that (in different ways) reject the one reliable and authoritative source for properly identifying Jesus Christ.

From the Enlightenment era into modernity and postmodernity, the autonomous subject-self has been elevated to reign over knowledge and meaning. Modernity gives us a strictly rational epistemology and a historical-critical hermeneutic. Postmodernity gives us an artificial epistemology and hermeneutic. Both reject the revelational epistemology and hermeneutic of the premodern Reformation. The modern approach works primarily through the paradigm of historical Jesus research, resulting in a critical Christology. The postmodern approach works primarily through the paradigm of pluralism, resulting

<sup>154</sup> Colin J. D. Greene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking Out the Horizons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 167.

in many personal Christologies. Both reject the confessional Christology of orthodoxy established in the early church and maintained into the premodern Reformation.

More than simply bemoan the loss of an older Christology, however, the work ahead will continue the argument for a well-warranted Christology for today. There is only one response to the two trends in contemporary Christology coming out of anti-revelational epistemologies: return to a revelational-biblical epistemology to read the Bible on its own terms and discover the identity of the real Jesus given by God himself. The Enlightenment-modern and postmodern epistemologies leave us in a legitimation crisis, asking “*whose story, whose interpretation, whose authority, whose criteria counts, and why?*”<sup>155</sup> To all of these questions, the next chapter argues that God himself is the answer—God himself identifies Jesus accurately and authoritatively according to his own word of interpretation in Scripture.

In this chapter, we have established only the first half of the epistemological warrant we need for Christology today. We have demonstrated that true knowledge of the true Jesus requires a revelational epistemology that looks to the Bible for God’s own interpretation of who Jesus is and his significance for us and all creation. In the next chapter, we need to lay out the basic contours of this biblical epistemology so that we can be sure to follow it as we continue the work of Christology in the remaining parts and chapters.

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<sup>155</sup> Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity,” 10 (emphasis his).

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