

DESTINED FOR THE DIVINE TELOS:
A SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

A Statement of Faith
Presented to Professor Mark E. Powell
Harding School of Theology
Memphis, Tennessee

As a Requirement in
Course 5400
Systematic Theology

By
Daniel T. Crouch
November 27, 2017

There can be no doubt that the modern world marches forward, that Western progress has lifted thousands out of poverty and granted countless more their rights and liberty. Undeniably, the global machine is in some way making life better. Yet with all this freedom, with all this surplus, the Western world has found itself wanting—it is directionless and desperately longing for meaning.

This hopelessness is both pervasive and profound. In fact, those who do not believe in God are almost twice as likely to view life as serving no purpose.¹ This is indicative of a society that is aimless, one that acknowledges that any answers we develop to life's questions are placeholders with feet of clay.

But the Christian proclamation declares that humans do not have to wander, that they have been given a direction and a destination by God: himself. In fact, God calls all things—humans and nature alike—into his presence. He desires to “unite all things in him,” reshaping and centering them with himself as the *telos* (Ephesians 1:10).²

Though sin disrupts the journey and our path is far from straight, all of creation spirals upward toward the goal.³ Central to our faith and our reality is this truth that all things converge on the divine *telos*—this is what supplies our ultimate hope.

¹ S. Cranney, “Do People Who Believe in God Report More Meaning in Their Lives? The Existential Effects of Belief,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52 (2013): 638–46.

² All biblical quotations are from the ESV.

³ This conception of history as progressing toward a final summation is reflected in a number of circles, theological and philosophical; Wolfhart Pannenberg famously echoes it with his defense of Frank J. Tipler’s Omega Point theory; Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Modern Cosmology: God and the Resurrection of the Dead,” *Innsbruck Conference Lectures* (1997).

Theology Proper

We begin our cosmic journey and theology of destination by studying our origin and beginning: the one God. The Christian God is best understood when the divine *otherness* is accepted, and by this we know that all claims to describe God are imperfect or merely describing a part of the divine existence. God is beyond gender, both immanent in nature and transcendent, and simultaneously personal, spiritual, and abstract.⁴

God's transcendence and thus eternity naturally lead to certain attributes: infiniteness, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Additionally, God's transcendence together with his immanence suggests that the language of panentheism is useful for understanding God—it suggests that he is the ground of being and that he is present in and penetrates the physical universe.⁵ This concept of God as pervading is central to our hope.

⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 78-87; Ilarion, *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to the Teaching and Spirituality of the Orthodox Church*, ed. Jessica Rose (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002), 25-7; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, trans. George H. Kehm, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 2:201-33; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 10-20. For convenience, masculine pronouns will be used when referring to God as Trinity as well as God the Father.

⁵ The consequences of this are manifold—e.g. God is identical with all that is good, including the experience of good, and all that is good in creation is reflective of him; God more than sympathizes with creation, but also experiences with creation, his groans being one and the same with those of the universe; Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 59-87; see also Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63) 1:236-8. However, panentheistic language is not without its problems—one important issue is that it more intimately connects natural evil with the divine. This concern, however, may be relegated to consequences of the Fall and as God being a sufferer of this sin; he is thus relieved of all agency in natural evil.

The core characteristics of God, however, are his “communicable” (or essential) attributes: love, righteousness, mercy, justness, grace, holiness, etc. (Matthew 22:36-40; 1 John 4:8). These are the traits that define the God of Christianity and are normative of the divine character.⁶ However, there is a tension in these traits, demonstrated most fully in the dichotomy of grace and justice, that is only assuaged when we realize that justness is a secondary characteristic of God while grace is primary—i.e. the baseline for decency is acting justly while compassion is the harder and higher display of virtue; one moves beyond justice on their way to grace.⁷

Also central to the nature of God and the Christian conception thereof is the doctrine of Trinity. In proclaiming that God exists in Trinity, we take up a distinctly Christian belief, transcending our monotheistic heritage.⁸ The three members of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit—exist in perfect equality, diversity, and unity; the Father generating, the Son begotten, the Spirit proceeding. They have existed as such for all eternity, in self-giving love for each other.⁹ Each member of the Godhead also has a role and work that they contribute: the Father is the ground of being and administer of the divine program, the Son is revealer and redeemer, and the Spirit is power and completer. They are each involved in the others’ work as they are in the great work of creation.¹⁰

⁶ God is not determined by these communicable traits but is described by them.

⁷ Grenz defends this position to an extent in his contesting of Brunner et al; see Grenz, 72-4.

⁸ Moltmann, 129-33.

⁹ “Athanasian Creed,” *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, ed. John H. Leith (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982).

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 99-102.

Cosmogony & Anthropology

This mysterious God—of the name Father, Son, and Spirit—chose to create. This cosmic choice cannot be reasoned except as an outflowing of God’s ultimate freedom and his love—his will to expand his divine relationship with the full intention to bring all things to him in time.¹¹ Existing in the non-material, timeless, and transcendent, God created the physical universe bound in time. Moreover, God continues to sustain and uphold the universe—not in any measurable way but in his immanence or what may be called general providence.¹² Since it is the work of God and that which is pervaded by him, this material universe is fundamentally good.¹³

The pinnacle of God’s good creation is the fashioning of humans. Our existence is obviously a physical one, but we are greater than the sum of our parts and a transcendent element—sometimes called a mind or a soul or a spirit—emerges from our physical

¹¹ Grenz, 99-101. Without delving into hermeneutics, the creation narratives of Scripture should be read with a theological and mythological understanding rather than historical. The present theological system does not hinge on this claim but will assume it; e.g. John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

¹² As the creator, God retains the right and ability to intervene in the normal processes of nature, through special providence or miracles, but we have little reason to believe he frequently does this besides in important times in history (e.g. the Exodus, Ministry of Christ, Early Church); J. C. Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos & Christianity: Questions to Science and Religion* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 79-88.

¹³ That is not to say that which occurs in nature is morally good; nature acts morally neutral—both beauty and disaster occur. But the physicality of the universe is good for it is loved and pervaded by God; McFague, 59-87.

being. In this way, the spiritual and physical aspects of humans are intertwined, and the human should be thought of holistically.¹⁴

Beyond any historical reality, the humans Adam and Eve are of deep theological significance as they portray the archetype of humanity.¹⁵ Humans have, unlike other creation, a transcendent element (rationality, morality, reflection, etc.) and are, as the Eastern Orthodox Church has stated, “a ‘mediator’ between the visible and invisible worlds, a ‘mixture’ of both.”¹⁶ Above all we see in Adam and Eve that humanity has a necessary dependence on their creator God.

Hamartiology

God’s good creation has been broken and corrupted in some way; we call this corruption *sin*. Sin, by necessity, originates in God allowing it rather than some external or dualistic force introducing it.¹⁷ Though traditionally, the Fall event recorded in Genesis 3 has been pointed to as the time at which sin entered the world, the account should be

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 348-9; Grenz, 155-64. This addresses the eschatological concern of Theseus’s Paradox as humans’ physical existence—the atoms that comprise them in any moment—is not definitive of their reality.

¹⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2004), 1:269.

¹⁶ Ilarion, 59; also Grenz, 132-7, 168-70. While we do understand humans to have some of the transcendent traits often attributed to the Image of God, the *Imago Dei* is best understood as the human mission to be God’s ambassadors and to “mirror for the sake of creation the nature of the Creator;” Grenz, 177.

¹⁷ Ilarion, 45-50. The devil has not been forgotten but has been intentionally left out of this theological system; regardless of the possible existence of these dark powers, the initiative of humans seems sufficient for understanding the present situation.

seen as symbolizing the dramatic way in which humanity and individuals experience evil.¹⁸ Sin as described in the Bible is rooted in not doing the will of God and failing to live by the standard outlined by God's character—in which he created the cosmos and humanity to operate. Since we saw in original mankind a dependence on God, we see sin as rejecting his guiding hand and relying instead on our finite senses and reasoning.¹⁹

Moreover, humans are destined to continue in this way of living for they have a proclivity toward sin and in some ways are depraved. This depravity, however, is not from any mystic or spiritual force but by their reality as finite beings.²⁰ Other than that, we are neutral agents created by God, asked to be like and with Him. Left to our devices we will live separated from the giver of life until we die. Still, in no way is God cut off from us on account of this; rather he continually extends his hand to us and we continually turn our backs to him.

Christology & Soteriology

The concerns of Christology are the questions regarding that most pivotal moment in history in which God lowered himself in order to dwell with his creation and redeem them—they are questions of the Incarnation. In that event, the preexistent Son—the

¹⁸ Ilarion, 67-73. Without an historical Fall event and instead relying on human free-will as the root of suffering, it is hard to rationalize the concept of natural evil. The best answer seems to be Irenaean Theodicy which asserts that this is the best possible world for God's people to develop; cf. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 275-6, 342-3.

¹⁹ Ilarion, 45-50.

²⁰ Niebuhr, 1-25; Tillich, 255-6. We can still use the language of “powers” or “sin and death” as cosmic forces that reign over us in as much as we understand that we have relegated ourselves to these forces.

second member of the Godhead—joined history to become human, not joining two exclusive natures but rather, as God, stripping himself of his unnecessary attributes and finding himself a limited and helpless human.²¹ Jesus is human in every way we are; he has no greater knowledge or power except what God the Father gives him.²² On the other hand, Jesus embodies the eternally divine work of the Son as Revealer and Redeemer—demonstrating God (as well as true humanity) to people, ushering in the Kingdom, and redeeming them in his act of atonement.²³ In the man Jesus, the Son demonstrates what being human is meant to be: an existence aimed at and reliant on God the Father.

Of course, the central work of the Son is the Atonement in which we each are saved—by the grace of God extended through the Son—from our own failures that lead to death. This act of the Son in tandem with the Trinity is in response to the mass rejection by humans of their creator, and it enacts the salvific plan through Christ's perfected humanity, the death it leads to, and the natural glorification and resurrection that it culminates in (Philippians 2:5-11).

The actual work done by the cross and the empty tomb—the mechanics of the Atonement—are rightly relegated to Sacred Mystery. On the surface, we can understand

²¹ In the paradigm of *kenosis*, the incommunicable attributes of God are stripped—or at the very least, deeply buried to avoid use; see Grenz, 306-7; cf. Moltmann, 83. The early Christological phrase, “two natures, one person” helps us emphasize the real joining that goes on in the Incarnation and that the divinity and humanity of Christ are uncompromised in this special event, but the category of “nature” seems unhelpful for modern Christians, making *kenosis* preferable; for the traditional view see “Athanasian Creed.”

²² Jesus may assume this miraculous power without explicit request because his will is so in line with the Father's will.

²³ Grenz, 326-55.

Christ's life and teachings and his ultimate fate as inspiration for humanity to turn back to its loving creator. From this, we might describe Christ's death and resurrection as defeating the powers of death reigning over mankind as much as we understand death as self-inflicted.²⁴ Christ's work as Redeemer is for all of creation, calling all to participate in it despite knowing only a limited number will accept that call in this life.

Pneumatology & Ecclesiology

The Spirit is the third member of the Trinity, who like the Godhead is both personal and transcendent yet working in ways that emphasize her transcendence.²⁵ It is the Spirit that welcomes us into the salvific plan. Over the course of history, the Spirit has actively been working in humanity, illuminating the mind and allowing for us to truly choose to reorient ourselves on God.²⁶ Upon acceptance, the Spirit continues her work in the individual with great ardor—refining the will and the efforts of God's disciples and producing in them virtuous fruit.²⁷

²⁴ The Atonement operates on a number of levels and can be seen as working under a system of legal necessity. However, it is best to understand the Law (which Jesus fulfills and ends) as an extreme accommodation to human barbarism that ultimately culminates in the death of Christ; cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas E. Torrance, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), IV/1:253.

²⁵ Feminine pronouns will be used to refer to the Spirit in contrast with the Father and Son in order to further accentuate the genderlessness of the divine persons.

²⁶ The mechanics and neutrality of the Spirit bestowing on us true freedom in choice are undoubtedly Sacred Mystery.

²⁷ Grenz, 440-5.

Those in whom the Spirit is working comprise Christ's church; people formally join this church through believer's baptism.²⁸ The Spirit is working in the church to bring all into God. There are countless ways in which individual Christians are brought into the divine community, but one of the main ways is through developing our virtue—particularly the virtue of love, the defining virtue of the Godhead. We demonstrate love in creation through (1) blessing the world (e.g. environmental action, social justice, charity, loving others), (2) sharing the gospel with all nations, and (3) discipling and encouraging those already committed.²⁹ By this the church participates in the Godhead's plan for redeeming creation and drawing it in.

Revelation

The Church is guided in its work through God's revelation. The divine has revealed itself in history most clearly in Christ, but also through Scripture, the prophets, and many other, possibly non-biblical ways.³⁰ Christians do accept the concept of general revelation—that God has revealed himself in nature, what can be deduced by logic, and even the insights of other religions—but this affirmation stems from the truth that God pervades reality and all that is good points to him (James 1:17).

Second only to Christ, the divine is revealed most through the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible. We accept this claim not on any merit of the book but by the witness of the Church. Scripture is inspired by the Spirit in mysterious, unfathomable

²⁸ Ilarion, 130-5.

²⁹ Grenz, 490-510.

³⁰ Barth, II/1:63-178; cf. Pannenberg, 2:1-27.

ways, containing words dictated to the prophets, ideas implanted in their minds, references to greater acts of revelation, and—most often—ordained works of men.³¹ Despite the spectrum of methods used to compose the Bible, Christians accept it as their ultimate guide, in as much as it points them to Christ and the greater Trinity. The Tradition of the Church has helped Christians understand Scripture and direct their interpretation throughout the centuries.³² The gospel as presented in Scripture is both progressive and directional, allowing for continual growth in interpretation by a Spirit-led church.³³

Eschatology

The Church, by the guidance of Scripture reflecting on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, anxiously looks forward to the end. It proclaims that we live in a state of already but also not yet, in anticipation of God's in-breaking Kingdom.

When Christ finally returns and fully establishes his Kingdom, Christians hold that all the dead will be raised (1 Corinthians 15). Those who have already accepted God in their lifetimes will join with him in what we may call heaven, while those who have not accepted God will be left, relegated to what we call hell. Heaven will be a greater

³¹ That is to say, the Spirit's inspiration manifests over a spectrum of influence where parts of Scripture are dictation from God and others are clearly reflective of human thoughts; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 127-206; see also Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 54-6.

³² Anthony Lane, "Scripture, Tradition and Church: An Historical Survey," *Vox Evangelica* 9 (1975), 37-55.

³³ Vanhoozer, 309-36.

communion with God, enjoying fellowship with the divine community—our identities will simultaneously merge with the divine and remain distinct.³⁴ Moreover, we will retain our bodies in some way; our resurrected bodies will be glorified continuations of our present vessels.³⁵ Regarding those who were originally left, now in hell, they are not forever condemned by the arbitrary time they spent alive. Rather, God will continue to draw all to him until all freely accept his invitation.³⁶

This is the mission of the Christian God, to draw all history and reality—that which he pervades and transcends—into himself. This process began along with the beginning of history, when the divine community of the Trinity freely chose to extend its community to a created order. God’s created people, those whom he loved, were designed to live in fellowship with him—yet they were never forced to do so, and in their liberty they have each rejected their creator. But God, even before their repudiation, was working to restore his creation and his children’s relationship. This effort climaxed with the submission of the Son to join creation and limit himself. He died just as all humans cut off from a relationship with God will die, but was raised and glorified on account of his perfect posture to the divine. Christians since then have proclaimed this event and

³⁴ McFague, 168. Discarding the concept of time when discussing eternity helps make sense of what happens to the dead before Christ’s return, the potential monotony of heaven, and the span after judgement until all souls have accepted God.

³⁵ Wright, 347-55.

³⁶ Hick, 242-64; Barth, IV/3:477-8. One cannot simultaneously dismiss determinism, uphold the importance of human life, and also hold humans accountable to the arbitrary time at which they die. Also, “Afterlife Theodicy” (sometimes associated with Aquinas) helps with concerns like why an omniscient God would create a humanity that is likely to be disconnected from him (Matthew 7:13) as well as the problem of evil in general.

sought to participate in it in this life. And in time, God will reward our efforts through completion, and will finally bring all to exist in his divine presence. This is our Christian hope.