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The Interplay between Forms of Revelation:
Implications for Theological Method

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Presuppositions	1
Purpose.....	2
Limits and Tools	3
The Interplay of Revelatory Forms in Paul’s Encounter	4
Jesus Reveals Himself to Paul	4
Vision/Epiphany	5
Ananias the Prophetic Healer and Disciple	6
The Way as Scripture Interpreters	7
Personal and Dramatic Experience	9
Christ as the Center.....	9
Paul’s Encounter Outside of Scripture.....	10
Theological Method and Personal Encounters	11
Connecting Christ-centered Experiences with Method	13
People’s Role as Revelatory Conduits.....	14
Ananias	14
Human Conduits of Revelation.....	15
Impact on Theological Method.....	16
Scriptural Affirmation.....	17
Orality	18
Implications for Doing Theology.....	20
The Community of Faith Seeking Understanding	20
Engaging with the Way.....	20
Antioch.....	22
Importance of Community	22
Bringing the Personal Encounters Together	23
Community and Theological Method	25
The Norming Norm.....	26
Paul and Scripture	27
Scripture, Theology, and the Interplay of Revelatory Forms	27
Interpreting Together	29
Scripture as the Final Arbiter	30
But What about Culture?	31
Culture and Scripture: Towards a Biblical Worldview.....	32
Method and Culture	33
The Incarnation Principle.....	33
Implications for Theological Method	35
Intercultural Necessity	37
Towards a More Wholistic Methodological Approach	39
Bibliography	42

Introduction

The interplay between forms of revelation has been a matter of much discussion in theological discourse for many centuries. While this paper is not particularly concerned with the final say on the doctrine of revelation it is concerned with revelation and its relation to theological method.¹ In other words, what is the significance of the various modes or forms that revelation takes in connection with the way theology is approached and done? Revelation is a challenging concept to define without creating some sense of ambiguity. This paper will proceed with the short definition of revelation as the various forms that God utilizes to reveal who He is to humanity. Theology in this paper is understood to be the dynamic pursuit of attempting to understand who God is as a relational being and the corresponding faith in God manifested as a result of His revelation.²

Presuppositions

This paper presupposes that God is triune and that Christ is the Incarnate God who came to earth in the flesh. It also presupposes that Scripture is the inspired Word of God and that God is also revealed through experiences, people, the faith community known as church, and that this

¹ The doctrine of revelation does pose some unique methodological challenges as Avery Dulles points out: “The theology of revelation offers peculiar methodological problems. It is not part of doctrinal theology (or dogmatics) as ordinarily understood, for doctrinal theology... customarily tests its assertions by their conformity with what is already recognized as revelation.” See Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 14.

² I have attempted to keep the definition here short but there are other valid ways of understanding theology. Andrew Walls quotes Gustavo Gutiérrez as saying theology is “critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the word” to which Walls adds, “theology is about testing your actions by Scripture” see Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 10. This is a good additional definition, not complete by itself but adding to the overall understanding of what theology is. Another good definition to add is “The purpose of theology is to train disciples to participate in the once-for-all mission of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.” Kevin Vanhoozer, “The Voice and the Actor,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* edited by John G. Stackhouse, Jr., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 97.

revelation takes place in cultural contexts.³ The primary concern of this paper is not to isolate forms of revelation but rather to work with the forms listed above to understand better how they interplay with each other as revelatory forms and what this means for theological method.⁴

In order to do this Paul's Damascus road encounter with Christ and the subsequent events will serve as a paradigmatic narrative to be used as a framework for the discussion. This narrative displays all of the above forms of revelation and can aid in an understanding as to how these forms interplay with each other in cultural contexts. It can also aid in understanding theological methodology as understood by Paul who went through these experiences. An advantage of using a narrative as our paradigmatic passage is that it is more dynamic in how it displays the forms of revelation. This can be done with any text but is easier with narrative because it is already in a dynamic setting of players and actions.⁵

Purpose

The thesis of this paper is that God is not limited to one form of revelation, but rather that each revelatory form can and does inform the others in some way. The paper will attempt to determine, through the example of Paul, how forms of revelation work together in various

³ This paper will not go into nature as revelation because the focus is elsewhere, but it should become clear that nature can easily fit into the discussion in much the same way as the other forms of revelation that will be discussed. There is no doubt that Paul had a very high view of nature as a form of revelation see Rom 1:20.

⁴ While this paper is going to look at method and attempt to guide towards an appropriate method, there may be some value in relooking at the concept of method in general, an example of this kind of idea is put forth by Vanhoozer commenting on the modern academies emphasis on figuring out "how you know" when he says, "method—the study of the right procedure for knowing—replaced metaphysics as modernity's 'first philosophy.'" Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "One Rule to Rule Them All?" in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* edited by Craig Ott and Harold H. Netland (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 87. If this is true then rethink on the endeavor to develop a theological method may be in order.

⁵ Bonnie Bowman Thurston, "Paul on the Damascus Road: The Study of the New Testament and the Study of Christian Spirituality," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2003): 227. Thurston also states that the New Testament as a whole "is itself the early church's considered reflection on the experience of meeting Jesus." Ibid: 228. And "It [New Testament] is not just a text like any other document from antiquity. It is a record of human beings' experience of communication between themselves and God in and through the person of Jesus Christ." Ibid.

cultural contexts to reveal God. Based on the research it will then move into possible implications for theological methodology.⁶

Limits and Tools

This paper is limited in that it does not pretend to be the final word on the topic nor comprehensive in its research outcomes. It is more of a working project meant to foster further study, reflection, and research on the issue of revelation, Christ, and theological method. It is somewhat limited in that it focuses on particular biblical passages and a particular person (Paul) in a particular context. There is much more biblical material that is relevant to the thesis of this paper and that would inform and enhance the thesis to a great extent, but such will be bypassed due to space constraints.

In order to accomplish the task several different disciplines were consulted. Of course systematic theologies played a role, but works that would fall under other theological disciplines, such as historical theology and biblical theology were also be consulted. Missiological, anthropological, and sociological literature were also referenced, these are often disciplines that are left out of theological discussions, but have been increasingly recognized as extremely valuable and important voices in theological discussion.⁷

⁶ This paper moves in the direction spelled out by Vanhoozer in the following way: “Contemporary theologies make contextual issues *explicit* in a way that was not traditionally the case. In turning to context, third world theologians now employ a different handmaiden: not philosophy but the social sciences. The key methodological issue is no longer that of right procedure (how?) but location (where?) and position (who?)” (emphasis in original). Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All?” 95. This is how I have begun to approach the challenge of method.

⁷ Veli-Matti Kärkäinen, is attempting to develop a constructive theology by “utilizing...insights, and materials of all other theological disciplines, that is: biblical studies, church history and historical theology, philosophical theology, as well as ministerial studies. Closely related fields of religious studies, ethics, and missiology also belong to the texture of systematic work.” *Trinity and Revelation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 13. In many ways this paper is attempting to move in a similar direction.

The Interplay of Revelatory Forms in Paul's Encounter

Acts 9:1-31, 11:25-26, and 12:25-13:3 relate the account in Scripture of Paul's transformative encounter from Christian persecutor to Christian epitomizer. However, it is not the only place that references this story. Later in his life Paul would frequently make references to this experience, both in his speeches and epistles. Acts 22:2b-21 records Paul's retelling of the events of his transformation before a crowd of angry Jews in Jerusalem. Again in Acts 26:4-23 Paul tells the story to King Agrippa at the court of Festus. Each of these are relevant for the purposes of this paper and will be consulted. Paul also references this encounter in several different places in his epistles. There is reference to it in 1 Corinthians 15:9, 10, as well as Galatians 1:11-24 in a very explicit manner.⁸ There are many more implicit or less direct references in other epistles as well. Beyond these direct references, however, it is important to recognize that "the Damascus Event [is] the hinge around which Paul's career turned, and there is no way one can seriously engage with Paul apart from this."⁹ While there were a variety of things that would have influenced Paul's theology as found in his epistles, his Damascus road experience is surely one of most formative experiences he had.

Jesus Reveals Himself to Paul

The various revelatory forms of Paul's encounter could be debated, but this paper will argue that God, at the very least, used the following forms as revelatory. First there is the direct encounter, on the road, in which Jesus is seen both in physical light and in person and Paul also heard as an audible voice. Paul is then sent to get a word of encouragement and prophetic

⁸ I am indebted to Patricia Elyse Terrell's book on Pauline writings in isolating cross-reference texts for this study, see *Paul's Parallels: An Echoes Synopsis* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

⁹ Paul W. Barnett, "Appendix 1: Paul in the Book of Acts," in *All Things to All Cultures* edited by Mark Hargin and Alanna Nobbs, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 392.

guidance from a “disciple” who is also part of the growing community known as the Way. Thus, both the disciple and the larger community serve as conduits of revelation and help Paul interpret his experience through the OT Scriptures, which Paul was already well acquainted with. Paul then goes out to tell others of his experience and becomes an active member of the community by becoming a witness to Christ whom he has experienced and begun to understand. But this is done in a limited way, until many years later, when he is sought out by Barnabas and brought to Antioch, which then leads to his full call to share God with the Gentiles.

Vision/Epiphany

As Paul is traveling down the road to Damascus a major event takes place that is not easy to picture nor fully comprehend. Luke describes it in Acts 9:3 in the following way, “light from heaven flashed around him.” Paul in his later descriptions of the event in Acts 22:6 and 26:13, puts even more emphasis on the overpowering light that flashed before him. In fact in Acts 26:13 he claims the light was “brighter than the sun.” Clearly the type of light and the impact of this light was something Paul would never forget. This was no ordinary, natural light but the light that only God possesses. This light was so bright it blinded Paul; however “Paul’s conversion experience is an experience of revelation described in terms of seeing,” affirmed in several passages, where Paul explicitly states that he saw Christ (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8).¹⁰

Beyond the sight sensation of this encounter, there was an audible voice which Paul heard and even replied to. Jesus engaged Paul in a conversation, asking Paul why he was persecuting Him (Jesus). Paul, in a state of shock, asks simply “Who are you Lord?” thus recognizing that this being is more than an angel. Interestingly, the conversation recorded in Acts 9, and then as retold by Paul in Acts 26, have a difference in how much Jesus actually spoke to

¹⁰ Thurston, 236.

Paul. In the early account (and in Acts 22 as well) Jesus simply asks a few simple questions and then directs Paul to Damascus, promising help there. But in Acts 26 we find Jesus giving a more detailed description of His future plans for Paul, a description that the earlier accounts attribute to Ananias. It is not necessary to get caught up in speculating about the compatibility of these texts because, either way, these both say that Jesus and Ananias play major roles in helping Paul know what his future holds.

Paul clearly had a major encounter with Jesus that was real and undeniable. His companions, while they did not hear the voice or understand the encounter, were aware that something occurred outside the norm. They were also confronted by the very real physical reality that Paul was blind. So there was no denying that Paul had an incredible encounter. For Paul this was a pivotal moment, not only in his recognition of Jesus as God, but also in his apostolic authority. It became common for Paul to reference this moment of revelation as evidence that he had seen the risen Lord, just as the other apostles had. This was clearly a revelatory encounter in which God revealed Himself to Paul in a very real and incredible way.

Ananias the Prophetic Healer and Disciple

Soon after Paul's encounter God gives Ananias a vision in which he calls to Ananias, and sends him to the house where Paul was staying. He gives Ananias a message to tell Paul that he has been chosen by God as an "instrument" to "proclaim" Christ to the Gentiles. Ananias is now more than a simple disciple, as he is called in Acts 9:10, but also a prophet who is used to reveal to Paul God's future plans for him. In other words, Ananias serves as a conduit of revelation through the prophetic word he speaks.

God also reveals Himself in another way through Ananias. By having Ananias place his hands on Paul, God heals Paul of his blindness, working through the hands of Ananias to reveal

His power over Paul's physical deformity caused by the light that Jesus had flashed before him three days prior. Ananias therefore is a vessel of revelation on several counts, and the text shows that he was a faithful revealer of God's will.

As a disciple Ananias does one more act that is also crucial in the revealing process for Paul. He takes Paul to join with the other disciples who were to be found in Damascus, the very people Paul had come to imprison and possibly kill.

The Way as Scripture Interpreters

Acts 9:20-22 mentions that Paul could not stay quiet for long. The passage says that he went out into the synagogues and began engaging with the Jews, and in fact, he "baffled" them by proving that Jesus is the Messiah. Implied here is a very key point in the revelation of Jesus to Paul. In order to "baffle" the Jews, Paul would have had to share more than his incredible encounter testimony. In fact what is implied in this text is that Paul was actually able to show the Jews from the Scriptures who Jesus really was.

While it is true that Paul was well versed in the OT Scriptures, from a very young age up until this transformative encounter, he did not find Jesus of Nazareth in those Scriptures prior to this point. How does he get from his pre-encounter understanding of Scripture to his Acts 9:20-22 understanding? The simple answer is that it was through the community of disciples known as the Way or the early church.

This group served as the hermeneutical community¹¹ which guided Paul in helping him interpret his encounter of Jesus by showing how Scripture revealed Jesus. Paul had encountered Jesus on the road, but there was still much detail to be filled in. He had also encountered Jesus through the healing and words of Ananias, but this also left gaps in his understanding. It was his

¹¹ I have borrowed this terminology from Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 91.

time spent with the disciples in Damascus (Acts 9:19b), which would have included Ananias who Paul later calls a “devout observer of the law” who would have helped him gain a clearer understanding of the Christ as He is revealed in Scripture.¹² Thus Paul is able to go out to the synagogues and show from the Scriptures, his fellow Jews, who Jesus of Nazareth really is.

Paul’s Return to Antioch

For a variety of reasons Paul was not able to fully engage in ministry in Jerusalem and therefore returned to his native city of Tarsus. Sometime later, as the multi-cultural church in Antioch began to grow, Barnabas recognized the need for a leader who could easily relate to and engage with this diverse group; it was at this time that the Spirit guided him to remember Paul who was in Tarsus. Barnabas searched him out and brought him back to the diverse church in Antioch where together they not only aided the church but helped foster major growth.

In many ways it became the proto-type for how the church should function. This multi-cultural setting served to continue the revelatory experience of Paul who now was also actively engaged in revealing Christ to others across cultural boundaries. Notice how an important aspect of the revelatory experience of Paul comes in Acts 13:1-3. Through the Spirit, God reveals to the diverse group (v. 1 illustrates very clearly that this was a very diverse group) that God has called Paul and Barnabas to move forward in the work that Jesus called Paul to several years prior on the road to Damascus.¹³

Once again the community becomes the agent of revelation by facilitating the call of the Spirit through the laying on of hands and affirming the Spirit’s sending of these men. Paul’s

¹² In Romans 9:3-5 you can hear the passion of Paul as he talks about the Jewish heritage in light of Christ in the Messiah. One can imagine that this passionate passage is similar to the experience that went through Paul’s mind when he began to discover Christ in the Scriptures in Damascus.

¹³ For more on this see John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 216-218.

intercultural experience and call at Antioch would play a major role in how he would move forward in revealing Jesus to a diverse Gentile world that God had called him to go to.

One could try to argue for the primacy of various forms of revelation over the others, but this paper is not interested in that debate at this particular juncture. Christ serves as the tie that binds the revelatory encounters into one cohesive unit. In each instance of revelation it is Christ who is manifested, in some forms more clearly than others possibly, but each one feeding off of and feeding the other. Each revelatory encounter revealed Christ in a unique way, while at the same time the encounters worked to mature Paul's understanding, building on what happened prior. Christ was the center and thread woven throughout each revelatory encounter. What does this mean for theological method? The next major section of the paper will attempt to flesh this out in light of Paul's encounter and subsequent witness through his testimony in Acts and the epistles he wrote.

Personal and Dramatic Experience

There can be no doubt that Paul approached theology as an understanding of his faith in a radically new way after his above experiences. By looking at the various ways God revealed Himself to Paul, and then looking at how Paul would later interpret and share this with others, can be very insightful in developing a more dynamic and appropriate understanding of theological method. There appears to be a center to the revelatory experiences of Paul, and that is Christ. What does this mean for the various types of revelation? What does this mean for theological method? These are the questions this paper will now proceed to unpack.

Christ as the Center

It does not take an overly quantified amount of study to recognize that Paul's life and teachings, or put another way, his theological framework, was centered in Christ

(Rom 15:17,18). It must be stated that while Paul is Christ centered, the Christ he knows and shares is not a being alone, but a being in trinity. This must not be lost sight of when thinking about Paul's Christ centeredness, was really Paul's God-centeredness.¹⁴ And all was viewed through the incarnate, crucified and resurrected Christ who Paul knew relationally, starting with his Damascus road experience and moving forward.

But the discussion must now move towards looking at Paul's experience of revelation, in its various forms and how they relate to Paul's understanding of doing theology. Looking at Paul's encounters with God, as shown in Acts, will guide the discussion, but the discussion will move beyond this to the wider corpus of Paul's writings.

Paul's Encounter Outside of Scripture

Systematic theologians throughout the last several decades have spent large amounts of *prolegomena* space on describing the difference between general revelation and special revelation. These have become the common denominators in most discussions on revelation. Thus, this issue need not be re-discussed here. Paul's encounter, however, may actually create a problem for some theologians in that it seemingly blurs the lines between these two types of revelation that are often strongly separated by theologians.

The physicality of the Damascus road encounter is essential for it to have any real meaning. Paul the persecutor needed a major shock to get him to not only stop what he was doing but completely turn and change his focus and direction. This was not a mere psychological experience, which would not be able to account for the radicalness of Paul's change in worldview.¹⁵ At the same time Paul's experience was outside the Bible. In other words, here was

¹⁴ Romans 8:14-17 demonstrates one way Paul was really focused on God as Triune.

¹⁵ There is a plethora of literature that explains Paul's experience in mere psychological terminology or as some sort of altered state of consciousness, often recognizing that Luke did not understand it this way, but rather that they are

a man who knew the Scriptures of the day as good as any and yet had not encountered Christ in them. He needed an encounter that was more direct than reading words on a page, no matter how inspired those words were. He needed a light to shine on him that was brighter than the sun, and he needed to see Jesus in order to take Him seriously.

Continuing with the above train of thought, Paul's experience was probably tested by Scripture, but it would also have to be noted that Paul began to view Scripture through his experience. In other words, yes the church of the day probably needed to verify Paul's experience by checking to see if it fit well into a scriptural framework. But it also had to read Scripture in light of what happened to Paul. For Paul, at the very least, Scripture was dramatically "changed" from a dry book of law, to a drama of Christ's story which he now found himself in the midst of.¹⁶

Theological Method and Personal Encounters

Any theological method that neglects the Spirit-led encounters and experiences pointing to Christ that people have with God, runs the danger of not being a dynamic method but rather a static method that begins to depersonalize God and turns theology into a mere scholastic study focusing on a dissection process. Paul's experience is simply a more dramatic version of all those who have experienced God's presence at some point or several points in their lives. The theologies of the Global South can be of great help to the Western theological method in this regard, because they often seem to naturally recognize more readily God's working in encounters outside a direct Bible reading.¹⁷ It is not uncommon to hear of people having dreams of Jesus or

interpreting it this way due to the modern scientific understanding, for an example of this see John J. Pilch, *Visions and Healing in the Acts of the Apostles*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 68-82.

¹⁶ Paul, later in life would attempt to help others enter the story of Scripture as well. An example of this is found in 1 Cor 10:1-5 in which he *tells* the story of the Exodus, instead of giving textual references and he does it in such a way that the hearer is inserted into the story.

¹⁷ For an example of this see David Tuesday Adamo, "What Is African Biblical Hermeneutics?" *Black Theology* 13, no. 1, (2015): 59-72.

experiencing healing from Jesus in the Hindu and Muslim contexts, which is often the starting point of their journey to and with Christ.¹⁸ If we are honest with ourselves most people, even in the Global North, claim to have had conversion experiences or moments where they encounter God in special ways.¹⁹ Theological method that is Christ centered should also be willing to take seriously the many testimonies of Christ working in people's lives.

There is one last point to be made before moving to the next section. The initiator of Paul's encounter was God. Jesus reveals Himself to Paul and, while he was yet a sinner, Christ came to Paul and revealed Himself to Paul in a concrete and unmistakable way. God met Paul where he was. Furthermore, it will become clearer, as this paper progresses, that this principle (as experienced by Paul) would have a profound effect on the way Paul proceeded to do theology and share in mission.

The fact that God did this should not have surprised Paul or anyone else well acquainted with the OT narratives. There are numerous encounters between God and people from other religious backgrounds recorded in the OT. Many have very similar characteristics to the encounter of Paul. Stories such as Hagar's hearing of God's voice in the wilderness and the dreams of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar in Egypt and Babylon contain many similarities with

¹⁸ For a book length source on dreams and visions of Jesus in the Muslim context see Tom Doyle, *Dreams and Visions*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012). For more on Hindus experiencing God through healing see Herbert E. Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity*, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001). 58-59.

¹⁹ Grenz and Franke put it this way: "whatever else may be involved, at the heart of the Christian faith is an experience of being encountered redemptively in Jesus Christ by the God of the Bible" Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 48. And later in the same book, "Although Christians adhere to various understandings of what kind of event the divine-human encounter ultimately is, most Christian traditions view the encounter as somehow connected to an experience or a succession of experiences that believers have. In fact, the commonality of the experience of being encountered by God in Christ is a—arguably *the*—central feature that identifies participation in the Christian community" (emphasis in original), *Ibid*, 233. See also Robert K. Johnston, *God's Wider Persence: Reconsidering General Revelation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), while I do not concur with all in this book it is a very interesting study of experience and the Bible and how they relate to each other.

Paul's encounter.²⁰ God clearly had set a precedence of using direct, overpowering contact as a way of revealing Himself in the past and with Paul He is simply continuing what He had been doing for millennia.²¹

Connecting Christ-centered Experiences with Method

When doing theology this form of revelation is often neglected. As noted above theologians from the Global South tend to understand and articulate this type of encounter much better because they tend to take these types of experiences more seriously. There is no doubt that a vast majority of Christians would be able to describe some sort of event, not necessarily as dramatic—although in some cases maybe more dramatic—but certainly just as life transforming as Paul's in their own lives. Yet when doing theology there is a fear that we must not allow our experiences to become part of the hermeneutic we use.²² What this does is cause a disconnect between real life experience and the actual way people articulate their faith. This in no way invalidates Scripture or other forms of revelation, but rather is part of the interplay between various forms of revelation. The key component is that the experience or encounter is with Christ.²³

²⁰ For more on these examples see Andrew Tompkins, *God's Mission to the Nations: An Old Testament Study Applied in the Hindu Context*, (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Global Mission Centers, 2015), 63-67.

²¹ Vanhoozer quotes Tiéno as saying, "Biblical writings do not teach us concepts of God; they show us how people encountered God, learned to know him and walked with him." Vanhoozer, "One Rule to Rule Them All?" 121.

²² Another way of articulating this danger is the following: "it is not right to say that propositional knowledge denies the role of experience but rather that it is often blind to it. It simply is the case that no human knowing is possible apart from experience" Kärkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, 72. Now it is true that some theologians have over emphasized the role of encounter and experience to the extent that the actual words of Scripture are reduced in their revelatory role, for an example of this see Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 221-223. This paper recognizes that Ward has isolated some important aspects of encounter as some theologians have understood it, but that when read as a part of a larger agenda are used to move away from a strong biblical understanding of inspiration. For a view that espouses a view that recognizes the inspiration of the author and the text need not be overly separated see Kärkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, 63.

²³ Walls gives a vivid illustration of people in a theater watching the death of Christ. The way the theater has been built no person is able to see the whole stage from their seats only part of the stage. Therefore each person experiences the play in a different way, they all hear the same words and see the same Jesus but in different ways. He uses this to as a way of explaining the wide variety of Christian experiences that are found where Christ's story is told and accepted, see Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 43-46.

People's Role as Revelatory Conduits

Ananias

Comparing the three instances in Acts that describe the Damascus road experience brings out nuanced details that are important for this study. According to Paul in Acts 26 Jesus spoke to him beyond what is recorded in Acts 9 and 22. In this extended discourse Jesus laid out His plan for Paul, which moves forward into the future. In Acts 9 the same plan is revealed by God to Ananias in a vision. God informs Ananias that Paul is a chosen vessel to be His instrument in reaching out to the Gentiles. In a way Ananias, who was a Jewish follower of Jesus and part of the growing group known as the Way, was a prophet to Paul. Prophecy found a special place in Paul's heart (1 Cor 14:1-5).

God was also clear in his brief conversation with Paul on the road that he was to meet a man in the city who would help him. After three days Paul and Ananias met. When they met, Ananias not only spoke to Paul, but as he prayed with him God healed Paul of his blindness as well. This is yet another aspect of God's revelational encounter with Paul, but this time through a faithful follower. Kistemkaer notes that it is an "interesting fact that Ananias, who is a disciple but not an apostle, serves as Jesus' instrument to work a healing miracle and to confer the Holy Spirit."²⁴ Paul in his own ministry would reveal Christ through acts of healing and other signs and wonders (Rom 15:19 see also 2 Cor 12:12). There is no doubt that Paul also shared his encounter details with Ananias who was probably shocked, but also encouraged by this miraculous story. So begins Paul's fellowship with the believers which would become a major

²⁴ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1990), 343.

part of Paul's focus over the coming years. Most of Paul's epistles are not theological tomes but rather Paul's inspired counsels to the churches which were filled with people he loved.

What is important to note at this juncture is that the process of revelation continues through this interaction between Paul and Ananias. Paul is brought to a "devout" man, who was strong in the Jewish tradition but also a follower of The Way and even called a "disciple." He receives a revelatory vision of Paul and his future, which he then shares with Paul. Therefore Ananias acts as a conduit of revelation. God works through this faithful servant to reveal Himself to Paul. This is yet another example of revelation taking place outside the direct locus of Scripture. Keep in mind that this paper is not attempting to put all forms of revelation on the same level, as later sections will make clear. But at the same time there can be no doubt that Ananias, a sinful human being like everyone else, was used by God as a conduit of revelation to Paul.

Paul needed this added form of revelation to help him start to make sense of his Damascus road encounter. It is important also that the man chosen as a revelatory vessel was not just any man. God worked within the context in such a way that he chose the very best person to continue revealing Himself to Paul. At this point in time, Paul would no doubt have struggled to receive further light from anyone other than a devout follower of The Way, who was also a strong Jew. Ananias was just that and thus God, in His wisdom, contextualizes His revelation in a way to give it the greatest chance of impact. There will be more on this in the section on culture later.

Human Conduits of Revelation

If this portion of the narrative is to be taken seriously, then it means taking seriously the idea that God reveals Himself not only through dreams and visions or direct encounter, but also

through people. Paul begins to better understand who God is through the prophetic witness, physical healing, and basic conversation with Ananias. There is another important element at play here as well. While Ananias was the “veteran” disciple in the story, there is no doubt that he also was encountering God through the revelation shared with him by Paul. In other words Paul’s encounter now becomes a story of God to share with others so that they too can encounter God through Paul’s story. Even though Paul was hardly even a babe in his new “world,” God was already using Paul to reveal Himself to those who were “disciples.”²⁵

Impact on Theological Method

God revealing Himself through human conduits has a major impact on how we go about thinking and doing theology. The connecting strand is once again Christ. Both persons are sharing Christ with each other in somewhat different ways. Both are acting as conduits of revelation, used by God to further an understanding of the faith they have in Him. Therefore, theology that does not take people seriously is an incomplete theology. In other words if it is true that people are encountering Christ, whether on a scale with Paul or not, then it is also true that people are conduits of revelation and that their stories are not only worth listening to but essential in the pursuit of an understanding of faith.

Paul on several occasions spoke about his testimony as a revelation of Jesus (1 Cor 2:1-2).²⁶ Beyond that, a quick read of the greetings in many of Paul’s letters show that Paul was in intimate contact with a large amount of people, both women and men, who continued to impact his experience with God. “Testimony is not [simply] a synonym for autobiography,”²⁷ but also as

²⁵ Romans 11:25-32 may have elements of this, as well when Paul seems to be saying that the Gentiles who have come to faith have a role to play in bringing those Jews, who have not yet believed, into faith.

²⁶ Paul’s words, found in 1 Cor 2:13, are also interesting in the context of the above study in that they endow human language that is Spirit influenced to become language that expresses “spiritual truths in spiritual words.”

²⁷ Stott, 178.

a conduit to reveal God; for some maybe it reveals Him to them for the first time; for others it may add light to their current relationship with God. This means that our doing of theology must allow for the stories of others to be heard and also allow them to help shape our understanding of God. The key is that the stories must uplift Christ and be centered in the Triune God, or as Paul puts it, “whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).²⁸

Scriptural Affirmation

The Old Testament records numerous instances where God uses people to convey who He is or His will. The narrative of Naomi and Ruth is a prime example of genuine love, caring, and relational kindness flowing through a person (Naomi), to another person (Ruth), who then allows it to flow back.²⁹ Another example is Hagar in the desert seemingly abandoned when God reveals Himself to her and sends her back to Abram and Sarai. While God did reveal Himself to Hagar in a supernatural way He also limited that revelation and sent Hagar back to people who were his followers with the expectation that they would continue revealing who He was to Hagar.³⁰ The narratives of Joseph and Daniel are full of moments where God revealed Himself through the actions and words of these two men.³¹ Suffice it to say that Paul’s experience is just one in a long line of similar types of experiences, in which God uses people as part of the revelatory process.

Another powerful analogy that Paul makes in his first letter to the Corinthians is between the temple and each follower of Christ. Paul says, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are

²⁸ Andrew Walls points out in his groundbreaking study on the transmission of faith over the ages, that throughout the history of Christianity one of the main threads that joins it all together is: “one theme which is as unvarying as the language which expresses it is various; that the person of Jesus called the Christ has ultimate significance” Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 6 see also 7.

²⁹ Tompkins, chapter 3.

³⁰ See Tompkins, 66-67.

³¹ See Tompkins, chapters 4 and 7.

God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Cor 3:16-17; see also 1 Cor 6:19-20). And later, "For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people" (2 Cor 6:16). What are the implications of this statement, which comes soon after Paul affirms humans as "God's fellow workers" (1 Cor 3:9)? His comparison to the temple is in many ways the strongest possible evidence for understanding people as conduits of revelation.

The temple was primarily meant to be a place for God to dwell in and reveal Himself. Therefore, if human followers of God are considered the temple of God, that means they are revealers of Christ. He carries on by saying that he, and those like him, "are servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God" (1 Cor 4:1). He thereby affirms the above idea that indeed all those who follow Christ are not only His servants but have been given secrets that they are then entrusted to reveal to others.³²

Orality

Anyone who has spent time or grown up in predominately oral cultures can more easily understand the importance of non-textual communication. The Global North is made up of textually based cultures. Reading and documentation have been the ways of passing on knowledge and values in the Global North for several centuries, whereas the art of story-telling and passing on important cultural knowledge orally has not been a major part of the Global North's perspective. That is currently changing with the shift to narrative being concretized in the social media revolution that has swept the Global North, but in many ways it is still a text based culture.

³² Paul even seems to imply that the revelatory work of humanity has cosmic implications when he states: "For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession... We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as men" (1 Cor 4:9).

Anthropologists have shown that oral cultures have a similar ability to pass on values and concepts just as accurately as text based societies. A “word in season” is worth much more than a “book shared” in these cultures. Experience is interpreted and understood in the stories told, and passed on. This is not to say text has no valuable role to play in these societies nor that the Bible is invalid.³³ What it does is help us to understand that the telling of the story in many places has a deeper impact on both the listener and story teller than reading a text.³⁴ The biblical world was also much more oral than text based. The narratives and wisdom of Scripture were primarily passed on through oral methods as opposed to mass producing text—which of course was to come much later after the printing press was invented. This in itself should force theologians to rethink the power of the testimony as a form of revelation. For much of history, and even in many current cultural situations, the spoken word is of primary importance.

A challenge arises however, when the above is taken seriously and understood. If each person has their experience and they go around telling others and we are just going around telling each other our experiences, there is little cohesiveness. There needs to be a guiding point of contact. That is essentially the Triune God as revealed in the Incarnate Christ. But even this statement is not enough to really give cohesiveness to the story telling, encounters and experiences lived and testified to.

³³ A recent study in China highlights this issue. The Lisu people of China are an oral society that did not even have an alphabet until missionaries came nearly 100 years ago. The missionaries created a script for the language in order to translate the Bible and then trained people how to read it so they could read Scripture. Many did learn to read but recently the author of the study spent five months among these people and found that currently almost none of them were engaging in Bible readings or Bible studies yet more than half the people group were Christians. Instead they were only reading the Bible during the once a week worship service. However, the Bible and its stories are still important to them because they pass them on orally and they still play a role in their lives. See Aminta Arrington, “Orality, Literacy, and the Lisu Linguistic Borderlands,” *Missiology* 43 no. 4 (2015): 398-412.

³⁴ Gideon Petersen has carefully documented this among the Himba people of Namibia who are an oral society. Petersen was a mission worker among the Himba. He struggled for many years to understand how to present the Gospel among the Himba until he began understanding the importance of orality and storytelling, see “God Speaks in the Heart Language,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 5 no. 1, (2009): 98-109.

Implications for Doing Theology

All of the above headings in this section have profound implications for doing theology. First of all, the importance of recognizing the role of people in revealing who God is becomes much more important. This obviously elevates the role of mission and ties mission and theology together. As people share their testimony they share God³⁵ and as one listens to others one listens to God in a sense. In order to construct a valid theological method, one has to take seriously the testimonies of others. Not just the “veterans” of the faith, but even the “newbies” in the faith. Ontologically speaking, the shared stories of people concerning their encounters and relationship with God is a move towards a working theological knowledge of who God is. The stories cannot be the final arbiter, nor can they be viewed as completely trustworthy, but they must be taken seriously. Without the witness and testimony of people there is a real risk that God becomes a mere scholastic concept stuck in a book.

The Community of Faith Seeking Understanding

Engaging with the Way

What is interesting at this juncture in Paul’s newfound experience is where he resides for several days and what he does as a result of where he resides. Through Ananias, Paul was introduced to the community of believers known as The Way. This was the wider group, the disciples of Jesus in Damascus. There are not many details as to exactly what Paul did while he was with them, but what he does after being with these believers gives us a major hint as to what he was doing.

³⁵ This can help us understand how Paul could say things like, “I urge you to imitate me” (1 Cor 4:16). He was in essence really saying, imitate Christ who I have revealed to you through word and deed. See 1 Cor 11:1 for a clearer example.

Acts says that soon after that Paul went out and began engaging with his fellow Jews, and in fact was “baffling” them with his ability to show Jesus was the Christ (Acts 9:22). There is only one way that Jews would be baffled in this situation. If Paul simply told them about the Damascus road experience or even about the words of Ananias the wider Jewish community would not have taken him seriously. This passage instead implies that Paul was able to show them through Scripture that Jesus was the Christ, and this is what was truly baffling.

But how did Paul go from being a non-believer in Jesus to a believer in Jesus as shown in Scripture? Keep in mind that Paul knew the Scriptures long before coming to Damascus; yet through all his study and time with Scripture it had not brought him to Christ. When he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus God did not direct Paul to Scriptural passages or give him a Bible study. Even Ananias in that first meeting does not mention Scripture. So how did Paul come to begin a journey of finding Christ in Scripture?³⁶

The community of faith in this instance carries on the work of revealing God to Paul. They act as a conduit to point Paul to the God of Scripture who matches the God of his experience and the God that Ananias spoke to him about. It was in this group that Paul was able to begin to see the riches of the OT witness to Jesus. It was also in this group of believers that he was able to interpret his own encounter more clearly. The community of faith gave meaning to his encounter and to Scripture. God revealed Himself to Paul through the community of faith. Paul also reveals Christ to the wider group through his testimony. The community finds meaning and cohesiveness in the shared stories of its community members.³⁷ Revelation goes in every

³⁶ Galatians 1:15-17 gives added details to the experience of Paul, including an extended visit to Arabia. The Bible does not record what Paul did in the wilderness during this time, but it is possible this was a time when he strengthened his faith through prayer and reflection on Scripture.

³⁷ Paul’s prayer meeting description, found in 1 Cor 14:30 is a clear indication that Paul viewed the church as a body of revelators sharing their stories and gifts for the faith maturation of each other.

direction inside the community of faith; thus Paul can say to the church in Rome, “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (Rom 1:1-12).

Antioch

The group in Antioch performs a similar function as that of the small group in Damascus did. The multi-cultural group in Antioch is more than simply another church planted.³⁸ It also plays the role of revelatory conduit for Paul and Barnabas. First, it is here that Paul gets his first sustained engagement with ministry, at least as far as the record of Scripture is concerned. It would seem that much of Paul’s approach to theology finds its roots in his Damascus and Antioch experiences, because it was in these places that God called Paul forth to the wider Gentile world.

Notice carefully how God called Paul and Barnabas. Rather than a direct vision or word from God the Spirit informed the group as a whole of God’s plan for “setting apart Paul and Barnabas” for the “work” God had called Paul to way back on the road to Damascus. It was most likely through the prophetic role of some of those present (Acts 13:1) that God revealed His will through the Holy Spirit.³⁹ Once again the church played the role of revelatory conduit, only this time as an affirming group who recognized God’s call and laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas to send them off.

Importance of Community

Before dealing directly with Scripture it is important to look more carefully at what it means for God to reveal Himself through the community of faith or the church.

³⁸ For more on the significance of the multi-culturalness of the early church in Acts, especially in Antioch see Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 17-18.

³⁹ Kistemaker, 455.

A cursory look, throughout scriptural history leads to the conclusion that God primarily works through groups not just individuals. This is not to downplay the major role individuals played throughout scriptural history. But the roles of these biblical characters almost always seemed to find meaning when understood within the community. Whether it be Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, or Esther, it was the community that provided the context for and in many ways gave meaning to their stories. Sociological research, has in many ways, proven that part of the essence of what it means to be human involves communal interaction.⁴⁰

The imagery of Christ and His bride is very helpful in seeing a direct connection between the community of faith, in its relational activity, with God. Paul also is clear on the role of Christ in relation to the community of faith. The church cannot be separated from Christ nor Christ from the church, because the church is one of the ways God has chosen to reveal Himself. Paul, in his first letter to the faith community in Corinth says, “Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed” (1 Cor 1:7). Later in the same letter Paul makes this clearer when he discusses the variety of gifts the Spirit gives out, which are really for the “common good” of the community of faith. The community uses their God-given gifts to guide and help each other understand God more clearly and their faith more appropriately (1 Cor 12:7-31).

Bringing the Personal Encounters Together

It is the church that brings the experiences and encounters into a place of contact and puts them together, creating a “mosaic of faith.”⁴¹ “In a sense, to be Christian is to be a storyteller”

⁴⁰ Grenz and Franke, 231. For more on this in Scripture see Andrew Tompkins, “God’s Mission to the ‘Nations’ and Hindus: Three Old Testament Narrative Models,” MA thesis, Andrews University, 2012 and Andrew Tompkins, *God’s Mission to the Nations*.

⁴¹ I am indebted to Grenz and Franke for the concept of the community as a “mosaic,” see Grenz and Franke, 49.

and the stories are told in communities of faith.⁴² The stories brought together can also be critiqued and interpreted more clearly.⁴³ When the encounters and experiences are left to the individual, or even to a small group of close friends, there is a tendency to misinterpret the encounters even when using Scripture. This is due to the sinful, selfish nature of humanity and its natural tendency towards self-deception and ethnocentrism.

The church, on the other hand, becomes a place where theology more safely develops. Notice that it is in the church, not the academy, that this is done; this is a move away from purely academic theology to community based theology.⁴⁴ Of course this is an ideological picture of the community of faith, unfortunately it is not always as safe as one would hope, but the alternatives are worse.⁴⁵ Patient listening and humility are essential in order for the wide variety of stories found in the community to have a voice and a say in the theological method. Without the community of faith people are left to choose how to interpret their stories and also how to act on that interpretation individually. This is found in the Hindu context where religious experience and devotion to God are highly privatized; the community can guide in ritual procedure but ultimately everyone is left on their own when it comes to experiencing and applying the deities revelation into their life.

⁴² Grenz and Franke, 48.

⁴³ When Paul scolds the Corinthians for allowing a sexually immoral man to simply go on as part of the community, he is essentially scolding them for failing to be a community of revelatory critique (1 Cor 5:1-5). If the community was doing its methodological job it should have taken this man's experience, compared it with their experiences in Christ, and ultimately with Scripture, and then critiqued his behavior as taking him in the wrong direction away from Christ. This is where theological method becomes practical.

⁴⁴ Gene L. Green, "The Challenge of Global Hermeneutics," in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic), 62. Green also comments here on the Majority World theological perspective which attempts to move towards a "reading from below" in the sense of allowing the non-academic person, and more specifically, the oppressed person to have a hermeneutical say in the process of theology, *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ Majoritarianism is another danger that should be avoided in the communal theological task. This requires a lot of listening and humility, see Grenz and Franke, 213. Vanhoozer also comments on this danger: "we should resist locating interpretative authority in community consensus, for even believing communities, as we know from the Old Testament narratives, often get it badly wrong, and to locate authority in the community itself is to forgo the possibility of prophetic critique." Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," 80.

Because the triune God is communal in nature, it is impossible to understand God without also being communal. The community of faith is where God is revealed in a wider way than the other two forms of revelation discussed above. The church becomes God's revelation to the world as a body in mission beyond the individual witness of the members. But the experience of the individual members is essential to give the wider revelation any meaning. The collective history and traditional background of the church is also important because it is a record of the experiences and encounters that occurred gone before it. The community, however, must be willing to reflect critically on this past and tradition in order for the community of faith to avoid becoming traditionalists and historicists in the sense of idolizing the past. This type of approach to tradition may potentially cut off God's present revelation through people, the Bible, and even through the traditions themselves, if they are viewed outside of the interplay of revelations.⁴⁶

Community and Theological Method

What does this mean for theological method? Any theological method which does not allow itself to be critiqued and even created in the community is not a dynamic method that can relate to real life. Christ and the church are inseparable and therefore our theological method must also take the church seriously. Without the interpretative help of the wider faith community theology runs the risk of individualistic God talk and sterile religion for the private world of the individual.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Paul was not opposed to passing on traditions (1 Cor 11:2), because those are what give meat to the bones of faith. He was also aware that traditions were to be passed on in a dynamic way, focused on Christ not on the traditions themselves. In this way the traditions are another possible conduit of revelation, but one that must be critiqued by the other revelatory conduits. When reading through 1 Cor 11:17-34 you can see how Paul understands the role of traditions that he passed on. If the tradition in any way is disconnected from its Christological center then the tradition is no longer a good thing and in fact results is negatively judged by God because it is no longer serving as a revelatory instrument.

⁴⁷ For a critique of Western theology, as overly individualistic, see Grenz and Franke, 224.

Another way to look at the church is as the hermeneutical community. The community can be seen as those who guide the interpretative process. Working together through the faith that Christ is amongst them with the Spirit helping to make sense of the God encounters that are brought into the community. Paul goes so far as to claim that, unlike Moses, the community need not veil their faces anymore, but instead should let the revelation shine forth in all its glory (2 Cor 3:12-18). This is done through fellowship, as Paul so beautifully shows in Romans 12:6-21, through allowing our knowledge of God to impact our daily decisions. The community is the laboratory of theology where God is revealed in many ways, and brought together to create a larger, grander revelation for the world to see. This is the kingdom of God being manifested, through what Christ did on the cross, and what the Spirit continues to do among people, guiding towards a true experience that is partial or incomplete until the eschaton but still true nonetheless.⁴⁸

The Norming Norm⁴⁹

The paper thus far has been very limited in addressing Scripture as revelation. There have been hints here and there but purposely I have avoided Scripture until this juncture. Most discussions on revelation are ultimately discussions about the role of Scripture as revelation.

⁴⁸ There are a few instances where Paul paints narrative pictures of the church fulfilling this type of grander revelation; see 1 Cor 14:22-25 for one example. It is also important to keep in mind what Grenz and Franke say here, "Because truth is historical, the focal point of certitude can only be the eschatological future." (Grenz and Franke, 44). See also Ibid, 236.

⁴⁹ I have borrowed this term from Grenz and Franke but I do not necessarily support their definition of this terminology as it relates to the role of Scripture. Kärkäinen also uses the term "norm" in relation to Scripture, comparing the use of this terminology between Grenz, Franke and Kärkäinen is helpful in distilling some of the semantic differences, which are important to the overall understanding of Scripture as the "norming norm." See Kärkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, chapter 6.

Unfortunately they often leave behind these other forms of revelation as though they are not connected.

Paul and Scripture

If one were to remove all the OT quotes from the writings and sermons of Paul one would be left with almost nothing. Paul's sermons and epistles are through and through biblically based. He often uses statements like, "the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures" (Rom 1:2). Paul clearly had a very high view of Scripture and was constantly promoting a scriptural approach to theological thinking and mission praxis.

As was briefly noted in the section on community, Paul encountered Jesus through the community when they helped Paul encounter Jesus through Scripture. Paul was an astute scholar of the OT, having grown up in the context of the Pharsaic worldview. But it was only after his Damascus road experience that Scripture became more than a book, but an actual meeting place between Paul and God. Paul encountered Jesus in Scripture and then traveled the world helping others to do the same. Paul's understanding of Scripture as revelation actually included the mission element; he says in his letter to the Romans that Scripture has revealed God "so that all nations might believe and obey him" (Rom 16:26).

Scripture, Theology, and the Interplay of Revelatory Forms

As the example of Paul and his writings remind us, Scripture and theology are closely tied together. Jesus is not just Incarnate, He is the Incarnate Word, and Scripture is where this Word is most clearly revealed throughout history. And this will happen continually even into the future, until Jesus returns. Scripture contains all the elements that are found above in textual form (Rom 1:2). Scripture has a wide variety of encounter experiences, recorded through inspiration, that are meant to continue on as stories to be told between people. They are stories

that are meant to shape and norm the mosaic created by the community. Much of current theological thinking is emphasizing the narrative approach to Scripture, or Theo-drama as one theologian has put it.⁵⁰ What this potentially does is free Scripture up from the stagnation of “written” text to “living, breathing Word.” It is not to say that all readers of Scripture must become narrative theologians, but that Scripture is about God’s revelation throughout history, in real encounters with real people who then incorporate that revelation into real life situations lived in relation to God.⁵¹

This is one of the reasons why comparing Scripture with Scripture is so essential. The revelation of God becomes clearer and history begins to gain meaning and in the context of the metanarrative of Scripture.⁵² But Scripture read outside the influence of encounters and experiences is Scripture without meaning. In other words, simply comparing Scripture with Scripture in a closed off room somewhere will eventually become a futile activity. Experiences and encounters must take place in order for the stories of Scripture to have their full revealing power.⁵³ Beyond that, Scripture that is not read in community, but rather as an individualistic scripture, is in danger of becoming the word of the reader not the Word of the author, the Spirit.⁵⁴ Scripture is interpreted by the individuals and communities who engage with it, just like

⁵⁰ Vanhoozer is the theologian who utilizes this terminology. See Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All?” 110. For a book length exposition see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

⁵¹ It may be that narrative theology holds some of the keys for improving some of the lopsided interpretations coming out of the West for the past several centuries. For more on the importance of this see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI: 2014), 59.

⁵² For more on the metanarrative of Scripture see Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

⁵³ It is important to recognize there is another side of the issue that should also be avoided, an imbalance in which experience and encounters eclipse Scripture is not a safe way of doing theology because there is a difficulty in locating a norm in which to understand and critique the experiences and encounters. For more on this discussion see Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, 89-95.

⁵⁴ Paul says in Romans 2:20b that “circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code,” reminding his audience that the written code is only worth anything when accompanied by the Spirit, in a way it appears Paul is implying that aside from the Spirit Scriptures revelatory role is greatly hindered. Paul, however, immediately defends the advantage of the Jews, primarily because they had the “words of God” Rom 2:2, so Paul

every other encounter with God. As seen above, Scripture must go through an interpretative process. But Scripture is unique in that it also informs the interpretative process by revealing to the reader and the hermeneutical community Christ who is the Word of Scripture.⁵⁵ In other words, as the individual and the community interpret Scripture together—and its essential that it be done together—it is from Scripture that they find the norm for interpretation, not only of other parts of Scripture, but also for all the experiences that make up the mosaic of the faith community.

Interpreting Together

Paul needed an experience to help him see God in Scripture, but at the same time he also needed the Word to give any type of meaning to his encounter. Beyond this the Word and the encounter only find real meaning when testified of and shared in the community of faith, who then aids in the interpretative process. This is an unending hermeneutical spiral.

There is another unique role that Scripture plays. While the encounters, experiences, and members of the community may share certain characteristics with each other, ultimately if left with only these as forms of revelation there would be a confusing cacophony. Scripture does not change, because it is the Word of the God which does not change. In a sense then Scripture is a stabilizer, in a world that is constantly changing, and in which experiences also change. This does not mean that interpretation does not change; to the contrary interpretation does and must change—not that every interpretation must change but that no interpretation must be viewed as necessarily final—to continue to be dynamic revelation, but underlying that change is a sameness

was clear that Scripture is revelation and is the norm that norms, even when the people who possess it don't recognize it as such.

⁵⁵ For more on the important distinction here concerning the role of the community in relation to Scripture see Kevin Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," 74.

in that Scripture has not changed, only the interpretation has.⁵⁶ In this way Scripture acts as a source of solid revelation that cannot be moved. Scripture is normative.

Scripture is normative because it is God-breathed. It is the meeting point for all the stories and even for the community that puts the stories together and the “formative text” that “must ultimately” be grappled with.⁵⁷ Paul says that, “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope” (Rom 15:4). In other words the stories of Scripture give us hope and if you read on Paul says that this same “God who gives endurance and encouragement give[s] you the same attitude” (Rom 15:5), tying the stories of all of Scripture to our story.

Scripture as the Final Arbiter

Scripture can be translated and can cross cultures, unlike any other form of revelation, precisely because of its inherent nature. In a sense Scripture incarnates over and over in much the same way that Jesus incarnated to earth.

It is ultimately Scripture that “stands in judgment over all” of our experiences, cultures, and “theological expressions.”⁵⁸ It is interpreted Scripture, but Scripture nonetheless. Scripture also reveals God in a way that helps people see more clearly the paths that lead away from God. Experience struggles to do this, even the community cannot fulfill this revelatory role like Scripture does, (see 2 Cor 11:1-4 for an example of this). Because Scripture records the repeated human encounters with God through history, it helps judge our own stories and the community’s mosaic of stories.

⁵⁶ For more on this see Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 11. It is also imperative to keep in mind that “our interpretative faculties...” do not “function in a clean interpretative environment. On the contrary, I am a man of unclean interpretation dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean hermeneutics.” Vanhoozer, “The and the Actor,” 87. We must never forget the sin element in our reflections on interpretation.

⁵⁷ Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All?” 107.

⁵⁸ Grenz and Franke, 71.

It is Scripture that can both critique and confirm our experiences and encounters, because it is where God has chosen to record how He reveals Himself in a variety of settings. Scripture can critique my North American worldview and my wife's Indian worldview at the same time, but in dynamically different ways. This brings me to my final point about Scripture. Scripture would seem to reveal God best when understood dynamically.⁵⁹ Not that Scripture changes, which it does not, but that interpretation of Scripture does. So in reality Scripture, as understood in light of faith, is inevitably dynamic and when understood in interplay with the other forms of revelation this is perfectly safe and even a good thing.⁶⁰ Scripture is then able to come alive and truly critique, encourage, and ultimately reveal Christ in a way that is meaningful for everyday life in a variety of cultures throughout time.⁶¹

But What about Culture?

Anthropology and sociology have shown that culture is a given reality. There is no way to live without being part of some sort of culture. Therefore, to argue that Christians should avoid culture or that the Bible speaks against culture does not fit with reality. A more appropriate understanding is that culture is real, and also, like everything else on earth is affected by sin and therefore there are no perfect cultures.⁶²

⁵⁹ Mark Allan Powell has done extensive work in the area of reader's responses to Scripture and attempting and what this means for theology, see *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

⁶⁰ Kärkäinen uses the analogy of marriage to help with an understanding of the revelation of God in action and words. Just as in marriage actions and words are all part of the "getting to know each other" process so it is with God see Kärkäinen, *Trinity and Revelation*, 71. This can be broadened in the above discussion to include the various forms of revelation that this paper has discussed.

⁶¹ Paul Hiebert lists three principles that may be useful here: "One principle is that the primary test is the Scripture itself. Another principle is that humility and the willingness to be led by the Spirit are vital to the reading of Scripture. The final principle is that the hermeneutical community checks interpretations and seeks consensus." Hiebert, 102.

⁶² For more on theology and culture, see Grenz and Franke's chapter entitled "Culture: Theology's Embedding Context."

Culture and Scripture: Towards a Biblical Worldview

Any person who reads Scripture or experiences God is inevitably influenced by the culture they are a part of. Andrew Walls clearly articulates this when he says:

The fact, then, ‘if any man is in Christ he is a new creation’ does not mean that he starts or continues his life in a vacuum, or that his mind is a blank table. It has been formed by his own culture and history, and since God has accepted him as he is, his Christian mind will continue to be influenced by what was in it before. And this is true for groups as for persons. All churches are culture churches—including our own.⁶³

Once this is understood, this can help us as individuals and faith communities to more carefully reflect on the role our various cultures are playing in our experiences and even our readings of Scripture.

But as the above section demonstrated, there is a spiral here as well. The reading of Scripture is not only influenced by the reader’s cultural viewpoint, but can also influence the reader’s viewpoint so that it actually acts as an agent to transform culture. As a result missiologists are using phrases like “biblical worldview” or “transforming into a biblical worldview” to describe the interplay between culture and Scripture.⁶⁴ There is a danger however, when a theologian or missiologist believes they have discovered the totality of what a biblical worldview looks like, based on their study, this side of the eschaton. This in some ways reflects the modernistic philosophical challenge. In the modern view there was an attempt to start from a “sure” foundation which with the goal of “discovery of an approach to knowledge that will provide rational human beings with absolute, incontestable certainty regarding the truthfulness of their beliefs.”⁶⁵ This led to a kind of theological imperialism in which Western systematic tomes

⁶³ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 8.

⁶⁴ Paul Hiebert in many of his works has used this terminology.

⁶⁵ Grenz and Franke, 23.

became the ultimate in truth pursuits.⁶⁶ It may be more appropriate to view theology as an ongoing task rather than a pursuit of an achievable end this side of the eschaton.⁶⁷

Method and Culture

If the above is true, then our method is influenced by our culture, whether we realize it or not. Not only that, but it begs the question, what do we do with so many cultures around the world? If there are so many cultures, does not that mean that there will be innumerable interpretations of Scripture?⁶⁸ In some ways this is true, but the above discussion of Scripture is important here. Scripture does not change and has proven that it can be translated into any language. Keeping in mind that culture and language are intimately tied together so that one cannot exist without the other. Then it becomes clear that Scripture is a God-breathed miracle in its ability to be applicable across all cultures. As Andrew Walls has so aptly put it, theology continually crosses cultural barriers creating a situation in which “the theological workshop never shuts down.”⁶⁹ This should be encouraging and in some ways creates a type of excitement at the possibility of discovering God in new and profound ways by engaging with all these different interpretations and experiences.⁷⁰

The Incarnation Principle

The Incarnation is a perfect reminder of the above and brings us back to the center, namely Christ. The Word came to earth and dwelled on earth as a human being. Walls sees the act of Christ as in some ways a type of translation which is replayed over and over as the Word is

⁶⁶ For a critique of this type of theological endeavor, see Grenz and Franke especially the chapter entitled “Beyond Foundationalism: Theology After Modernity.”

⁶⁷ Grenz and Franke, 17.

⁶⁸ For more on this see Hiebert, 97-103.

⁶⁹ Andrew Walls, “The Rise of Global Theologies,” 26.

⁷⁰ Walls also finds this exciting and says, “We can expect, and rejoice in, a vast expansion of theological activity. The theological workshop is likely to be busier than ever before, its workers more varied in language, culture and outlook.” “The Rise in Global Theologies,” 33. Grenz and Franke talk about approaching the “text with an attitude of expectation, anticipating that there is always more to be received from the Bible.” (Grenze and Franke, 67).

translated into new cultures.⁷¹ Christ came and lived on earth inside a cultural context. But while He was living in the context of Palestine He was also challenging the culture around Him. Jesus did not promote a kind of cultural assimilation so that all would eventually be part of one culture; rather, He challenged the cultures around Him to glorify Him within their culture.

Paul recognized that this principle was part of who God is, and that incarnating into cultures was an essential part of being a revelatory conduit. Paul was all things to all people in order to reveal Christ to some so that they could be saved (1 Cor 9:19-23). When Paul says that he became a Jew or one under the law and outside the law he is simply following the example of Christ. He was flexible in how he approaches other cultures, knowing that each culture was different. Paul did not critique culture itself as bad but rather brought Christ into contact with the cultures he was a part of and lived in so that the cultures could be transformed.⁷²

All revelation takes place in a culture. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus took place within a cultural context. Paul was confronted by Jesus on the road and then sent to a devout student of the law who had a Jewish background. In other words, Paul was sent to someone he could easily relate to and understand.⁷³ Throughout Paul's epistles and the narratives recorded in Acts Paul continues this legacy by always doing his best to take the context seriously and adjust his method of revealing Christ to fit the context. Therefore as a revelatory agent Paul is also a contextualizer. His theology is not just founded on his experience, his interaction with disciples and the faith community and his reading of the word, it is also grounded in a cultural setting.⁷⁴ This is not to say that culture is where Scripture is grounded or where truth is found

⁷¹ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 23.

⁷² Walls chapter entitled "The Translation Principle in Christian History," in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* is a clear exposition on the idea that the Incarnation is also a type of translation that foreshadows the translation of the Christian faith from culture to culture.

⁷³ Kistemaker, 337.

⁷⁴ Vanhoozer says that, "No one system of theology is appropriate for all times and places. The church needs to theologize without ceasing, not because the gospel changes but because the historical stage, cultural scenery, and

most clearly, but rather to say that Scripture and people pursuing truth are cultural by their very nature. Therefore, a good theology must also be contextual. In fact all theology is contextual, unfortunately however, much of non-Western theology has been labeled contextual while often Western theology is considered more universal in nature.⁷⁵

Implications for Theological Method

There is a very serious implication based on the above consideration. If all theology is influenced by culture, including our experiences, our communities, and our readings of Scripture, then that means there is a subtle but serious danger that must be looked out for. Much of the theological thinking and subsequent published material of the past centuries was done and continues to be done in fairly mono-cultural settings.⁷⁶ In fact much of the written theologies available are actually found to be from one primary cultural group, namely white, Global North, males.⁷⁷ David Adamo spells it out in the African context in the following way:

Eurocentric hermeneutics have not addressed the abject poverty prevalent on the African continent. They have not addressed the oppression and the pain of witches and wizards, which is very real among African people. Such hermeneutics have not addressed adequately the problems of African ancestors

intellectual setting of the church, the company of gospel players, is constantly changing.” Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All?” 111. Paul had a handle on this long before Vanhoozer wrote it.

⁷⁵ Listen to Vanhoozer’s creative description of this, “Western pride in the universality of reason—may actually be a symptom of cultural insanity. The madness of Western rationality and methodology, then, consists in its lack of imagination, its being too generic and too narrowly universal.” Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All?” 88. Christopher Wright also comments on this, see Wright, 42. See also Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 16-21.

⁷⁶ Vanhoozer uses very strong language in commenting on this when he states, “One purpose of this chapter [referring to the chapter of a book he is writing] is to situate today’s Christian theologian by calling attention to the church’s global context and to remind us that no language or culture has a monopoly on God, the gospel, or theology. This is an important and timely prophetic blast against the monstrous regiment of systematic theologians, in whose company I count myself.” Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All?” 91.

⁷⁷ Walls colorful commentary on the theological endeavor of the past few years in the West is worth quoting here: “The domestic tasks of Third World theology are going to be so basic, so vital, that there will be little time for the barren, sterile, time-wasting by-paths into which so much Western theology and theological research has gone in recent years.” Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 10. While this is probably an overstatement, it is worth reflecting on. The reality that theological studies has been dominated by white males has had major practical implications for the way God has been understood, especially over the past few centuries. For an example of this in the North American context see Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

and the question of land domination on the African continent. African culture and religion are not taken seriously in Eurocentric hermeneutics.⁷⁸

Slowly scholarship is taking note of this across cultures, but the change is difficult in the coming.⁷⁹ The Global South is producing tremendous amounts of theological reflection that must be taken more seriously. Walls has forcefully argued that much like the cross-cultural diffusions of Christianity in history that have served to stymie erosion and decay within the church, so it is again in the present. The cross-cultural diffusion of the present very well may have saved Christianity from a slow death in the Western world.⁸⁰

The faith community must become more intentional in taking seriously an inter-cultural approach to Scripture and faith gatherings.⁸¹ Walls may be able to help us here when he talks about a “dual nationality,” whereby all disciples of Christ “have a loyalty to the faith community which links him to those in interest groups opposed to that to which he belongs in nature,” meaning those that come from different cultural backgrounds and who thus view the world differently in many ways must come together.⁸² In other words in a world that is globalized there is no longer any excuse for mono-cultural understandings of revelation, readings of Scripture or

⁷⁸ Adamo, 62.

⁷⁹ There are some notable exceptions one of which is the book by Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, (Delhi, India: ISPCK, 1975). In the introduction to this book Boyd is far ahead of his time when he states: “The aim... is to trace the origins of Indian Christian theology, to assess its meaning and significance, and to draw from it what encouragement and insight we can for the task of the Church’s mission not only in India but in every land and culture in the world.” Ibid, 6. For a sample of more recent scholarship see the Spring 2015 issue of *The Asbury Journal* has intercultural hermeneutics as a theme see also: Hans de Wit, Louis Jonker, Marleen Kool, and Daniel Schipani, ed., *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, (Amsterdam, Holland: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004); William A. Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology: Case Studies in Vernacular Theologies*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992); Justo L. González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992); Khiok-Khng Yeo, “Culture and Intersubjectivity as Criteria for Negotiating Meanings in Cross-Cultural Interpretations,” in *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretations*, edited by Charles H. Cosgrove, (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004); John R. Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison ed., *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

⁸⁰ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 19.

⁸¹ For a study on developing multi-racial churches intentionally see George A. Yancey, *One Body One Spirit: Principles of Successful Multiracial Churches*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

⁸² Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 9.

mono-cultural faith gatherings.⁸³ Anthropologist Paul Hiebert points out that, “theologians can often detect the cultural biases of theologians from other cultures better than they can critique themselves.”⁸⁴ As an anthropologist and missiologist Hiebert has been able to experience first-hand the value of a global hermeneutical community doing theology together.

Tite Tiénou, the chair of Mission and Global Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has isolated four major issues in the theological atmosphere of the present: “the West’s ‘hegemony postulate’, the West’s self-perception that it is ‘the center,’ the perception that third world scholars as ‘purveyors of exotic, raw intellectual material to people in the North,’ and the ‘dialogue of the deaf’ between the West and the rest of the world.”⁸⁵ He goes on to persuasively argue that while many Christian historians and missiologists have grasp the importance of these issues, while many in the theological disciplines have not.⁸⁶

Intercultural Necessity

Because all cultures contain the footprints of God, as well as the footprints of Satan, it is in the interest of all cultures to be engaged in a dynamic theological method where Scripture is the norm. This paper argues that the most dynamic way to do theology is to engage in a method that first takes all the forms of revelation seriously, and secondly, does so in an inter-cultural

⁸³ In Romans 15:26-27, Paul discusses an interesting connection between the Gentiles and Jews and how they should be communities of reciprocity both spiritually and materially. While the text is not directly related to the paragraph above it is an interesting passage in relation to Paul and his desire to bring faith communities “together.”

⁸⁴ Hiebert, 91. See also Wright, 39 for a similar expression.

⁸⁵ Tite Tiénou, “Christian Theology in an Era of World Christianity,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* edited by Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 46. For another strong critique of Western dominated theology see Dayanand Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl*, (Delhi, India: ISPCK, 2004), 96-106.

⁸⁶ A few quotes will suffice to give the flavor of Tiénou’s argument: “The Africans’ scholarly expertise suffers in the long run. Consequently, ‘despite individual achievements and reputations, African scholarship is at best marginal, and at worst nonexistent, in the total intellectual and scientific endeavor of the world’ (Irele 1991, 63-64)... This is the case of inclusion by marginalization. As long as this persists in Christian circles, Christian theologizing cannot be a world endeavor.” Ibid, 48. “For Christian scholars (even those in the West), ignoring this southward shift has detrimental effects. Christian scholars, especially the theologians among them, need to be aware of the change in Christianity’s center of gravity.” Ibid, 43.

environment. The inter-cultural environment will then bring the mosaic of faith communities closer to completion; it will bring the forms of revelation of God into a broader and more accurate light.⁸⁷ It has been noted by many that different cultures read the same text in different ways and that often both are accurate readings. “So we read together [interculturally] with hope for a more complete understanding of the faith in the present, which anticipates the full revelation of Christ’s advent.”⁸⁸ If this is the case, then in order to experience Christ in a fuller way the setting essentially should be intercultural. As Vanhoozer puts it, “the ‘turn to context’ has resulted in a more vital and practical interpretation of Scripture in which understanding is a matter of loving as well as knowing God with all one’s heart, mind, and strength.”⁸⁹ Mark Allan Powell has carefully documented how different cultures read the same text, often times coming up with different interpretations, both of which can be true.⁹⁰ Therefore, an intercultural approach to theology, in reading the text, in sharing of stories, and in fellowship as a church, could serve to broaden the theological horizons.

This does not negate all past theological methods that did not take an intercultural approach to theology. In many ways this was beyond the theologian’s ability to comprehend or deal with. Andrew Walls points out that the norm for the NT church was intercultural communion, but over time this was lost as theology became more entrenched in certain cultural

⁸⁷ Vanhoozer goes so far as to say “it takes many interpretative communities spanning many times, places, and cultures to appreciate fully the rich, thick meaning of Scripture.” Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All?” 119.

⁸⁸ Gene L. Green, “The Challenge of Global Hermeneutics,” 53-54.

⁸⁹ Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All?” 93.

⁹⁰ Powell did one experiment with the story of the Prodigal Son found in Luke 15 with groups of students from North America and then later with students in Russia. He then shows how they recognized different things in the text that were important to them in their interpretations, that the other group felt were superfluous details of the text. See Mark Allan Powell, “The Forgotten Famine: Personal Responsibility in Luke’s Parable of ‘the Prodigal Son,’” in *Literary Encounters with the Reign of God* edited by Sharon H. Ringe and H.C. Paul Kim, (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

milieus. Walls goes on to say that there is “now an opportunity to recover” this intercultural element.⁹¹

Paul’s experience again is in many ways the blueprint. It is interesting to note that Paul hailed from Tarsus, a multi-cultural city, and that much of his early ministry, after becoming a follower of The Way, took place in Antioch, which Scripture repeatedly points out was extremely multi-cultural (Acts 11:20; 13:1).⁹² It is interesting to note that it was the Antioch church that, through the revelatory work of the Spirit, affirmed the call of Paul and Barnabas to go out as mission agents.

The rest of Paul’s earthly life can be summed up as one prolonged intercultural engagement. Therefore, Paul’s theological method was no doubt influenced by his inter-cultural engagements. Walls looks at the churches Paul was a part of and the theology he developed out of this inter-cultural experience and claims that, “This was, surely, not simply a historic episode, but a paradigmatic one, to be repeated, even if briefly, again and again.”⁹³ This may explain why his theology is so rich and to this day unmatched by any systematic theological tomes.⁹⁴

Towards a More Wholistic Methodological Approach

Without God’s revelation, theology is of no consequence and therefore theological method unnecessary. Therefore the above understanding of revelation becomes essential in that it recognizes the various forms of revelation as all being valid and in need of each other. However,

⁹¹ Walls, “The Rise of Global Theologies,” 32-33.

⁹² Kistemaker, 340-341.

⁹³ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 25.

⁹⁴ For Walls Ephesians 4:8-13 points to “the richness of humanity’s infinitude of cultures and subcultures into the variegated splendor of the Full Grown Humanity.” Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 51.

it avoids building on one of these forms as its theological foundation. Any revelatory point can act as the starting point, leading into the hermeneutical spiral. What is important is that each form of revelation be centered in Christ and interplay with the other forms of revelation. Scripture plays a unique role in this hermeneutical spiral by being the unchanging norm that all the other forms keep coming back to. But Scripture alone cannot function in its fullest as a revelatory form without the other types of revelation.

The theological method also must take seriously the cultural contexts that revelation takes place in, which ultimately effects the theological endeavor. Therefore as God continues to reveal Himself through various forms of revelation in various contexts, it becomes essential to pursue God in intercultural settings to draw closer to Him. The thread that brings it all together is God working through the Spirit, leading us to the Incarnate Word who draws us back to the Father.

Further research is needed to understand all of this more clearly. A more thorough study of other Scriptural examples in both the OT and the NT would be essential. Along these lines is the need for a careful study of the concept of the *missio dei* and its implications for theological and missiological method. Major issues on how to practically apply the challenges this paper presents is another area of continued study. Creating spaces or groups where intercultural theological discussion can take place safely is a major challenge that this paper does not even begin to address.

If the thesis of this paper is taken seriously there also would need to be a development of research in the area of other religions and how they fit into the wider conversation of revelation and culture. There is a push, in today's globalized world, to take the theological concepts of other religions more seriously leading to a wide variety of preliminary conclusions but this is an area that needs much more careful exploration. Finally, an evaluation of the role mission plays in

theological development is also crucial towards a more wholistic approach to understanding revelation and culture as they relate to theological method in a Christ-centered way. This paper is meant to serve primarily as a launching pad not a final say on the subject.

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