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This past February (2019), the General Conference of the United Methodist Church met in St. Louis. The primary item on the agenda was the existing language in "The Book of Discipline" regarding sexual ethics. After much debate and controversy, over 800 delegates cast their votes. Fifty-three percent favored retaining the language, and forty-seven percent voted against it, revealing how evenly divided the denomination is on this issue. At the time of this writing, it is unclear how the dissenters will proceed, but it is unlikely that the issue will go away or that unity will be the long-term result.

As many have observed, the identity crisis that the United Methodist Church and many other Christian fellowships seem to be facing is due, in large part, to a crisis of authority. Is Scripture the primary authority, and how is it brought to bear on the controversial issues of our day? This question is fundamental to the life and faith of the church and is pertinent to a wide range of topics. Because of the relevance of this question, this issue of *Christian Studies* is devoted to the theme of authority for Christian faith and practice. And this question is of utmost importance. Where does our authority for faith and practice lie? What are the proper sources for theology? What are the standards for evaluating different theologies? What should they be? What role does the greater historic tradition of the church play?

The contributors to this issue have emphasized different aspects of these questions, and various solutions are proposed in the following pages. In addition to biblical insights, these articles offer a range of theological, historical, and philosophical considerations regarding the authority and interpretation of Scripture. As always, our intent is to provide thoughtful reflection that will create dialogue about matters that are important to God's people.

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Authority:
Some Philosophical and Theological Considerations[1]

Frederick D. Aquino

It is not uncommon for people to employ Scripture to navigate discussions about a host of issues. This is especially the case for those that take Scripture as authoritative for Christian faith and practice. It is not surprising, then, to see a laundry list of questions emerge in light of such a commitment. Some of these questions involve determining 1) the locus of authority for Christian faith and practice, 2) the proper sources for theology, and 3) the criteria that help us evaluate different theological claims or conflicting interpretations of Scripture.

This line of inquiry has a long, complex, and multifaceted history that traverses denominational lines and theological perspectives. We can see its impact on and relevance to how we tackle issues in our own contemporary context. At first glance, for example, the problem of adjudicating competing claims seems to be more prevalent now than it used to be. But is this case? It is certainly true that we have greater and quicker access to more information, and so this reality may explain why we have a heightened awareness of the problem of disagreement and of the challenge of furnishing a common standard of adjudication. However, it is not as though the problem of securing a criterion or method by which people can adjudicate claims of knowledge is something new.[2] The failure to agree on the locus of authority for judging theological and

[1] Thanks to William Abraham, Keith Stanglin, Chance Juliano, and Michael Van Huis for comments on previous drafts of this article.

[2] For example, Descartes's internal appeal to the *cogito* as the clear, distinct, self-evident foundation for all other beliefs. The same kind of crisis also can be seen in

non-theological issues has fueled and continues to fuel the long search for new grounds of certainty. By now, most of us have experienced a cognitive dissonance of some sort and have tried different ways to heal the intellectual wounds of our past. Yet, we continue to participate in and feel the impact of a long-standing crisis of authority in our current setting. The point here is not to map out fully the details of the crisis of authority.[3] I am simply noting that the effects of the crisis seem to be very much with us, especially as we try to navigate a course that stipulates the conditions for handling the relationship between the soteriological and epistemological aspects of Christian faith. As we will see, an important task involves figuring out whether Scripture in the economy of the church should be treated primarily as a book about God that functions as a means of grace and makes us wise unto salvation (2 Tim 3:15, a soteriological conception of Scripture) or as a criterion that determines whether any/all beliefs are true, justified, and constitute knowledge (an epistemological conception of Scripture).

The Stone-Campbell Restoration tradition (henceforth RT) is no exception. This free-church expression of the Christian tradition has its own, though not fully explored and developed, chapter in the modern crisis of authority and in the modern story of theology.[4] In particular, RT has been fundamentally committed to the goal of retrieving, if not restoring, early Christian beliefs and practices.[5] At the heart of this vision is the desire to acquire true (rather than false) beliefs concerning the ancient order of things. More exactly, the aim is

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claims of papal and biblical authority. For a fuller treatment of the regional and universal dimensions of the problem of the criterion in the Reformers, Descartes, and other proposals, see William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

[3] On the modern crisis of authority and its implications for contemporary theology, see Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*. In my estimation, Abraham's analysis is a nice complement to Stout's historicist narrative and vice versa.

[4] For a recent treatment of the philosophical contours of RT, see Caleb Clanton ed., *Restoration Philosophy: New Philosophical Engagements with the Stone-Campbell Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2019).

[5] For a fuller account of intellectual formation in RT, see Frederick D. Aquino, "Toward a Constructive Account of Intellectual Formation in the Restoration Movement," in Clanton, *Restoration Philosophy*.

to reconstruct and restore New Testament Christianity. The normative constraint of such a project is the primitive New Testament church.

The emphasis on acquiring true beliefs is admirable and important. However, it seems clear that RT has begun to think more constructively about its history, its theological vision, and its aims in light of the broader Christian tradition. As RT seeks to make progress towards developing a constructive conversation about what is authoritative for Christian faith and practice, I think we need to make some important distinctions and clarifications. Accordingly, the first section will briefly draw attention to three areas: 1) the relationship between divine revelation and Scripture, 2) the authority of Scripture, and 3) the nature and function of Scripture. The second section will argue that discussions about the epistemological aspects of Scripture fit more naturally in a new sub-discipline called the epistemology of theology. The third section will offer some concluding reflections. In particular, it will spell out some ways in which RT can put its commitments in conversation with recent work in the epistemology of theology and thus make progress towards advancing a constructive proposal. To this end, I hope my reflections will serve as a springboard for conversation and further work.

Preliminaries

Whether we seek to reduce, expand, or maintain our sources of theological assessment, we need to recognize an important distinction between the soteriological and epistemological aspects of Christian faith. More exactly, employing Scripture within the life of the church for soteriological purposes is different than using it for epistemological purposes. The former focuses on issues with which the church confronts us when we are baptized and initiated into the faith (for example, who is God, what is the human predicament like, how has Jesus liberated us for salvation and healing), whereas the latter focuses on issues related to the adjudication of truth claims (for example, determining whether a belief is true, justified, constitutes knowledge).[6] The failure to provide clarification on this front has contributed to a host of misunderstandings and controversies on different topics (for example, the relationship between religion

[6] For further reflection on this distinction, see William J. Abraham, Jason Vickers, and Natalie Van Kirk eds., *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

and science, between scripture and philosophy, and between the church and the academy). With this distinction in mind, I want, in a preliminary way, to draw attention to three areas that warrant greater clarification and development.

First, we need to make a clear distinction between divine revelation and the means by which we gain access to it. Such a distinction presupposes that divine revelation is antecedent to or distinct from that which bears witness to (or mediates) it (see Luke 1:1–4; John 1:1–3, 14; 1 Cor 15:3–8; Eph 3:3; Heb 1:1–3, 2:4; Rev 1:1–3). In other words, the event, manifestation, or speech act of divine revelation at a particular time is distinct from the process by which it is recognized and appropriated. As William Abraham points out, "it is one thing to construe Scripture as a sure and certain foundation of knowledge; it is another to see it as a contingent medium of divine revelation."[7] Abraham employs the language of contingent medium to highlight the polymorphous activity of divine revelation and the diversity of mediators and means of God's self-disclosure (see Heb 1:1–2).[8] Thus, there is a sharp distinction between divine revelation and the relevant sources of transmission and preservation.

Failure to make such a distinction incorrectly assumes that Scripture is the primary epistemic concept, when in fact it is in and through divine revelation that we acquire knowledge of God. Scripture, then, is derivatively, not fundamentally, authoritative insofar as it bears witness to or mediates what has been made known in a revelatory speech act, event, manifestation, and so on. In recognizing such a distinction, we see the importance of not confusing divine revelation with the means of transmission and preservation.

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[7] Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Theology*, 5. In *The Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 89–90, Abraham also makes the following helpful distinction of three separate acts in the process of revelation and response: 1) the act of God in speaking, 2) the recognition of the speech act on the part of the recipient, and 3) the response of the recipient to the revelation.

[8] William J. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 57–58. Sandra Menssen and Thomas D. Sullivan, "Revelation and Scripture," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, ed. William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 30, agree that "Not all revelation is reducible to scripture, for God's fundamental revelation is in the person of Jesus Christ." Given that Scripture is about divine revelation, this "'aboutness' relationship is one-directional, and makes revelation ontologically prior—prior in 'the order of being'—to Christian scripture."

Second, we need greater clarity on what sort of claim we are making when we talk about the authority of Scripture. What kind of authority is it? Is it a practical authority? A theoretical authority? Or both?[9] What is the scope and range of its authority? With respect to what is it authoritative? If an authority is relative to a particular subject matter and field of knowledge, then over what subject matter or field of knowledge is Scripture authoritative?

It makes little sense to say that a document, field of knowledge, or person is authoritative without qualification. Instead, we think of authority in domain-specific terms. In this sense, something is authoritative with respect to a particular domain of inquiry or field of knowledge. Just because someone is an authority in one field of knowledge does not mean that he or she is an authority in every other field of knowledge. For example, if we want to learn something about the basic principles or laws that govern the physical world, then we will defer to the insights of people working within the field of physics. We would not, however, see physics as an authoritative guide for how to read literature, nor would we turn to biology for how to make sense of political structures. So, authority seems to be domain-specific. The extent to which a text, for example, is authoritative depends very much on what we intend to tackle in terms of the subject matter. Thus, we might say, "no ascription of authority to a text is complete without the specification of the domain within which it has authority."[10]

Third, we need greater clarification on the nature and function of Scripture. Is it a list of books used by the church as a means of grace that initiates people into (as well as sustains them in) the life of God? Or, is it an epistemic criterion that demarcates true from false beliefs, rationality from irrationality, and knowledge from opinion? The point here is not to deny that one can come to know God in and through the witness of Scripture. Certainly many have come to believe in or know God as a result of engaging in practices like Scripture reading, the Lord's Supper, prayer, spiritual direction, and so on. Rather, the question is whether we should treat Scripture as an epistemic criterion that determines whether any/all beliefs are true, justified, or constitute knowledge.

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[9] On the distinction between theoretical and practical authority, see Michael C. Rea, "Authority and Truth," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 872–98.

[10] Rea, "Authority and Truth," 874.

The distinctions that I have made thus far may lead some to say that I am relativizing Scripture. More exactly, the charge could be that I am suggesting that Scripture does not make truth claims, that it does not contain truth, or that it does not offer any epistemological suggestions. This could not be further from the truth. Instead, I think that making the relevant distinctions and clarifications is crucial to avoiding category mistakes and thus confusing Scripture (in terms of its derivative status) with divine revelation (in terms of its fundamental source) or assuming that the range of its authority is unlimited. In addition, there is a fundamental difference between making truth claims (for example, asserting something to be true) and determining whether these claims are true, rational, warranted, and so on. So, in the case of Scripture, it certainly makes truth claims or provides information with respect to a particular theological domain of inquiry (for example, God, salvation). However, the question at hand is whether Scripture in fact provides a reflective consideration of what, for example, constitutes knowledge (as opposed to mere opinion).[11]

Now it is certainly the case that various people, practices, and materials play an indispensable role in the process of forming and shaping Christian identity. They can function as sources for forming theological judgments and for seeking God. Christians have employed or have drawn insights from Scripture, doctrinal summaries (for example, creeds), liturgical materials (for example, baptism, the Lord's Supper), spiritual exemplars (for example, saints, fathers, mothers), and teachers to form and sustain Christian identity. They are authoritative insofar as they provide crucial information with respect to the process of forming and sustaining Christian identity. The primary interest here is "soteriological." That is, the aim is to "bring about the healing of human agents and restore them to their proper dignity and destiny."[12] Accordingly, one can read Scripture, be baptized, take the Lord's Supper, pray, preach, catechize, and so on without working out a full-blown epistemology of Christian belief. In other words, there is a fundamental distinction between being initiated into the life of God and securing an epistemology for Christian truth claims.

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[11] For this distinction, see William J. Abraham, "*Smoky the Cow Horse* and Wesleyan Understanding of Scripture," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 51/2 (2016): 7–25.

[12] Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*, 58. See also Abraham, Vickers, and Van Kirk, *Canonical Theism*.

Relocating the Discussion

The primary task of the church, then, is not to provide a full-blown epistemology of Christian belief. In other words, the church should not drop everything (for example, preaching the gospel, initiating people into the faith) until it develops a theory of justification and knowledge. However, such a caveat does not suggest that the aim of justifying Christian belief (or determining whether Christian claims constitute knowledge) is irrelevant to or incompatible with Christian faith. In fact, the Christian tradition encourages, rather than inhibits, this kind of pursuit. Along these lines, recent work in epistemology can help theologians make the relevant distinctions and alert them to epistemic components in the Christian tradition that have been ignored, neglected, or not formulated adequately. For example, some recent work in virtue epistemology may help identify epistemic suggestions in the Christian tradition that stress the importance of the proper function of cognitive faculties, conversion, volitional openness, and transformation for knowledge of God.

More specifically, questions concerning the norms and sources of theology (including Scripture) belong in the sub-discipline called the epistemology of theology. By the epistemology of theology, I mean the attempt to provide an orderly, constructive, and critical investigation of appropriate epistemic concepts and theories in or related to theology (for example, justification, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom). In particular, this involves examining and articulating what counts as appropriate epistemic evaluation in theology. The wide-ranging nature of this kind of inquiry can be seen in the following distinction. On the one hand, there are concepts that are usually thought of as questions about norms and sources of theology (for example, reason, experience, tradition, Scripture, revelation). On the other hand, there are some general epistemic concepts that can be related to theology (for example, wisdom, understanding, virtue, evidence, testimony, skepticism, disagreement).

An example along these lines is Linda Zagzebski's book, *Epistemic Authority*. In a chapter on religious authority, for example, she focuses on the epistemological significance and intersection of divine revelation, testimony, and authority. She thinks that there is a clear distinction between divine testimony (a divine telling at a particular time) and the appropriation of it (this would include but is not limited to Scripture; see the distinction between divine revelation and Scripture in the first section). As she points out, "Christianity existed

as a tradition decades before the Christian Scriptures were written down, and in the early Church, the Word of God did not primarily refer to a book."[13] Early Christian witness included appeals to a broader network of practices, people, and materials.

The significance of this divine telling for people beyond the revelatory event requires the development of authority structures to "preserve and transmit the practices that define it to distant and future members of the community."[14] Accordingly, Zagzebski draws attention to three models of revelation, "all of which are intended to explain how something communicated by God" at a particular time "can be transmitted to a great number of people over a long period of time in widely varying circumstances in such a way that the communication succeeds in producing a state of faith that includes reasonable belief."[15] A principle of epistemic trust in others undergirds a transmission of this sort. This kind of trust includes both a general trust that my cognitive faculties are similar to theirs and "a particular self-reflective trust in those others whose conscientiousness I discover by being conscientious."[16] If acquiring true beliefs is desirable, then I, as a conscientiously self-reflective being, should extend the same degree of trust to conscientious others as I do to myself. Moreover, conscientious self-reflection may reveal that others are in a better position to pursue and acquire the relevant epistemic goods. An appeal to authority, then, is "justified by the commitments of conscientious self-refection." Likewise, religious beliefs can be justified by principles that arise "from conscientious reflection of self-conscious beings." So, I am justified in taking beliefs on the authority of a religious community, "if I conscientiously judge that I am more likely to believe what God revealed if I take the authority of the Church than if I do not."[17]

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[13] Linda T. Zagzebski, Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 192.

[14] Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 191.

[15] Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 191. See also her chapter, "Authority in Religious Communities," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, 97–110.

[16] Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 184–85.

[17] Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 198–99. See also Richard T. De George, "The Function and Limits of Epistemic Authority," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 8 (1970): 199–204; De George, *The Nature and Limits of Authority* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985); Phillip Kitcher, "Authority, Deference and the Role of Individual Reason," in *The Social Dimension of Scientific Knowledge*, ed. E. McMullin, (Notre Dame:

Although Zagzebski does not develop a theology of Scripture, she shows what is at stake when we make epistemic claims about divine revelation, the transmission of it, and the relevant authorities or authority structures that preserve it. In particular, she seeks to establish that a person's acceptance of authority in a particular community can be justified by principles that outsiders would readily accept. As a result, the particular beliefs justified by that authority would not be immune to external criticism. The point here is not to evaluate Zagzebski's proposal but rather to show, by way of an example, that if a theology of Scripture is going to be spelled out in epistemic terms, we must be prepared to do the epistemological work or defer to those who have done such work.

Accordingly, I have contended that epistemological issues related to or in Scripture should be relocated in the epistemology of theology. This is not to say that connecting epistemological issues and Scripture is wrongheaded; it is simply to say that these issues fit more naturally in the epistemology of theology. An important aim along these lines is to attend more fully to the epistemological issues that arise in the course of doing Christian theology and in the course of engaging Scripture epistemologically.

The time for such a project is propitious. On the one hand, the whole field of epistemology has been revolutionized over the last fifty years. One fruitful and refreshing feature of recent work in epistemology is the expansion of its topics.[18] The landscape includes, but is not limited to, developing accounts of

University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 244–71; Richard Foley, "Egoism in Epistemology," in *Socializing Epistemology: The Social Dimensions of Knowledge*, ed. Frederick F. Schmitt, 53–73 (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1994); Arnon Keren, "Epistemic Authority, Testimony, and the Transmission of Knowledge," *Episteme* 4 (2007): 368–81; Sanford Goldberg, *Relying on Others: An Essay in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Paul Moser, "God and Epistemic Authority," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 14/2 (2015): 415–24; and Katherine Dormandy, "Epistemic Authority: Preemption or Proper Basing," *Erkenntnis* 83/4 (2017): 773–91.

[18] E.g., William Alston, *Beyond Justification: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Alvin Goldman and Denis Whitcomb, eds., *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); John Greco and John Turri, eds.. *Virtue Epistemology: Contemporary Readings* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012); Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard, eds., *Social Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Jonathan Kvanvig, "Truth is not the Primary Epistemic Goal," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* ed. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 284–96.

knowledge, rationality, justification, warrant, understanding, wisdom, the intellectual virtues, and the social dimensions of cognition (for example, testimony, trust, authority). Along these lines, some have already shown how different theological topics can be addressed in light of these recent developments in epistemology.[19] More importantly, these projects have paved the way for fuller theological appropriation and have created space for constructive work in epistemology as it crops up within theology.

On the other hand, there are signs that some theologians are ready to participate in the epistemology of theology project. They see the relevance of recent developments in epistemology for their own work.[20] Given the extraordinary diversity within theology at present, it is clear that theologians are acutely

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[19] E.g., William J. Abraham, "The Epistemological Significance of the Inner Witness of the Holy Spirit," *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 434–50; Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*; Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*; William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Alston, "The Distinctiveness of the Epistemology of Religious Belief," in *The Rationality of Theism,* ed. G. Brüntrup and R. K. Tacelli (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 237–54; John Greco, "Religious Knowledge in the Context of Conflicting Testimony," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 83 (2009): 61–76; Greco, "Religious Belief and Evidence from Testimony," in *The Right to Believe: Perspectives in Religious Epistemology*, ed. Dariusz Lukasiewics and Roger Pouivet (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2012), 27–46; George Mavrodes, *Revelation in Religious Belief* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1973); Mitchell, *Faith and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); William Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomena to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Wainwright, *Reason, Revelation, and Devotion: Inference and Argument in Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*.

[20] E.g., Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*; Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*; Frederick D. Aquino, *Communities of Informed Judgment: Newman's Illative Sense and Accounts of Rationality* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004); Sarah Coakley, "Dark Contemplation and Epistemic Transformation: The Analytic Theologian Re-Meets Teresa of Avila," in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 280–312; Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

aware of the need to sort through how to adjudicate the theological and epistemological options in a responsible manner. They cannot really do so without getting into the epistemology of theology.

Constructive Suggestions

As I have suggested, an important task of the church, soteriologically speaking, is the cultivation of Christian identity (for example, Phil 2:5–11). However, the process of forming and sustaining Christians does not take place in a vacuum but is conditioned by the relevant beliefs, practices, and processes. More exactly, formation of this sort calls for deep immersion in a set of practices. As a result, the Restoration tradition (RT) needs to maintain its commitment to the formative role of ecclesial practices (for example, preaching, singing, Scripture reading, the Lord's Supper, prayer) while recognizing that there are epistemological options for making sense of and justifying Christian belief.

The key here is not to confuse these formative practices with theorizing about the intellectual status of Christian belief. Such confusion incorrectly presumes that epistemological analysis is a precondition to Christian formation. Many have come to faith without engaging in this kind of reflection. Instead, the distinction between the soteriological and epistemological should liberate people to see more clearly the importance of dividing the cognitive labor and thus clarifying the particular goals we have in mind when, for example, we read Scripture. So, in making such a distinction, I am not suggesting that we should shy away from engaging in epistemological reflection of the relevant themes and issues in Scripture. I am simply putting the soteriological and epistemological in their proper place. The latter can certainly take its place alongside the former without blurring the relevant distinction.

When one blurs the distinction between the epistemological and soteriological functions of scripture, two problematic options emerge.[21] One option is to view Scripture as an unqualified authority that holds sway in all domains of knowledge. The consequence of this option, however, is that Scripture, as one authoritative voice among many others, becomes beholden to the norms of each discipline to which it is an authority (for example, physics, biology, psychology). Another option in an attempt to avoid such a consequence would be

[21] Thanks to Chance Juliano for helping me clarify things a bit in this (and the next) paragraph.

to up the authoritative ante of Scripture and treat it as an epistemic criterion (not *merely* as an authority). If Scripture is a criterion that adjudicates all claims, it becomes unclear how one can adjudicate competing claims about Scripture itself! To appeal to Scripture in this case would be circular. One could, of course, claim that select parts of Scripture norm the rest of Scripture, in which case all of Scripture would not be normative and the real norm would lie in some subset of Scripture. This is of course well known as the canon within the canon. But what do we do when the smaller normative subset of Scripture is disputed? Do we appeal to yet another norm? Given that both parties will be appealing to Scripture, it seems that we need a standard list of criteria to make adjudication a real possibility. We are bound to look for criteria to sort out the relevant issues when comparing rival claims. One can see, then, the troubles that occur when one makes Scripture an epistemic criterion. In addition, we set people up for an unnecessary faith crisis by misconstruing Scripture as something that is primed for resolving questions concerning the justification of Christian belief (for example, employing Scripture as a criterion for navigating questions in fields of knowledge such as science).

Are we, then, to understand that Scripture is in no sense epistemically authoritative? No. Scripture *is* epistemically authoritative but 1) not in an unqualified sense and 2) not as an epistemic criterion. The solution between these two extremes is that Scripture is epistemically authoritative in a limited or circumscribable sense; it is uniquely positioned as a witness to divine revelation. As I have shown, Scripture's authoritative domain is not un-circumscribable. But in what domains is Scripture epistemically authoritative? Not all Christians need to be burdened with the task of trying to circumscribe the epistemic authority of Scripture; this is a task for those who engage in the epistemology of theology. This is why it is important not to confuse the soteriological and epistemological functions of Scripture. Given that Scripture is primarily soteriological, not all need to worry about reading epistemology textbooks. Scripture is, of course, epistemically authoritative, and theologians with an acute interest in epistemology can follow up the debate as far in the weeds as they desire. This is not to undermine the authority of Scripture. Rather, such a distinction divides the cognitive labor in such a way so as to enable the church to retain Scripture's authority but not at the cost of lapsing into incoherence.

With these distinctions and clarifications in mind, epistemological questions concerning the status of Christian belief are natural and inevitable. In this respect, the time is ripe for folks within RT to put some of their commitments in conversation with recent work in the epistemology of theology. So, I hope that RT will explore the relevant epistemological issues in Scripture, a resource that has been central to its theological and ecclesial identity. Accordingly, I will draw attention to two areas that warrant further reflection and development.

First, a nice place to begin is with reflection on the epistemological issues that are identified in Scripture. A project of this sort would seek to do historical, theological, and philosophical justice to various themes in Scripture while seeking to explore the constructive epistemological possibilities. The interdisciplinary nature and scope of this project, however, is a vivid reminder of the importance and challenge of bringing together insights from various domains of inquiry.

For example, Scripture makes a connection between purity of heart and perceptual knowledge of God. "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they will see God" (Mt. 5:8). Such a connection is ripe for epistemological analysis. The text seems to suggest that the cultivation of a pure heart is a precondition to the process of making progress towards and achieving perceptual knowledge of God. However, it is not entirely clear in what sense purity of heart is integral (epistemically speaking) to or shapes the process of sensing things divine. What kind of epistemological sense can we make of spiritual perception? What role in particular does a pure heart play in shedding perceptual distractions (such as vanity, pride, and so on), in cultivating perceptual readiness, and in fostering a stable and discerning habit of mind?[22]

[22] Recent work on trained perception may provide some clarification along these lines. In particular, it has shown how perception and perceptual processes can be altered or improved by learning, attention, and training. The focus here is on the social conditions under which people depend on structures, practices, and others to improve their perceptual capacities. Such training is important in many fields of knowledge. Under the tutelage of others, people learn to attend well to things and thereby become better perceivers. The goal of perceptual training, then, is to cultivate increased sensitivity to important features in an environment. It is deeply crucial to the process of refining our perceptual capacities and thus becoming better perceivers in the relevant domain. In this case, to become a better spiritual perceiver is to take up the relevant beliefs, practices, virtues, and learn how to screen out irrelevant or vicious stimuli. See

Second, an equally important task involves providing a more precise understanding of what a constructive account of RT entails. Before we carve out an account of authority, it may be helpful to understand exactly what we have in mind with the language of restoration. Is a constructive account of authority tied to some kind of primitivist project that seeks to recapture and repristinate the earliest and purest form of early Christian thought? If the pursuit of true rather than false beliefs concerning early Christian beliefs, practices, and materials is still an important goal of RT, would it make better sense to draw from other resources within the Christian tradition as well as Scripture? If so, the kind of restoration envisioned here would 1) include a broader account of the resources of the Christian tradition, 2) do justice to the formation and development of theological concepts from these resources, and 3) explore the intersection of Scripture with other early Christian practices and materials. The point here is to relocate Scripture within a broader network of practices and resources.

Given the previous distinctions, clarifications, and focus on a new sub-discipline, what, then, does it mean for RT to take seriously the integrity of its own ecclesial and theological commitments while charting a constructive path? It certainly does not mean forgetting its own commitments, nor does it mean exempting those commitments from engagement with the broader streams of the Christian tradition and recent work in the epistemology of theology. However, if RT is going to make headway towards a more constructive path, it needs to formulate a more systematic account of the formative practices that put people in a better position to achieve the stipulated goals, whether they are soteriological or epistemological. Along these lines, we must avoid conflating the soteriological and epistemological aspects of Christian faith. The inability (or refusal) to do so will likely contribute to a long-standing crisis of authority.

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