

Towards a Baptist Dogmatics

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Abstract: *In June 2021, a gathering of Baptist theologians convened in Wake Forest, North Carolina, to delve into the distinct approach to dogmatics within the Baptist tradition. This academic initiative aimed to establish the core principles guiding theological discourse among Baptists. Baptist dogmatics places a significant emphasis on active engagement with the gospel, Scripture, tradition, and the faith-oriented community. Dogmatics, as a field of theological exploration, operates on the foundational belief that theology inherently serves the ecclesiastical body through its interactions with Scripture, tradition, and rational contemplation. The primary objective of dogmatics is to meticulously unfold the nature of God as revealed through Jesus Christ, a revelation drawn from both the Old and New Testaments. This revelation is coupled with the intention to equip adherents to embody their faith in practical ways. The authors put forth four guiding markers—historical, ecclesial, covenantal, and confessional—to chart the course of this theological endeavor. These markers are firmly rooted in a shared affirmation of the gospel, interwoven covenantal connections, and a dedicated allegiance to the paramount authority of Scripture. Consequently, the Baptist framework of dogmatics aspires to eloquently express and exemplify the Christian faith within the context of the congregational community, extending an open invitation to the wider world to partake in the transformative understanding of God through the figure of Christ.*

Key Words: *Baptist theology, dogmatics, dogmatic theology, evangelical theology, systematic theology, theological method*

In June 2021, a group of Baptist theologians gathered in Wake Forest, NC, to explore the possibilities of engaging the discipline of dogmatics in a distinctively Baptist manner. As a part of this venture, we commenced collaboration on a book project, titled *Confessing Christ*.¹ The

¹ Steven A. McKinion, Christine E. Thornton, and Keith S. Whitfield, ed., *Confessing Christ: An Invitation to Baptist Dogmatics* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academics, forthcoming).

vision for this gathering arose from the conviction that dogmatics uniquely serves the church and its witness because it explains the Christian faith holistically from both biblical and theological perspectives. The discipline of dogmatics, as a subset of systematic theology, explores the coherence of the faith by the church, within the church, and for the church.

This edition of the *Southeastern Theological Review* features an interview with Timothy George, where he defines three key terms: “dogma,” “dogmas,” and “dogmatics.” His insightful discussion of these terms illuminates the intrinsic nature of dogmatics as a discipline that operates *by, within, and for* the sake of the church. He explains that Christian dogmatics involves theological reflection within the domain of the Christian faith—the church. This reflection is guided by the church’s foundational doctrinal affirmations (“dogmas”) in order to elucidate the central tenet (the “dogma”) of Christianity—Jesus Christ is Lord. Christians have consistently confessed this “dogma” since the first century. It is, therefore, fitting for Baptists to contribute their unique perspective to this task, given that they have also engaged in such theological reflection from the beginning of the Baptist movement. The Baptist movement arises from a radical commitment to the Lordship of Christ over every human person. The intention is to establish specific markers that help identify core Baptist principles for doing theology, thus renewing a distinctively Baptist approach to confessing and practicing the Christian faith.

In this article, we aim to briefly introduce our approach to cultivating Baptist dogmatics. To do this, we will set a broad context for this project within the discipline of dogmatics and the recent developments in evangelical dogmatics. Additionally, we seek to introduce the distinctive features of Baptist dogmatics that should enrich Baptist theological reflection. A more expansive exposition of the distinctives presented here will appear in *Confessing Christ*.

The Task of Dogmatics

Dogmatics represents a mode of theologizing grounded in the belief that theology serves the church by faithfully and coherently engaging with Scripture, tradition, and reason. Rather than reducing theology to a set of propositions or a historical narrative, dogmatics seeks to be a form of wisdom that explores and articulates the mystery of God’s self-revelation in Christ through the Spirit, referred to above as the “dogma.” This task requires theological retrieval, where theological reflection and Christian practices from the past are recovered and reappropriated

for the present and future. The aim is to rediscover the richness and depth of the Christian tradition while avoiding the pitfalls of modern and postmodern theological systems like rationalism, relativism, and individualism. As Jaroslav Pelikan described, this task is to preserve “what the church believes, teaches, and confesses.”² The goal of dogmatics is then to articulate the truth about the Christian God as revealed in Jesus Christ by drawing from the Old and New Testaments and to equip Christians to live and confess their faith.

For evangelical dogmaticians, dogmatics must be theological and biblical. It is biblical in that it provides an account of what the Bible says about God and his work of reconciling the world to himself through Christ (2 Cor 5:18–19) and how it communicates this message.³ At its core, it is “theological” because it demonstrates how the Triune God, in being and acts, shapes reality.⁴ T. F. Torrance and John Webster have influenced the current work of evangelical dogmatics in their respective projects. For both of them, the Triune nature of God determined the purpose of theology as a discipline and directed how they pursued the theological task.⁵ A Trinitarian perspective is central to evangelical dogmatics, as it grounds the “dogma” that pertains to the person of Jesus Christ, his saving work, and the significance of Christ’s role in revealing the being of God to humanity.⁶

The Triune God reveals himself in the Scriptures. The purpose for

² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969), 143.

³ See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Analytics, Poetics, and the Mission of Dogmatic Discourse,” in *The Task of Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 23–48; and Scott Swain, “Dogmatics as Systematic Theology,” in *The Task of Dogmatics*, 49–69.

⁴ For a robust account of the theological nature of theology, see John Webster, “What Makes Theology Theological,” in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology: Volume 1* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 213–24.

⁵ See Michael Allen, “Theological Theology: Webster’s Theological Project,” in *A Companion to the Theology of John Webster*, ed. Michael Allen and R. David Nelson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2021), 38–43; and Elmer M. Colyer, “A Scientific Theological Method,” in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance*, ed. Elmer M. Colyer (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 205–38.

⁶ For helpful overview of this point, see John C. Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson, *A Call to Christian Formation: How Theology Makes Sense of Our World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 21–48.

expounding the Scriptures is to instruct the church about God and his ways and to guide the church in its confession of the God they worship. Theological reflection on the Scriptures seeks to discern the presence of a central theological message in the text and the interrelation of biblical concepts and categories around it. These patterns of biblical language rule the development of theological language. Following David Yeago’s insights, dogmatics employs appropriate conceptual terms to interpret the patterns of biblical language.⁷ Dogmatics involves summarizing and explaining the apostolic faith as portrayed in the Scriptures in terms that are understandable and fitting to communicate the truth. It provides the church with the language to express the gospel in ways that align with how the Bible conveys it. It is not a mere repetition of biblical words but a coherent re-telling of the gospel that maintains a biblical and theological approach.

Dogmatics proclaims what the church has believed and ought to believe to remain true to the apostolic faith. It conveys the church’s reading of the Scriptures, not replacing the Scriptures as God’s revelation but articulating what the church confesses based on the biblical revelation. It draws from the history of the church’s witness to the God who works in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit—examining what the church believes, confesses, and proclaims in its worship and preaching. This theological reflection leads to a Christian grammar (words, symbols, and actions) that invites participation in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This theological grammar continues to be found in the church’s creeds, confessions, prayers, sermons, and songs—guiding the church’s behavior and communion.

The Rise of Dogmatics within Evangelical Theology

In 1973, Bernard Ramm offered some advice for the future of evangelical theology that would position the church to be at the frontlines of cultural engagement and defense of the faith. He called evangelical theologians to remain biblical, operate with thoroughgoing evangelical theological commitments, study the current culture and philosophy of language, and establish a robust theological account for how God relates to the world.⁸ Contemporary evangelical theologians, like Carl F. H. Henry,

⁷ David Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3.2 (1994): 152–65.

⁸ Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage: A Study in Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 151–70.

Donald Bloesch, Millard Erickson, John Frame, Gordon Lewis, Bruce Demarest, and Wayne Grudem, took up and by all accounts fulfilled Ramm's vision. However, just as the evangelical movement established significant works to defend and articulate the faith on the frontlines of modernity, the cultural terrain shifted significantly. Modernity, which had defined the intellectual operating system for two centuries, was undergoing its own critique and at some level, repudiation. The type of reasoning and argumentation that held sway throughout the 20th century was no longer compelling. As evangelical theology made some level of progress to articulate the faith and answer the questions raised by modernism, the emergence of postmodernism and rejection of hypermodernism led to new objections to the evangelical arguments. As a result, the profound and timely work produced by the likes of Carl F. H. Henry began to lose its appeal, and in the 1980s and 1990s, criticism arose over how evangelicals approached the nature and task of theology.⁹

Much of this criticism surrounded questions on the function of the Bible in theology, epistemology foundational for the evangelical movement, and the nature of evangelical theology. Hans Frei's *Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative* and George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* represent two early assessments from non-evangelicals that contributed to evangelical theology undergoing an evaluation at the end of the 20th century. Within the broad evangelical camp, Clark Pinnock,¹⁰ Stanley Grenz,¹¹ Roger Olson,¹² Kevin Vanhoozer,¹³ and Michael Horton¹⁴ all contribut-

⁹ For a history of this development, see Gary Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), and for an early reason to the changing landscape, see the collected essays in Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: IL: Crossway, 2004).

¹⁰ Clark Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way Through Modern Theology from an Evangelical Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990).

¹¹ Stanley Grenz, *Revising Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993); Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in Post Theology Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); and Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

¹² Roger Olson, "Does Evangelical Theology Have a Future?," *Christianity Today*, February 9, 1998, 40.

¹³ Kevin Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 49–104;

ed an appraisal of evangelical theology during this period. While they did not share the same points of concern or even arrive at the same conclusions, their questions did revolve around the three defining issues highlighted above: the function of the Bible in theology, epistemology, and the nature of doctrine.

Lindbeck's short book had a monumental impact on theological studies. The book was a groundbreaking study on doctrinal criticism and not per se an assessment of theological methods. He introduced a three-fold taxonomy that assessed how Christian theologians were doing theology at the time: experiential-expressivist, cognitive-propositionalist, and cultural-linguistic. For evangelicals, almost every discussion on the nature of theology from 1984 addressed his critique. Ten major evangelical theological projects responded at various levels of directness to the questions Lindbeck raises: John Frame, *The Knowledge of the Doctrine of God*; Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*; Alister McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine*; Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center*; Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*; Michael Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*; Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*; David Clark, *To Know and Love God*; and Anthony Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*. Lindbeck labeled the evangelical project "cognitive-propositionalist," emphasizing the cognitive aspects of religion and the informative function of church doctrines as truth claims about objective realities.¹⁵ While this emphasis on propositional truth was beneficial in the 20th century, the responses made it clear that Lindbeck struck a nerve. Theologians tended to focus on propositional truth claims that atomized the theological enterprise and fractured evangelical theology rather than offering a holistic account of God and his world in the world.¹⁶ To ground the interrelationship of doctrines, that system needs a theological center to unite theological

Kevin Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005); and Kevin Vanhoozer and Daniel Trier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture: A Mere Evangelical Account* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

¹⁴ Michael Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

¹⁵ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 16.

¹⁶ In response, while he does not use the term dogmatics, Douglas Vickers calls for a return to something like dogmatic reflection in *The Fracture of Faith: Recovering Belief of the Gospel in a Postmodern World* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2000).

reflection. Another consequence of atomizing doctrines and not providing a holistic account of the Christian faith is that Christian truths can be apprehended separately from the practice of the faith.

The propositional focus on theology resulted in a theological method lacking a central core and an underdeveloped framework to illuminate the theological relationships of biblical doctrines. This led to one-volume Systematic Theology texts that lacked internal coherence and, at times, presented theologically conflicting claims.¹⁷ Richard Lints addressed this issue in his 1993 book *The Fabric of Theology*, arguing that evangelicals need to recover a vision for theology that demonstrates the interrelated nature of doctrines around a robust biblical and theological core.¹⁸ Furthermore, the inherited method tended to address Christian doctrine in such a way as to isolate it from Christian living, despite claims that theological knowledge should have a transformative impact on Christians.¹⁹ However, this aspiration did not fully materialize in the evangelical experience, as the underlying epistemology seemed to align more with post-Enlightenment thinking than with biblical principles.²⁰ The lack of internal coherence among doctrines and the separation of Christian theology from the Christian life prompted some evangelicals to seek a reorientation in the pursuit of theological knowledge and a deeper understanding of God.

Eventually, some evangelicals began looking back to chart a path forward and discovered that propositional theology was not the primary way the early church theologized. They realized that theology was not always fragmented, leading them to retrieve the nature and method of theology from the rich history of Christian theology for their contemporary evangelical context. Fred Sanders offered an early evangelical exam-

¹⁷ Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 54–56; and David Clark, *To Know and Love God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 33–58.

¹⁸ Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 312–15.

¹⁹ Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3–34; Clark, *To Know and Love*, xxiii–xxxii; Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 77–114.

²⁰ Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 3–34; and Michael Allen, “Knowledge of God,” in Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 7–9; David Clark, *To Know and Love God*, xxiii–xxxii; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 1–36.

ple of this theological reflection in his book *Deep Things of God*.²¹

This group of evangelical dogmatists followed the paths set forth by their European counterparts, who initiated a dogmatic retrieval in the mid-to-late 20th century. Figures like Karl Barth, Henri de Lubac, and others influenced the history of dogmatic theology outside of evangelicalism. John Webster and Thomas F. Torrance were two influential evangelical dogmatic thinkers in the UK. Webster, considered by some as the father of American evangelical dogmatics, employed the Reformed Scholastic dogmatic method, which resonated well with evangelicals in the Reformed tradition.²² Torrance, while less influential among American evangelicals, provided a model for retrieving the early church fathers within a robust theological epistemology, rejecting the bifurcation of theological knowledge prevalent in much of 20th-century theological reflection.²³ Both Webster and Torrance offered evangelical theologians a coherent vision for integrating theology within church life and practice. Although Torrance’s influence may be less pronounced among some evangelicals, especially his work on theological epistemology, he remains a significant presence. Notably, North American evangelical theologians such as Tom Oden and Timothy George have played a significant role in doing Christian theology *by, as, and for* the church.

As of 2023, evangelical dogmatics has diversified into multiple spheres, each presenting a way forward for theologians seeking constructive theology. Scott Swain and Michael Allen have recently brought together theologians around a dogmatic project that draws inspiration from the Reformed Scholastic method, aiming to apply the best of their heritage to their contemporary ecclesial context.²⁴ Similarly, Tom McCall and Oliver Crisp have developed a proper dogmatic discourse through the discipline of Analytic Theology.²⁵ Among Baptists, Matthew Barrett and Craig Carter aspire to revive the classical scholastic dogmatic meth-

²¹ Fred Sanders, *Deep Things of God*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017). It was originally published in 2010.

²² See John Webster, “*Omnia ... Pertractantur in Sacra Doctrina Sub Ratione Dei*. On the Matter of Christian Theology” and “Christology, Theology, Economy. The Place of Christology in Systematic Theology,” in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology: Volume 1: God and Works of God* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 3–12, 43–58.

²³ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (London: T&T Clark, 2016).

²⁴ Allen and Swain, *Christian Dogmatics*.

²⁵ Crisp and Sanders, eds., *The Task of Dogmatics*.

od for Baptists in a forthcoming series of books called *Pillars in Christian Dogmatics*.

Baptist dogmatics is seen as a discipline engaged in confessional dialogue with other evangelical dogmatic enterprises, especially the constructive work done by Scott Swain and Michael Allen in their book *Christian Dogmatics*. Baptist dogmatics share significant common ground with the Reformed dogmatics tradition and is deeply indebted to the Reformed method and intended outcome. Theological retrieval is a shared commitment, making these theological projects valuable partners in helping the church engage in faithful theological reasoning.

According to Swain and Allen, dogmatics is “the concerted attempt of the church to discipline its hearing of and testimony to the gospel according to the same gospel, specifically, to the promise that God makes himself known to and by his people.”²⁶ Engaging in this discipline is a practice shared within the communion of saints throughout time and space. The dogmatic task involves reading the creeds of the ecumenical church, studying the confessions of the Protestant Reformation, learning from the texts of the ancient church fathers and medieval doctors of the faith, considering modern articulations of the gospel, and exploring contemporary testimonies to God’s Word.²⁷ It is a task undertaken by the church for God, the church itself, and the world.

Dogmatics empowers the church to read the Bible faithfully and requires theologians to continually explain the message of the gospel while remaining grounded in the Scriptures. For Swain and Allen, Christian dogmatics is both an exegetical and theological task, with dogmatic reasoning flowing from and returning to the task of exegesis.²⁸ Theology is never extricated from the Scriptures; it is sourced from and reflects on the revelation of God and his works as found in the Scriptures. Theological reflection is closely tied to the practice and confession of the faith within the church. It involves contemplating the Trinity of God as the origin and ultimate end of the faith. Swain and Allen emphasized that the possibility of faithful service in the task of dogmatics arises not from within the resources of dogmatics itself but from the infinite depths of the Triune God who speaks to and through his church, desiring to spread the knowledge and love of himself.²⁹

²⁶ Allen and Swain, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1.

²⁷ Allen and Swain, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4.

²⁸ Allen and Swain, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1. See Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11.

²⁹ Allen and Swain, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1.

As Baptist dogmaticians, the authors align themselves with this group of evangelical theologians in certain aspects while expressing their unique perspectives. They share a core dogmatic commitment to the theological interpretation of the Bible and theological retrieval. However, they also emphasize the importance of giving voice to catholic dogmatic theology in a way that accounts for Baptist distinctives and the particular ways in which Baptists confess and live the Christian faith. Embracing their Baptist distinctives, they integrate these formative aspects into the faith and practice of Baptist churches that share their theological and ecclesial identity. The authors strive to retrieve the best of their Baptist heritage within the Great Tradition, aiming to develop Baptist dogmatics.

The Task of Baptist Dogmatics

Historically, Baptists emerged from the radical reformation on the continent and as an independent movement in England. Despite the complex early formation of the Baptist movement, Baptists have always seen themselves as faithful representatives of the apostolic faith passed down through the ages by Christian communities participating in preaching the Word and administering the sacraments/ordinances. Historic Baptist confessions of faith have consistently maintained the orthodox foundations of the Christian faith that are consistent with the historic church. However, since its earliest days, Baptists have expressed and lived the faith with their unique theological inflection. Baptist dogmatics is the theological study and articulation of Christian doctrines from this distinctively Baptist perspective.

Baptists hold certain core convictions, including the authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures, the sovereignty of God, the priesthood of all believers, the necessity of regeneration and faith for salvation, believers’ baptism by immersion, the autonomy and interdependence of local churches, and the separation of church and state. While Baptist dogmatics is not uniform due to the diversity and development of Baptist history and identity, there is a common heritage and a shared commitment to the gospel that unites Baptists across different contexts and periods. The Lordship of Christ over every human conscience is a central conviction that governs the Baptist way of being.

Baptist dogmatics is not a secluded or sectarian endeavor but actively engages with other Christian traditions and the broader culture respect-

fully and constructively. Baptists affirm their catholicity as members of the universal body of Christ, seeking to learn from and contribute to the Great Tradition of Christian theology.³⁰ While engaging with other traditions, Baptists also bear witness to the truth and grace of God in their context and address the challenges and opportunities they encounter in their ministry. Ultimately, Baptist dogmatics is an act of worship and service to God and his church. Its purpose is to bring glory to God by deepening the knowledge and love of him through his self-revelation in the Scriptures. Additionally, Baptist dogmatics aims to edify the church by equipping believers for ministry and building them up in faith and love. It utilizes various sources, such as creeds, confessions, catechisms, sermons, songs, and prayers, to communicate and apply the doctrines of the Christian faith for the benefit of believers.

A significant theological distinction in Baptist dogmatics is its self-conscious commitment to the gospel and its missional nature. Dogmatic reasoning for Baptist theologians is inherently connected to an evangelical commitment to understanding humanity's sinfulness, the salvific work of Jesus Christ, forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and union with Christ. This missional aspect of Baptist dogmatics shapes the articulation of Christian doctrines and finds expression through ethical and liturgical practices. The belief that *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief, and the law of belief is the law of life) informs the method for dogmatics, integrating theological rationality with the lived faith of the believing church. The confessional articulations of faith state "what is to be believed" and inform the believing community. In other words, believing churches confess the faith that has formed them, making dogmatics an integral part of their identity and witness.

The Four Engagements of Baptist Dogmatics

Theologizing in a manner consistent with the field of dogmatics includes four fundamental engagements of theological reasoning. We describe this activity as engagement to capture the reality that the theological enterprise involves interpreting sources and making faithful judgments. So, these four engagements are not sequential acts or movements; they are integrated practices that form the substance of

³⁰ See Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps, *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academics, 2020).

theological articulation. We begin with the gospel because it is the *skopos* of the message of Scripture and the discipline of dogmatics.

Theological Engagement with the Gospel

Dogmatics entails an explicit engagement with the gospel according to Scripture. The Bible proclaims the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ from different perspectives, including succinct summaries. First Corinthians 15:1–14 says that the gospel is that Jesus died for our sins according to the Scripture, was buried, and was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. The explanation in the Old Testament determines the apostle's understanding of Jesus's death and resurrection. It is not merely that Jesus died for our sins, but that his death is understood through engagement with the rest of Scripture. The gospel is the key to understanding what it means to be a Christian, thinking well as a Christian, interpreting the Bible, and articulating doctrinal conviction according to Scripture.

In Matt 28:18–20, Matthew sets forth a summary of the gospel as the narrative of Scripture. He begins with creation, declaring that the Son has all authority over heaven and earth, and he then proceeds to how the people of God participate in God's kingdom as we take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Matthew also explains in this narrative summary that we gain the privilege to participate by identifying with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection in our new life in Christ, demonstrated in our baptism (Ezek 36, Rom 6:1–3). This new life leads to faithful obedience as we follow what Jesus taught and teach others that they may also obey. Finally, the summary ends with the promise of the presence of the Son with the community of faith until the end. In this way, these verses proclaim the gospel as a meta-framework for the entire Scripture.

Another example of how Scripture address the reality of the gospel is found in 1 Cor 5:19. Paul presents what one might term the reality of the gospel in this verse. Describing the activity of God to redeem, Paul says, "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us" (CSB). God has reconciled his people to himself in Christ and commissioned us to participate in his work by proclaiming this message of Good News. In this way, the gospel traffics in what is real—God, Christ, and his people. In this way, our faith can be established, not by mere *mythos* or hopeful conjecture, but in the truth of God in Christ. As dogmaticians engage with the gospel, we moor our lives and our words in the reality of this gospel and the God of this gospel.

Theological Engagement with Scripture

Theologizing is primarily an engagement with the Scriptures as the Word that tells the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, theological engagement with the Scriptures requires grammatical and theological exploration (Luke 24:13–35; 1 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21). Grammatical exegesis focuses on the language of the biblical text from the smallest linguistic level to the canonical contexts to discern the meaning of biblical words and concepts. Theological exegesis approaches the Bible as the revelation of God in the person and work of Christ so that we might behold God through his Word. As Tyler Wittman and R. B. Jamieson explain, exegesis is “not only ... adequate to the text itself, but also ... adequate to the ultimate reality to which the text bears witness.”³¹

Further, by beginning with the confession that the gospel is the summary of Scripture and the redemptive reality it proclaims, dogmatics engages with the text for a more complete understanding of the gospel because the Bible is itself the message of the gospel. The Bible includes summaries that provide readers language and explanation of the gospel to deepen their understanding. Through the spiritual enterprise of theological reflection, theologians and their articulation are formed by a theological reading of Scripture. This type of biblical reasoning through theological exegesis leads to theological reflection.³² This reflection meditates on the Word of God as a spiritual exercise with formation as its intended end. Through intentional contemplation of the Scripture, theologians produce theological language that serves the church in knowing God in Christ more deeply. This corporate knowledge of God is the purpose of engagement with Scripture.

Theological Engagement with Tradition

Baptist Churches practice the scriptural faith with the church in all times and places. Theology happens within the apostolic tradition, confessing the faith that was “once for all delivered to the saints” and doing theological reflection as recipients of and participants in that tradition. Dogmatics entails reflection on and engagement with a received tradition of theological exposition and proclamation. The Baptist tradition is a particular way of expressing and living that Great Tradition and is not

³¹ R. B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), xvii.

³² John Webster, “Biblical Reasoning,” in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reasoning* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 115–32.

outside of it. For Baptists, the tradition is a lived faith in which conversion, progress, and Christian living are inseparable from the proper articulation of the Christian dogma. Our proposal retrieves dogmatics for the believers’ church, while doing theological reflection within our own time and space as Baptist Christians. A Baptist disposition does not require sectarianism or the unwillingness to listen to non-Baptist voices in the Christian tradition—quite the opposite. Baptist dogmatics, as we understand it, necessarily requires participation in the broader Christian communion without losing those elements of the believers’ church that we believe form that church.

Theological Engagement with the Community

Theology seeks to provide the church language to articulate an understandable, receivable, and livable faith. This process occurs within the church. Theologians should participate in the community to experience the reality of lived faith. They reflect on the church’s practices as embodied portrayals of the gospel that unite the believers’ church. They join the church in confessing their faith and listen to how the people of God understand the confession. As members of the body of Christ, they serve the worship and faith of the church. Theologians must participate in a community of believers to inform the language it uses to articulate the faith. The church’s awareness of its identity and calling is apprehended by words it uses to explain its existence. The church’s prayers, songs, sermons, and symbols all convey some meaning. These words convey theological meaning within the community and, at the same time, for the community. Theologians are called to participate in the community for their faith and assess the effectiveness of the church’s language used to explain the faith.

When the language offers a clear understanding of the gospel, it guides the community in confessing the faith and helps form the community to live out the faith faithfully. Theologians serve the community by helping it reflect well on its confession and deepen the church’s understanding. Where there is a misunderstanding of the gospel, theologians can aid by explaining and even reformulating language. The community’s life is as much part of its theology as is its language. Taking heed to sound doctrine means watching one’s life and practice. Theological articulation is not an end in itself. The worship of God and the transformed life of the worshipper is the end of theologizing.

The Four Signposts of Baptist Dogmatics

Baptist theology is ecumenical and non-sectarian. The apostolic faith is expressed and practiced in different, equally valid ways among Christians throughout history and worldwide. Baptists practice the one faith in ways that are true to Scripture, the Great Tradition, and our historical context. **Baptist dogmatics is rooted in the free church tradition.** This tradition emphasizes local churches worshipping under the Lordship of Christ, the voluntary association of churches with similar theology and practice, the authority of Scripture, a robust conversionism, the necessity of Christian mission, and the priesthood of believers. Baptist dogmatics aids the church to articulate the faith fueling the church's mission, wherein people are invited to know and enjoy the Triune God through faith in Jesus Christ. Believers are priests of God who contribute to the dogmatic task through their ongoing confession of the common faith of other Baptist believers. To define the terrain of Baptist dogmatics, we propose four "signposts" that exemplify theology in action and guide theological reasoning for the believers' church.

Historical Signpost

The historical signpost guides the method for Baptist dogmatics. This signpost situates the project within the historical reality of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection and within the church's historic confession, reminding us that our theological reflection follows the patterns of reading and articulating the faith handed down from the apostles through the church fathers. Nevertheless, the signpost signals that Baptist dogmatics depends on Scripture's authority alone to explain to us and lead us to explore who Jesus is, what he has done, and how he reveals the Triune God to us. The contemporary gathered community shares in the gospel grounded in the historical reality of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection and in how the gospel has been practiced by confessing Christians for millennia. These realities are the basis for the Christian faith and frame the faith the church lives out, explains, and explores through teaching and theological reflection. Baptist dogmatics operates as an ongoing dialogue with the tradition and all those who received that faith, confessed that faith, and participated in the exploration of that faith. The Baptist theologian does more than acknowledge the history of theology. The dogmatician practices his or her discipline as a part of that communion of saints whose history is their own.

Ecclesial Signpost

The ecclesial signpost demonstrates that the Baptist theologian's

context and *telos* is the believing church with Christ as its head (Col. 1:18). Theological reflection, formulation, and reformulation happen as the theologian participates in worship, prayer, proclamation, and spiritual formation. The commitment to a believer's church implies that theologians are reasoning with a redeemed mind, having been formed by the gospel they wish to engage and articulate. Additionally, the Spirit's presence is anticipated because the dogmatic task happens within the believing community. As noted above, Trinitarian, Christocentric orientation of theology and theological epistemology raises the central importance of ontology for dogmatics. For Baptists, ecclesial ontology has always played a significant role in our tradition. To be a Baptist, at a bare minimum, means that one shares the core convictions of believers' baptism and regenerate church membership, both of which are concerned primarily with being. For Baptists, the ontology of the church has always been a primary concern.

When the dogmatic convictions concerning a properly theological (or ontological) objectivity combine with the Baptist commitment to ecclesial ontology, a unique and coherent vision for Baptist dogmatics emerges. Knowledge of God has a clear and natural mooring in our current ecclesial experience because **Baptist churches are composed only of those who confess to be born again in Christ.** Because of our emphasis on ecclesial ontology, for Baptists, objective theology cannot be something "out there," some knowledge of this Triune God and his incarnate Son far off in the distance. Rather, objective theology must be something "in here," a knowledge of the Triune God in the body of Christ. Further, our baptism has a distinct reality connected to it. As we join the catholic tradition of remembering our baptism in Christ in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we recall our real and true renewal in him. In this way, Baptist dogmatics takes on a uniquely ecclesial connection. To do (objective) dogmatics as a Baptist is to always do so in the communion of the regenerate church. As such, Baptist dogmatics must be ecclesial.

Covenantal Signpost

The covenantal signpost guides the believing community into its identity as the people of God and into its commitment to one another. The community is formed by the theological covenant based on the love of God and applied to those who confess faith in Christ through the soteriological covenant that unites God with his people (John 13:35). God's acts to redeem people determine the people's identity as Christ followers, and the application of this identity leads his people to live a common faith in union with one another to be a witness to God's work

in the world. Baptist dogmatics is characterized by agreement to practice the apostolic faith in such a way that the covenant community is itself a witness to the gospel which forms the community. Agreement in life and practice requires theological inquiry to help the participants know the one who united them to himself through his redeeming work and who united them to one another under the Lordship of Christ. The theological inquiry also guides participants in the church to common practice as well as common confession. The covenantal nature of Baptist life guides theologians.

Confessional Signpost

The confessional signpost reminds us that theology is practiced as the church confesses its faith to one another and to the world. Baptist dogmatics begins from the gospel confession—Jesus, Lord and Christ, according to the Scripture. Christians theologize both to understand the gospel and to better articulate their confession. Both ends of the confessional spectrum are essential to proper dogmatics. Furthermore, because the task begins and ends with confession, the work done between those ends is guided by the confessional nature of dogmatics.

This signpost connects with Baptists' well-known focus on missions. Baptists have been distinctly missional—not by doctrinal uniqueness, but by cultural emphasis. We are a missional people. Baptists expect that when Christians speak the gospel, those words are powerful. We expect that as we preach Christ, people across the street and around the world will hear and believe. Those who hear and believe profess their confession of the gospel and are sent to continue that confession inside the church and to the ends of the earth. Integrating Christian theology and the Christian life for Baptists requires that theological language be living and active. Baptist dogmatics must be communicative and empowered by the Spirit. Baptist dogmatics must be confessional.

Conclusion

Baptist dogmatics describes the theological study and articulation of the doctrines of the Christian faith in a distinctly Baptist voice. While Baptist dogmaticians share much in common, we do not propose that all in our community use the same theological method or draw the same theological conclusions. Indeed, Baptist theology is not standardized. Differences among our theologians are many. We are Baptists, after all. However, we share a gospel confession in our baptism, a conviction about the regenerate church. We are conditioned by our common commitment to the authority of Scripture, and we find a communal tradition in the ways Baptists have confessed the Christian faith. We believe our

tradition carries distinctive and formative hallmarks, which we have expressed in the four planks of Baptist dogmatics—historic, covenantal, ecclesial, and confessional. We theologize within the Great Tradition, seeking to join Christians in confessing the faith “once for all delivered to the Saints.” More specifically, *we theologize within our shared experience in the believing church and its practice of faith as we consider the New Covenant reality that we are a people in union with Christ and in union with one another.* We do dogmatics from within this covenantal reality and for this covenantal people—the believing church. These claims give us a particular vocation to the theological task; namely, to confess for theological formation and missional faithfulness as a believing people who seek to know the love of God in the Lord Jesus Christ and who seek to invite the world to have this same knowledge.