Ambrose University TH 790: Thesis

Beginning with God

John Webster's Portrayal of Theology as a Work to be Undertaken in the Fear of God

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‘[I]n contemplation “the Beginning”, which is God, is the object we seek’
(Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job* VI.61)

For my sons and daughters

Thesis Approval

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Abstract

John Webster (1955-2016), Anglican theologian, begins with God's perfection as the organizing principal of theology. Webster portrays theology as a work to be undertaken in the fear of God because it is God who reveals and sanctifies knowledge of God, which God does in the process of sanctifying the knowers. This thesis investigates what it means to approach the task of theology in a posture which begins with the fear of God, not by deducing a methodology but by articulating the manner of the theological task. Chapter one looks at the nature of God, the nature of creatures and the relations of creator and creatures, in order to form an understanding of the fear of God as the root of our fellowship with God. Chapter two considers how God relates to creatures by sharing knowledge of Godself with them. In addressing creatures through the Word, God thereby summons them to address themselves to God's address. Chapter three looks at how God sanctifies creatures in their knowing, as well as the appropriate posture for the task of theology. The fear of God serves creatures by providing the relational conditions for fellowship with God.

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Introduction

This thesis is a close reading of the theology of John Bainbridge Webster (1955–2016), Anglican theologian. Webster was born in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, England on 20 June 1955. In 1974, Webster went to Cambridge as an Open Scholar.[1] In his first year, he studied Languages and Literature, specializing in English, but switched to Theology at the end of his second semester. This change was due to Webster's disappointment and frustration with the approach of practical criticism detached from the study of literature as a moral practice. Writing later about the choice to study Theology, Webster noted, "I chose theology only because I could not think of anything else I wanted to do."[2] Webster stayed on for graduate work at Cambridge where he found interest in the writings of Eberhard Jüngel. He went on to complete his PhD on Eberhard Jüngel's theology which Webster described as "an exotic mix of Luther, Heidegger and Barth."[3] Following the completion of his thesis, much of Webster's early academic work focused on the theology of Karl Barth.

After graduate work, Webster was hired to teach systematic theology at a Church of England theological college, St John's College, Durham University. He served there from 1982 to 1986. Webster was also ordained a priest in the Church of England in 1984. Webster described this time in his teaching career as one for which he was "desperately ill-prepared" and in which he had yet to "clarify satisfactorily the task of Christian doctrine, its relation to exegesis and its role in the life of the Church."[4] Here we see early on that Webster has a certain view of theology

[1] Ivor J. Davidson, "John", *Theological Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 18.
[2] John Webster, "Discovering Dogmatics" in Darren C. Marks, ed. *Shaping a Theological Mind:Theological Context and Methodology* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 129.
[3] John Webster, "Discovering Dogmatics", 130.
[4] Ibid., 130.

as needing to be intimately connected to the life of the church. He was also not satisfied with doctrine disconnected from the theological task of exegesis.

In 1986, Webster moved to Toronto with his wife and young son to teach at Wycliffe College, an Anglican Seminary. At Wycliffe he taught graduate students Christian doctrine in a text-based format, sharing a regular seminar with a Jesuit colleague, George Schner (1946–2000). Text-based format was an important shift away from the format of critical theory that Webster had been taught (practical criticism detached from the study of literature as a moral practice). During these years in Canada, Webster translated two volumes of Jüngel's essays into English[5] and wrote a monograph on Barth's later ethics.[6]

In 1995 Webster returned to England, with his family, to teach at Oxford. This was a prestigious position. However, the climate at Oxford was not always welcoming to Webster's views on the task of theology which made him "prone to a measure of isolation."[7] Webster challenged the popular academic approach to theology by attempting to articulate the Christian difference. This thesis explores Webster's conviction that for theology to be theological, it must begin with God and be ordered to God's perfection.

Webster wrote many essays in constructive dogmatics during his time at Oxford. In addition, he launched the *International Journal of Systematic Theology* in 1998 with Colin Gunton (1941–2003) who taught at King's College, London. Webster practiced theology in community.

[5] Eberhard Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, eds John Webster and Arnold Neufeldt-Fast (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995). *The Possibilities of Theology: Studies in the Theology of Eberhard Jüngel in his Sixtieth Year*, ed John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).
[6] John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
[7] Davidson, "John", 24.

In 2003, Webster moved to the University of Aberdeen where he assumed a Divinity Chair teaching systematic theology. Here he continued to write and edit. "The writing was pervasively marked by the same deep convictions as to the nature, sources and ends of theology as a discipline, and of the implications of this vision for the theologian's personal practice and the architecture of his studies." [8] The constructive theological work that Webster did during this time is the material under consideration in this thesis.

Webster attracted more graduate students than he could take. He was renowned for being a generous and gracious mentor. While remaining in Scotland, Webster moved to the School of Divinity, St. Mary's College, St Andrews for what would be his last professorial post (2013–2016). In his inaugural address, Webster spoke on the virtue of intellectual patience.[9] His writing continued to point "unashamedly at delight in God" and ever directed towards the edification of the Church.[10] John Webster died suddenly at home on 25 May 2016.

Progression of Webster's Theology

Before he began to construct his own theology, John Webster labored to understand the theology of Jüngel and Barth. This humble approach of being open to receive knowledge of God through the work of other human teachers continued for Webster. He came to value the patristic, medieval and scholastic writers of theology and in particular, Thomas Aquinas.

Webster addressed a broad number of theological topics in his writings. The theme of 'theological theology' is one that Webster returned to in three of his inaugural addresses

[8] Davidson, *27. See note 25.*
[9] John Webster, "Intellectual Patience", *God Without Measure Volume II: Virtue and Intellect* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016)
[10] Davidson, 35.

(Wycliffe, Oxford, St. Andrews) as well as in several essays.[11] He was progressively trying to clarify the responsibility that theologians had to maintain the course and be true to their discipline. This meant that for Webster, theology could not resort to the same standards of other academic disciplines. 'Theological theology' came to be a term that Webster was known for.[12] As Webster's theology progressed, he came to focus more on the ethics of virtue so that his final volume of essays was on virtue and intellect.[13]

The Background of the Project

What stands out in the opening chapter of *Holiness* are Webster's comments on the fear of God as the manner of holy reason. Webster states that God being feared and his name hallowed is the requirement for theological reason.[14] Webster also observes that the completion of holiness involves the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1)[15] The mysterious reference reads as follows: "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God."[16] Webster goes further: the human creature through speech and holy reason can give voice to the fear of God.[17]

This thesis is borne out of a quest to learn what Webster has to say in his published works about the fear of God as it relates to the manner of theology. To speak of theological manner is

[11] "Reading Theology", *Toronto Journal of Theology* 13 (1997): 53-63; *Theological Theology: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered Before the University of Oxford on 28 October, 1997* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); "Intellectual Patience"; "Biblical Reasoning", *Anglican Theological Review* 90 (2008): 733-5; and "What Makes Theology Theological?", *Journal of Analytic Theology*, vol.3, May 2015: 17-28.
[12] R. David Nelson, Darren Sarisky and Justin Stratis, Editors. *Theological Theology: Essays in Honour of John Webster* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).
[13] John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume II: Virtue and Intellect* (London: T&T Clark, 2016).
[14] Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 28.
[15] Ibid., 27.
[16] All biblical quotations are taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.
[17] Webster, *Holiness*, 29.

not the same as theological method, although for Webster there does exist some overlap between the two. Manner is the posture or the approach of the theologian. In this case, the manner which begins with the fear of God is not a manner unique to John Webster. All creatures are made for fellowship with God and the creature's approach to God is designed to be one of reverence. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Pr. 9:10). The term fear of God is found throughout the canon and is highly concentrated in the wisdom literature. As biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad writes in *Wisdom in Israel*: "The fear of God is regarded as something which is given precedence over all wisdom. In its shadow, wisdom is assigned its place."[18] The fear of God is to be prioritized over wisdom. In this thesis, priority is understood in terms of proper order, as in the analogy of being rooted. Or in the relation of roots to plants.

For the purpose of this thesis, we are using the analogy of being rooted. Being rooted is the place of beginning and the source of flourishing. The fear of God is the foundation or the root of our fellowship with God and thereby, with creatures. To have a relationship there must be a proper root of trust and vulnerability. If the vulnerable place is the safest place, being rooted in the fear of God is absolutely the safest foundation for creatures in relation to God.

John Webster portrays theology as a work to be undertaken in the fear of God because it is God who reveals and sanctifies knowledge of God, which God does in the process of sanctifying the knowers. This thesis investigates what it means to approach the task of theology in a posture which begins with the fear of God, not by deducing a methodology but by articulating the manner of the theological task.

[18] Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1972), 67.

Outline and Methodology

Webster's approach to the task of theology is the subject of this project, focusing primarily on his published works regarding the doctrine of God (chapter one), God's Word (chapter two), and the redeemed intellect (chapter three). These are for Webster the three principles of systematic theology: The Holy Trinity provides the ontological principal basis for theology, the Word of God is its external (or objective) cognitive principle, and the redeemed intelligence of the saints is its internal (or subjective) cognitive principle.[19] In chapter one we will consider the God who is to feared above all things. In chapter two we will consider God's self-revelation. In chapter three we will draw conclusions for the manner of theology.

In the pursuit of this thesis, the entire corpus of Webster's published works: books, essays, and articles alike were considered. It then narrowed to focus primarily on relevant sections in: *Confessing God; The Culture of Theology; Domain of the Word; God without Measure Volume I: God and the Works of God*; *God without Measure Volume II: Virtue and Intellect; Holiness; Holy Scripture;* "God's Perfect Life"; "The Human Person"; "What is the Gospel?" and "What Makes Theology Theological?"

Secondary sources were consulted as critical aids to interpretation, especially dissertations on aspects of John Webster's work, book reviews, the festschrift titled *Theological Theology* (2015), and eulogies/obituaries. Works of other authors on the subjects of theological method and biblical theology were also consulted in order to provide a framework for the fear of God theme. The thesis focusses on the interpretation of primary sources. There has not yet been an abundance of scholarly reflection on this aspect of Webster's theology.

[19] John Webster, *The Domain of the Word* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2012), 135.

Chapter 1 – The Doctrine of God: Systematic Theology's Ontological Principle

Introduction to the order of Webster's theology

John Webster begins many of his essays with the following refrain: "Theology's proper object is two-fold: first, God the Holy Trinity in [God's] inner and outer works, second and derivatively, created things *sub ratione dei* (the idea of God)."[20] Here we meet Webster's pattern of ordering theology and he does not part from it. Webster begins the study of any subject by considering the nature and being of God. *Agere sequitur esse* is a phrase which Webster borrows from Thomas Aquinas, meaning 'doing follows being'. It is Aquinas' metaphysical and moral principle connecting ontology, obligation and ethics. Webster explains that "in the intellectual act of theology the order of being precedes and is actively present to the order of knowing."[21]

Because God is known in Christ, and Christ is revealed through the scriptures, theology concentrates on two fundamental tasks: exegesis and dogmatics. This is due to the way the being of God has been revealed through creaturely means: 1) Scripture (the prophets and apostles), and 2) "secondarily, other human teachers who repeat and apply the heavenly doctrine which they have received from its prophetic and apostolic ambassadors".[22] This takes the form of the church's creeds and confessions as well as other texts. Dogmatics is a set of flexible accounts of the content of the gospel. These accounts are meant to inform, guide and correct the Church's reading of the gospel. Dogmatics is a work of reason using conceptual vocabulary and forms of

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[20] John Webster, Editorial: [theology, the church, and the university], *International Journal of Systematic Theology* vol. 15, no. 3 (July 2013): 237-239, 237
Another example of Webster using this phrase, from his final volume, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume II: Virtue and Intellect* (London: T&T Clark, 2016): "As dogmatics, theological reason fixes its gaze on God, and then on all things *sub ratione Dei*", 1
[21] John Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology", in *The Domain of the Word*. London: T&T Clark, 2012, 135.
[22] John Webster, "Editorial: [God's Knowledge and the Task of Theology]." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no.4 (October 2014): 370-372, 372.

argument. It is in this way that we will consider theology's ontological principle: the Holy Trinity which is the *principium essendi* or the beginning of being.[23] True to Webster's logical and material order, we are beginning with 'being' rather than 'knowing'. The purpose in doing so is to ensure that we reckon with the proper manner and proportion of the two. Even though we only have access to the order of being through the order of knowing, the knowing follows the order of being.

To explore this, the present chapter will begin with the nature of God, then God's work of creation, and finally the relation of creator and creatures. As we consider the nature of God as Webster describes, we begin to see the foundation of Webster's theology as a work undertaken in the fear of God.

I. First, the Nature of God

The Holy Trinity is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One concept that is important for Webster in discussing the nature of God is *aseity*. Aseity carries the meaning of self-derived, self-originated. It is a quality or a state of being that is specific to God. Creatures do not possess aseity because they are not self-derived, they are created by God.

How God in three persons came to be self-derived is described through what is termed the divine processions. The divine processions can be described starting with the Father who begets the Son. This begetting or generation is repetition in the sense of affirmation, confirmation, and fullness. There is fullness of life and relation between them; paternity and sonship. The Father and the Son together breathe the Spirit. The Spirit proceeds from them; spiration or breathing. These divine processions: paternity, generation, and spiration, are

[23] Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology", 135.

characterized by wholeness and richness of life.[24] These modes of God's perfection make up what we understand as the Trinity.

Simplicity of God

At the same time that God is triune and has three modes of being, God is also 'this one'. Webster "aims in his insistence upon description to point to, but also to describe the Singular God, this very One."[25] Webster uses description in a concrete way through interrelated pairs such as Love and Holiness, Immensity and Ubiquity. This allows Webster to articulate the whole in terms of the divine simplicity.[26] There is self-consistency in the simplicity of God which allows for us to trust in the unchanging one.

The doctrine of God is concerned about God's identity. This includes God's character: attributes particular to Godself. It is also concerned with the function of God. God's singularity refers to God's name. God is this one who acts thus. God's singularity is referring to God's uniqueness. Webster uses the phrase "God's name" or God's "thisness" to speak of the simplicity of God. Simplicity is referring to the singular plenitude of God. Webster makes reference to two of his favorite mentors – Jüngel describing simplicity as God's "inexhaustible fullness" and Augustine using the terms, "simple multiplicity or manifold simplicity" – to capture this idea.[27]

God is complete in Godself. God is not dependent on anything outside of Godself.

[24] John Webster, "God's perfect life", in *God's Life in Trinity*, Mirolsav Volf and Michael Welker, editors. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, 149.
[25] Katherine Sonderegger, "The God-Intoxicated Theology of a Modern Theologian". *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no.1 (January 2019): 24-43, 36.
[26] Sonderegger, 37.
[27] John Webster, *Holiness*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdman's, 2003. p. 39. Quoting from E. Jüngel, "Theses on the Relation of the Existence, Essence and Attributes of God", *Toronto Journal of Theology* 17 (2001), 66.

More can be said about the triunity and simplicity of God's nature within the context of considering God's perfection. Websters title for his two-volume work *God Without Measure* shows his priority, both in sequence and in importance, on the perfection of God. 'Perfect' means that there is no common measure.

Perfection of God

For Webster, the organizing principle of theology is the perfection of God. In his own words: "God's immanent triune perfection is the first and last object of Christian theological reflection and governs all else."[28] God's perfection is positive – it is the "sheer positive plenitude of God's being."[29] Some phrases to attempt description of this perfection are; self-originating, self-moving, self-explicating, self-fulfilling.[30] God is. Webster does not attempt a comparative description for there is nothing to which God can be compared. God's perfection is a matter for confession not construction. God is God. God in God's perfection does not need creatures, creatures need God.

In order to achieve some human understanding about this matter, we can consider the immanent and economic perfection of God. The immanent perfection of God is God's self-preservation which refers to God's self-existence. God lives.[31] The economic perfection of God is found in God's self-communication. God turns to that which is not God. This movement of God to make Godself known is 'wholly gracious.' It is in this gracious turning that God makes Godself known through the works of election, reconciliation, and redemption.[32] God

[28] John Webster, "On the Theology of Providence", in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume II: Virtue and Intellect* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 128.
[29] Webster, "God's perfect life", 143.
[30] Ibid., 143.
[31] Ibid., 147.
[32] Ibid., 148.

communicates out of complete fullness and not lack.[33] God makes Godself known. Out of God's perfection and fullness, God turns toward.

The organizing principle of theology is the perfection of God. The fear of God begins with knowing God's perfection. God's perfection instills wonder and awe in the creature (Ps 27:4).[34] And it is out of God's perfection and fullness that God turns to the creature. The material order of Webster's theology is foundational to the work he is undertaking in the fear of God.

Knowledge of God

Webster describes God as one who is 'a God of knowledge' (1 Sam. 2:3).[35] According to Aquinas, "In God there exists the most perfect knowledge".[36] Aquinas' use of the word 'perfect' is explained by Webster to mean that there is no comparison or common measure to God. In contemplating the knowledge of God, unlike humans, God's knowledge is 'substance and pure act.'[37] This knowledge is not potential knowledge because God is not limited by time and space as creatures are. Rather, it is unlimited knowing.

God's knowledge is *the* active cognitive principle making it possible for creatures to have knowledge.[38] "Because this is so, recollection of and appeal to God's supereminent knowledge is to accompany all acts of theological intelligence, for every such act is not first of all a cause but an effect of knowledge."[39] Recognizing that knowledge comes from God and asking humbly for

[33] Ibid., 149.
[34] "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple." Ps. 27:4. All biblical quotations are taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.
[35] "Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed." 1 Sam. 2:3.
[36] John Webster, "Editorial: [God's Knowledge and the Task of Theology]." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no.4 (October 2014): 370-372, 370. Quoting Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia.14.1 corp.
[37] Ibid., 370. Quoting Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia.14.1 ad 1.
[38] Ibid., 371.
[39] Ibid.

God to make God's knowledge known to the creature, are two components manifesting the fear of God in one movement: with the fear of God producing humble posture. The recognition component is associated with the correct ordering of natures: God's infinite nature and the creature's finite nature. The fear of God cuts off pride, thereby creating a state of dependence on God.[40] Humble appeal for God to make God's knowledge known to the creature has at its root the fear of God. This humble appeal has to do with the posture or attitude of the creature approaching God out of a state of dependence. Creatures can only receive knowledge from God because it is God who reveals and sanctifies knowledge.

Holiness of God

Webster continues: "Holiness is a predicate of the personal being, action and relation of the triune God, of God's concrete execution of his simplicity; it is not a quality in abstraction, but an indicator of God's 'name'." [41] God's holiness as incomparability. Majestic incomparability. God's holiness as difference. Different majesty. God's holiness as pure. Pure majesty. Tying these points to the simplicity and triunity of God, Webster writes, "God is this singular and unrivalled one in his thrice-holy being; his uniqueness… is identical with his triunity."[42] Using some other descriptors, Webster writes of the majesty and singular purity of God; "majesty in relation". For creatures it is "a majesty known in turning, enacted and manifest in the works of God."[43] God makes Godself known to creatures as humankind by turning toward creatures. In the decision to make Godself known to creatures, God shares God's holiness in

[40]Matthew Levering, "On Humility", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* Volume 19 Number 4 October 2017: 462-490. doi:10.1111/ijst.12254. Accessed 28 February, 2022, 480. "Humility has at its root interior fear of God." See also Note 91: "Aquinas, Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 19, a.9, ad 4, Roots humility in the Holy Spirit's gift of filial fear."
[41]Webster, *Holiness*, 39.
[42]Webster, "The Holiness and Love of God" in *Confessing God* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 117.
[43]Webster, *Holiness*, 41.

order to transform and sanctify creatures in their knowing. Out of this turning toward, God acts. This is known as the economy or the works of God. Just as the divine processions are modes of God's perfection, so too the divine missions flow from God's perfection. Together, the divine processions and the divine missions are the perfection of God.[44] The divine missions can be understood as fellowship. This fellowship is not shared being because God is completely other than creation. Instead, this fellowship is the history of God and creatures through the missions of the Son and the Spirit. The missions are both the intimacy of God with creatures, and the unbridgeable gulf, on the side of the creature, between them. These two principles taken together is the essential condition of the relation between God and creatures in time.[45]

For Webster, the holiness of God is not a holiness which makes God inaccessible to creatures. God is what God reveals, despite inaccessibility from our side, God is trusted to communicate truly and accessibly about Godself. Trusting God to make God accessible on the side of the creature by making the creature holy is to do so from a state of dependence on God. The creature's state of dependency is rooted in the fear of God.

II. Second, God's Works

God is the only one who can reveal God's self. Therefore, creatures can only know God through what God reveals about Godself. The merit of considering the theology of creation following our consideration of God in Godself, is supported by the following observation made by Matthew Levering:

> Webster's development as a dogmatic thinker was accompanied by growing awareness of the theology of creation as a topic that bridges the gap between reflection on God's life *in*

[44]Webster, "God's perfect life", 150.
[45]Webster, "God's perfect life", 150.

> *se* and consideration of God's work *ad extra*, and that conditions all that is said about God's relation to creatures.[46]

Let us consider the doctrine of creation in order to learn about God through the work of creation as well as the nature of the relationship between God and creatures.

Theology of Creation

Webster teaches that the doctrine of creation is a cardinal doctrine, describing it as "a hinge" by which the second topic of theology, all other things relative to God, turns.[47] And it is also a distributive doctrine, meaning that in exploring all things relative to God, the importance and reference to the doctrine of creation recurs frequently.[48] The doctrine of creation provides orientation to what theology says about all things in relation to God; it brackets and qualifies what is said about the nature and direction of all things. And it does this implicitly, not necessarily visibly.[49]

Within the economy, the protagonists are the creator and the creator's creatures.[50] The doctrine of creation can be divided into four topics: the identity of the creator, the divine act of creating, the several natures and ends of created things, and the relation of creator and creatures.[51]

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[46] Levering, "On Humility", 462.
The Doctrine of Creation is 'the bridge' by which thinking about God in se moves over to thinking about God ad extra. In John Webster, "Non ex aequo: God's Relation to Creatures", in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume I: God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 117.
[47]John Webster, "'Love is also a lover of life': Creatio Ex Nihilo and Creaturely Goodness", 99. "… on this hinge turn all the elements of the second topic of Christian theology."
[48] Ibid., 99. The Doctrine of Creation is one of two distributed doctrines. The first is the doctrine of the trinity and the second is the doctrine of creation.
[49] Webster, "*Non ex aequo*", 118.
[50] Webster, "'Love is also a lover of life': *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness", 100.
[51] Ibid., 100. The subject of the divine act of creating is outside the scope of this project and will not be considered in this thesis.

The Nature of Creatures

Looking at the first topic which governs us, God is perfect in Godself. God has no need of creation. God is not made better by its existence, nor deprived in its absence.[52] In God's supereminence, God is the universal cause of creation.[53]

In the essay, "'Love is also a lover of life': *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness", Webster considers the natures and ends of created things. Creatures are created out of nothing, and yet, "created things have their being in relation to God… they are not nothing."[54] Webster observes that, "such entire inequality ought not to be considered a denial of the creator's relation to created things: God loves, and in providence and reconciliation acts towards, that which [God] causes to be."[55] Creatures are bestowed with creaturely being, dignity, worth, agency and activity, as well as gifted by God with a portion of God's knowledge and God's holiness. "God's perfection is seen also in bringing into being other agents. God bestows being and activity: this is part of the special sense of creation out of nothing in the Christian confession."[56] Webster elaborates on this theme of the creaturely nature, offering an example of human agency:

> To be created out of nothing is not to suffer deprivation but to be given a nature whose performance will certainly involve acts of courage and may include – for example – magnanimity and magnificence, the extension of spirit to great things, the performance of some great work.[57]

Approaching God with the fear of God, is an acceptance of the order of nature that creatures have been given. Great rest comes from relying on God as source of being as well as source of human agency. Webster celebrates the matter of creaturely worth. The idea that creatures were

[52] Ibid., 103.
[53] Ibid., 105.
[54] Ibid., 106.
[55] Ibid., 107.
[56] Ibid., 112.
[57] Ibid., 113.

made from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) can "touch anxiety" if the relation of the created to the creator "is such that [creatures] have no honor."[58] The shame of feeling worthless is refuted by Webster. Creatures have been given the amazing gift of life and position by the creator.

> Creation is a work of wholly adequate love. Part of this love's adequacy is its voluntary character: it is fully spontaneous and self-original, nothing more than God's will being required for creatures to come to be… Love *gives* life and love gives *life*… Only God can do this; only God can bring about a life which is derived yet possessed of intrinsic substance and worth.[59]

The matter of creaturely worth that Webster is describing means that in addition to the gift and position given to creatures, there is also a requirement for the creature which is the participation of creatures "in the process of becoming certain kinds of persons."[60] The requirement for participation takes into account the fallen nature of creatures, and offers reconciliation. "We might also speak of friendship with God as a condition for knowledge of [God] as creator and of ourselves as [God's] creatures. In our corrupt state, such friendship is lost to us, for we despise both our creaturely condition and our creator, and need to be reconciled."[61] In this passage of Webster's, there are two reasons for the creaturely need for the fear of God. The fear of God is required for knowledge of God because of (a) creaturely finitude and (b) corruption by sin. This belongs to our discussion of the correct ordering of natures which is core to the fear of God. As finite creatures the condition for knowledge of God is friendship with God. This is also known as fellowship with God. As creatures corrupted by sin, creatures cease wanting to be creatures. Matthew Levering observes Webster's treatment of the core of sin in the following:

> Webster puts the emphasis … upon the fact that humans are creatures.

[58] Ibid., 108.
[59] Ibid., 110.
[60] Ibid., 101.
[61] Ibid., 102.

> The result of redemption needs to be viewed through this lens of creatureliness: we are 'summoned to redeemed and perfected creatureliness' ("Where Christ Is", 14). Where others speak of deification, or derive an exclusively soteriological concentration from the comments in Ephesians, Webster trains attention upon the perfecting of our creatureliness. The more we are in Christ, the more we will be creatures, since our fundamental problem – the core of all sin – is our rejection of our status as God's creatures.[62]

Levering 's insight about Webster's emphasis on creation is helpful here for a couple of reasons. Levering observes Webster's identification of the core of all sin and Levering acknowledges the unique focus Webster has on creaturely ends. Webster does not speak of our becoming divine, instead creatures are 'in Christ' the creature, and therefore the ends of creatures is creatureliness, redeemed and perfected.

Knowing God

Creatures can know God because God reveals and sanctifies knowledge. God knows God's creatures because they are 'from him and through him' (Rom. 11:36).[63] Webster furthers his argument by sharing a quote from Augustine: "With respect to all [God's] creatures, both spiritual and corporeal, [God] does not know them because they are, but they are because [God] knows them."[64]

In writing about the relationship between God's own knowledge and our knowledge of God, Webster concludes that we are converted to reality – slowly – by turning to this God. Creatures, not possessing aseity, have been gifted with knowledge of God. "God condescends to communicate to creatures a portion of [God's] knowledge, and to invite them into intelligent

[62] Levering, "On Humility", 463. See note 2 in Levering: quote from John Webster, "'Where Christ Is': Christology and Ethics", in *God Without Measure: Working Paper in Christian Theology, Volume 2: Virtue and Intellect* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 14.
[63] John Webster, "Editorial: [God's knowledge and the task of theology]", *IJST*, vol.16, no.4 (October 2014): 370.
[64] Augustine, *On the Trinity* XV.13.

fellowship of which the work of theology is an instance."[65] God in God's generosity wants to see creatures flourish and so leads the way in knowing.[66] God uses creaturely means to do this including the prophets and apostles as well as human teachers. We learn *theologia in se* as well as *theologia nostra*; attending to God's own life and knowledge as well as God's outer works of love deriving from the first.[67] Webster writes that, "Creaturely knowledge of God's perfection derives from God; it is revealed knowledge whose origin and realization are out of our hands."[68]

God the Spirit moves the creature's mind and intellect into action. "The Spirit's moving of creaturely intellect is [God's] work of illumination. Operations of creaturely intelligence are caused, preserved and directed by divine light, that loving radiance of God which makes creatures to know."[69] This is not to be understood solely as an intellectual endeavour, since the encounter is with the whole of creaturely being, including the communicative and intellectual aspects of being which are relevant to theology. American theologian, Katherine Sonderegger agrees with Webster: "As subject, God tells us Who He is."[70] Sonderegger labels Webster's approach to the doctrine of God as 'Personalist' because the best way to know a person is to listen to their own self-disclosure. It is how friendship is born. In the task of theology, the object of study is the acting subject of our knowledge. Again, Sonderegger observes that Webster insists on the priority of revelation in how God is known; we listen to God's speech about Godself. [71] "But the LORD who reveals [God]self, in Webster's theology, is Subject over [God's] Self-disclosure. [God] chooses to make [God]self known; [God] cannot be examined."[72]

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[65] Webster, "Editorial: [God's knowledge and the task of theology]", 371.
[66] Ibid., 371.
[67] Ibid., 372.
[68] Webster, "God's Perfect Life", 144.
[69] John Webster, "Editorial: [The Holy Spirit and theological intelligence], *International Journal of Systematic Theology* Volume 14 Number 4 (October 2012): pp.379-380, 379.
[70] Sonderegger, "The God-Intoxicated Theology of a Modern Theologian", 33.
[71] Ibid., 33-34.
[72] Ibid., 35.

God makes Godself known to creatures as holy, thereby transforming creatures and making them holy.

Holiness of the creature

Out of God's perfection, creatures know God through God revealing Godself, and creatures are transformed and sanctified by God in their knowing. This is accomplished by God sharing God's holiness with creatures. In the chapter, "The Holiness of God" in *Holiness,* Webster describes God's manner toward us as a holiness in relation. "God's holiness is a relational concept … [which] articulates the origin, manner and goal of the relation in which God stands to [God's] creation."[73] The creature's manner of approaching God shares this trait of holiness. However, the asymmetrical relationship between God and creatures due to their differing natures, means that the manner of approach to the relationship of creator and creatures is asymmetrical as well. The manner in which the Creator approaches the creature is "majesty in relation". [74] The manner in which the creature approaches the creator can be described in terms of the "fear of God" grounded in: knowing God's perfection which instill wonder and awe, and the correct ordering of natures.

God communicates God's holiness to creatures. The way that God's holiness is communicated is through God's presence. Webster describes this notion or aspect of God's holiness as: "[God's] majestic self-communicative and saving presence".[75] Referring to Hosea 11.9 and Isaiah 12.6, Webster states that God is in our midst – the Holy One in our midst.[76] The

[73] Webster, *Holiness,* 44.
[74] Ibid., 41.
[75] Ibid., 43.
[76] "I will not execute my burning anger; I will not destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." Hos. 11:9; "Shout and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel" Isaiah 12:6.

relation of the holy God to creatures means that holiness characterizes God as the origin of creation, the manner of God toward creation, and God's goal for creation.[77] How this plays out in the gospel is that the triune God relates to creatures as creator, savior and sanctifier through God's works of nature and God's works of grace.[78] Holiness and covenant go together because of the fact that holiness is not an abstract concept but a relational one.[79] The positive holy acts of God within covenant are that God elects, separates and purifies.[80] God the Father elects, the Son separates, and the Spirit purifies. And this takes place out of the fullness of God's being. The negative holy acts of God are that God destroys sin and wickedness, everything that stands in the way of God's good intentions for God's creation is destroyed in the presence of God's holiness.[81] Negative holiness means for creatures that God has overcome. Creatures can feel secure in knowing God as this holy One in our midst.

In his essay, "The Holiness and Love of God", Webster writes that the dyad – holiness and love –characterizes God. Before looking at the holiness and love of God, Webster begins by placing his discussion in the context of the doctrine of God and in particular the divine perfections. "A trinitarian account of God's being, acts and perfections… will be concerned at every point to indicate the fellowship which God is in [God's] own limitless majesty and which [God] establishes with [God's] creatures. As Father, Son and Spirit, God is and acts out of holy love."[82]Elaborating on the idea that God's holiness is pure or moral, Webster makes a note of caution. If God's holiness is understood as virtue personified, then we only encounter moral imperative in our perception of God's character. God would appear distant, abstract, and

[77] Webster, *Holiness*, 44.
[78] Ibid., 44.
[79] Ibid., 46.
[80] Ibid., 48.
[81] Ibid., 50.
[82] Webster, "The Holiness and Love of God", in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II*, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, [2005] 2016), 115.

removed. God's holiness would become divided from God's love. Instead, we must conceive of God's holiness as being holiness in Godself. "The holiness of God *in se* is the support and strength of the people of God, the unshakeable foundation of creaturely being and confidence."[83] In love, God turns to the creature.

For Webster, the holiness of God is not a holiness which makes God inaccessible to creatures. To understand God's holiness in this way is to go off in the wrong direction because "God's holiness cannot be isolated from God's calling of a people."[84] Instead, God's holiness must be understood as relational: relational in the way God condescends to be God with creatures. God's knowledge and God's holiness is God's self-consistency and integrity on display. God is what God reveals. The inseparability between God's holiness and God's love is richly described in the following:

> God is holy as [God] loves the creature; [God's] love for [God's] creature is holy love. Once again, everything depends on giving the right sort of specificity to the conception of holiness, which must not be allowed to become separated even by a hair's breadth from attention to the triune God and [God's] loving ways in the world."[85]

And this holy love for the creature is actual in that God gives the creature being, life and a particular destiny. God establishes the creatures as a son or daughter and calls the creature to be holy as God is holy – acting out a creaturely role in fellowship with God.[86]

The fear of God is necessary for the creature because of creaturely finitude as well as corruption by sin. As loving and holy, God is jealous. Webster defines God's jealousy as: "the energy of God's good will with which [God] directs [God]self in all [God's] works and ways towards us."[87] And again: "The jealousy of the triune God is [God's] purposiveness; it is [God's]

[83] Webster, "The Holiness and Love of God", 119.
[84] Webster, *Holiness*, 46.
[85] Webster, "The Holiness and Love of God", 121.
[86] Ibid., 123.
[87] Ibid., 124.

refusal to negotiate away the creature's good by allowing the creature itself to set the terms on which it will live."[88] It is out of God's jealousy that restoration and mercy flow. This purposiveness of God speaks to God's self-consistency for creaturely good. Creatures cannot destroy the creature's self-destructive tendency. So God destroys that version of creatures in order that God may fulfill God's purpose towards creatures of protecting and upholding the creature. Creatures' powerlessness in the face of God's power is cause for terror and dismay on the part of the creature.[89] This holiness of God at work as 'consecrating mercy' is seen in the coming of the Son.[90] As well as the restorative work of the Holy Spirit. The beginning and the end of this process of sanctification requires gifts of the Holy Spirit. Webster dialogues with Aquinas on this matter, and here we must pay close attention to Webster's use of the word 'religion' because it speaks to the proper posture in which God is known.[91] Before receiving divine instruction, Webster notes that creatures require the Holy Spirit's gifts "of docility and patience; of resistance to curiosity; of acceptance of limits." Webster continues:

> A good deal of what needs to be said might be gathered under the rubric of "*religion*" in its deep sense of being bound to God, the one to whom "we ought to be bound … as to our unfailing principle." … Corruption inhibits knowledge. But God the teacher is God the reconciler and overcomes our corruption, establishing the new creaturely nature, objectively in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and applicatively in the regenerative work of the Spirit.[92]

Webster uses the word "religion" to describe the proper manner in which God is known. "Religion" as a "deep sense of being bound to God", which is lost to creatures through the

[88] Ibid., 124-5. See also Webster, *Holiness*, 50.
[89] Ibid., 125.
[90] Ibid., 126.
[91] In most OT cases, 'Fear of God' could be rendered 'religion' because it is most often referring to an aspect of worship of Yahweh. Bernard J. Bamberger, "Fear and Love of God in the Old Testament". *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. 16 (1929): 39-53, 43.
[92] "'Love is also a lover of life': *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness", 102. Emphasis on *religion* is mine. Webster quotes from Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IIaIIae.81.1 resp.

corruption of sin, and then renewed. It is a posture based on dependence on God which stems from the fear of God. The fear of God is rooted in knowing God's perfection and correct ordering of natures. This "deep sense of being bound to God" is also known as piety or reverence. This surprisingly delightful definition of "religion" has the potential to reform our own concept of what is meant by the term "religion". Webster describes the work of the Spirit in the life of the saints as restoring their vocation and making them human: "Sanctification is not a matter of participation in God's work but rather of the restoration of creaturely vocation. The Holy Spirit makes creatures holy and therefore makes them human. And in that is fulfilled the love of God for what [God] has made for [God]self."[93] The restoring of creaturely vocation has an ongoing quality to it and is part of the work of sanctification. In creatures coming to be human, not only are creatures gradually restored morally, but the creatures' theology is continuously being reformed as well. Creatures need the relational conditions of the fear of God in order to be converted to reality as it is; settling neither for fanciful thinking nor static tradition.

Relation of Creator and Creatures

The relationship of God and creatures is an ongoing fellowship. The character of this relationship is addressed in Webster's essay, "*Non ex aequo*: God's relation to creatures."[94] It is a mixed relation between creator and creatures: not equally placed.[95] On the part of the creature to creator it is a real relation. But on the part of God to the creature it is a logical relation or a relation of reason.[96] The terms "real" and "logical" are classical or scholastic, taken directly from

[93] Webster, "The Holiness and Love of God", 129.
[94] John Webster, '"Non ex aequo': God's Relation to Creatures" in*: God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume I: God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 115-126.
[95] Webster, "Non ex aequo", 115.
[96] Ibid., 115-116.

Thomas Aquinas' metaphysical description of the mixed relations of God and creatures. Within Godself there exists real relations between the Father, Son and Spirit in the form of paternity, filiation/sonship and spiration. However, in relation to that which is outside God, it becomes a relation of reason.

> Because God is not one being and agent alongside others, and because [God] is in [God]self entirely realized and possesses perfect bliss, [God] has nothing to gain from creating. Precisely in the absence of divine self-interest, the creature gains everything; *because of (not in spite of)* the non-reciprocal character of the relations of creator and creature, the creature has integrity."[97]

Willem Maarten Dekker makes a critique of Webster's use of real and rational relations. In his review "John Webster's Retrieval of Classical Theology", he writes the following:

> In my opinion, the distinction made by Thomas [Aquinas] between *relatio realis* and *relation rationis* deserves a more critical analysis here. With God being kept in self-satisfied being outside the relationship, humanity in this theology does not get a relationship with God[self], but only with [God's] will and [God's] deeds … It is regrettable that Webster does not discuss alternative[s]. Because [Webster] takes up scholastic theology, … his theology tends toward a certain abstractness.[98]

This critique by Dekker may be based on a misunderstanding of what Webster means by a "relation of reason". A "relation of reason" doesn't mean only the intellect but refers to the whole person in a communicative and dependent encounter on the real. Reading a large sample of what Webster has published assuages any fears of Webster's theology portraying God as impersonal or inaccessible. The distinction between the two relations: *realis* and *rationis* serves to solidify the status of "not equally placed" or "not other" that describes the difference between the relation of creator and creatures.

[97] Webster, "'Love is also a lover of life': *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness", 110-1.
[98] Willem Maarten Dekker, "John Webster's Retrieval of Classical Theology" in *Journal of Reformed Theology* 12 (2018): 59-63 ,63.

God does not create out of need but out of love. As Karl Barth wrote, the creation bears "testimony to eternal, free and unchanging grace as the beginning of all the ways and works of God."[99] God freely chose to create. "Although [God] could be without us – [God] did not and does not will to be without us."[100]

Webster's teaching about God and the work of God in creation, as we have been looking at in this chapter, has a great impact when articulating the work of grace. It must be articulated using established principles as well as accounting for the nature of created things in relation to God. It is easy to go off track by placing the wrong emphasis on the outer works of God. Webster was convinced that modern theology's concentration on the outer works of God gave it a 'historical' or 'dramatic' focus. "By consequence, the existence and history of created things may be assumed as a given, quasi-necessary, reality, rather than a wholly surprising effect of divine goodness, astonishment at which pervades all Christian teaching."[101] Focusing on God's outer works can flatten the relation of God and creatures, causing it to appear as one between persons and agents "who, for all their differences, are strangely commensurable" and as though they are engaging in the world together as a "commonly-inhabited field of reality."[102]

Webster is providing a correction here by way of critique.[103] Webster's critique is that much of modern theology gives too little focus to theology proper: the doctrine of God. Moving quickly to the works of God without beginning with, and pausing on God *in se*, has the unfortunate result of flattening out the relationship of creator and creatures, impacting the end result. Webster's positive reordering consists of beginning with God's Perfection in Godself and

[99] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.2§32.1
[100] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.2§37.1
[101] Webster, "Non ex aequo", 118.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Sonderegger, 27. Webster's goal is one of *ressourcement* or renewal which begins with diagnosis of current weakness and timidity in order to treat.

making this the organizing principle in Webster's theology.[104] From this starting point of God's perfection, the mixed relations between creator and creatures can be seen as infinite and finite and the outer works of God can be seen as truly gracious by considering God's condescension and love. This reordering does not diminish the important work of grace which, along with the work of nature, together make up the divine missions or the outer works of God. The mixed relation of God and creatures is part of this re-ordering, for it is fitting to the natures of both God and creatures "and to the unrestricted intimacy of God's presence in the world."[105] This distinction between real and logical is to inhibit the idea of a reciprocal relationship. The relations of the creator and creatures are 'not equally placed'. This correct ordering of natures is core to the fear of God. And this is good news for creatures. Webster surprises us with the joyful exclamation: "In God, absence of reciprocity is not absence of relation but the ground of limitless relation."[106]

In addition to the relationship creatures enjoy with God, through dependence on God, creatures are given relationship with other creatures, expressed in reciprocity with one another. How can creatures respond to such generosity? Considering what we have learned about creation and in particular, the relationship between God and creatures, the creature's response requires a certain posture arising out of a dependence on God. "Most of all, it obliges those who consider [Christian teaching about creation] to recover the posture of creatures, the dependence and gratitude of derivation and the repudiation of self-subsistence."[107] This posture is made up of

[104] Sonderegger, 29.
Sonderegger observes the following about Webster: "The Doctrine of God in Webster's theology yields primacy and priority absolutely to the Triune LORD. There is no diagnosis possible without the Divine Teacher: He strides onto the earth first, and in His Light we see light. Always we will find this sequence in Webster's work. God set forth positively, in formal and material terms, followed hard by a disclosure of the inattention, rebellion and confusion that plague the modern condition." (Psalm 36.9, "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light.")
[105] Webster, "Non ex aequo", 119.
[106] Ibid., 125.
[107] Ibid., 126.

intellectual virtues as well as ascetical ones which we will explore as we move through this thesis.[108] From the fear of God flows dependence and the humble posture of creatures before the presence of the creator. Creaturely dependence on God recognizes the finite nature of creatureliness and moves toward its fulfillment. Creatures could so easily convince themselves to live for their own sake by insisting on the creature's own way, and thus slip from proper relation to the creator. Creaturely finitude and corruption by sin requires mortification and the renewal of the creature's spiritual, intellectual and moral natures. The fear of God is a fearful thing because without it, creatures would miss out on the gift of being restored creatures in fellowship with God.

Conclusion

We have begun to explore Webster's approach to the task of theology as a work undertaken in the fear of God, by considering the perfection of God, God's work of creation, and the relation of creator and creatures. For Webster, the organizing principle of theology is the perfection of God and the material order of Webster's theology is foundational to his task. These two principles: Knowing God's perfection and correct ordering of natures are the two principles which make up the fear of God. Recognizing that knowledge comes from God is to recognize God's infinite nature and the creature's finite nature. Asking humbly for God to make God's knowledge known to the creature is a posture stemming from dependence on God. The holiness of God is not a holiness which makes God inaccessible to creatures. God is what God reveals, despite inaccessibility from our side, God is trusted to communicate truly and accessibly about Godself. The fear of God cuts off pride, allowing for dependence on God. From a state of

[108]*Ascetical* meaning: exercise, training, restraint, discipline; with tangible examples of: time alone, prayer, and fasting.

dependence, creatures trust God to make them holy. Within the correct ordering of natures, creatures in their finite dependence need the fear of God for two reasons: (a) creaturely finitude, and (b) corruption by sin. God's holy manner in fellowship with creatures is "majesty in relation" and the creaturely manner is "fear of God". God's holiness, while perfect in itself, is not abstracted from God's love for us. God's manner is one of holiness and love. God's sanctifying work in creatures has an ongoing quality and requires an ongoing relationship with God. From the fear of God, flows the humble posture of creatures before the presence of the creator. "Religion" or "a deep sense of being bound to God" is a humble posture based on dependence, stemming from the fear of God. This creaturely posture is also known as piety or reverence. This humble posture is made up of theological, intellectual and ascetical virtues and humble practices.

Creatures come to know God's perfection through revelation. Revelation is the gift of God's presence. Revelation is an aspect of fellowship. It is knowledge of God that comes from standing in relation to God. Reconciled creatures are on their way to perfection. Creaturely perfection is both now and not yet which takes place in a process called sanctification. This process includes the correction of sin as well as the renewal of reason. In our quest for understanding Webster's theological task as one undertaken in the fear of God, we must know more about how God reveals God's self to creatures through revelation in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 – Economy of the Word of God: Systematic Theology's External Cognitive Principle

Introduction

This chapter concerns the order of knowing from which the content of the first chapter, the order of being, has been derived. The ontological principle of theology is Godself, and the cognitive principle is grounded in the ontological principle. Webster identifies the economy of the Word of God as systematic theology's external cognitive principle.

> Scripture is the cognitive principle of theology in the sense that Scripture is the place to which theology is directed to find its subject matter and the norm by which its representations are evaluated. God [in God] self is this subject matter and norm in [God's] royal address of the creature's intellect.[109]

Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is the "subject matter" of the "royal address" to which Scripture directs us. "Holy Scripture is a function of God; its cognitive and revelatory force is not that of a textual deposit but of a loving voice and act of rule."[110] Webster is making the link between the first two systematic theology principles: The triune God and Scripture.

This chapter begins with a look at how the creator relates to creatures through providence and revelation. Next, we consider God's address through the gospel and Scripture. In response, creatures address themselves to God's address through theological practices such as exegesis and biblical reasoning. Throughout our exploration of these subject as they relate to the order of knowing, we are paying particular attention to the manner of the theological task as Webster presents it: a work to be undertaken in the fear of God.

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[109] Webster, "Biblical Reasoning", in *The Domain of the Word* (London: T&T Clark), 2012, 129.
[110] Webster, "Biblical Reasoning", 129.

I. God's Address

The Knowledge of Providence

In this second chapter we are exploring *how* the Creator relates to the creature. We begin with the providence of God to uphold creation in its finitude and despite its fallenness, so that God might reveal Godself within creation.

In Webster's essay, "On the Theology of Providence", we learn that providence is part of the doctrine of God. We are considering it here as a link between creator and creaturely being (chapter 1) and how God reveals Godself to creatures.[111]

God's perfection includes God's love. Providence is a function, an aspect, an overflow of God's love and abundance. "In this act of generosity, God wills, establishes and perfects a reality beyond [God]self as a further object of [God's] love."[112] God's relation to creatures is not only initial but purposive or "temporally extended".[113] In other words, God's relation to creatures is ongoing and relational. Creatures have an historical nature and acquire perfection in fellowship with God. The creator "continues his love as the governor of what he has made."[114] God's manner towards God's creatures is faithfully continuous and governing. In addition to God's holy manner as "majesty in relation" in chapter one, God's providential manner is "faithfully continuous and governing."[115]

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[111] John Webster, "On the Theology of Providence" in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume I: God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 133.
A formal matter is the placement of providence. "A doctrine of providence will best be conducted as an exercise in biblical reasoning, a conceptual, schematic representation of what theology is told by the prophets and apostles." (John Webster, "On the Theology of Providence", 130.)
[112] John Webster, "On the Theology of Providence", 135.
[113] Ibid., 135.
[114] Ibid., 137.
[115] Ibid. See also Webster, *Holiness*, 41. "Majesty in relation."

Webster portrays the goal or ends of providence as the fulfillment of the "ordered fellowship with God which is the creature's perfected happiness."[116] Ordered fellowship with God is grounded in the fear of God: knowing God's perfection and correct ordering of natures. God administers creation; God has a plan or a pre-existing pattern. Webster quotes Calvin's insight about what this means for creatures to live in light of this knowledge:

> To live by virtue of "a certain and deliberate will", that is, "God's ordinance and command", is not a matter of fear or resentment but of comfort, for it means to be "under [God's] hand."'[117] This knowledge comforts creatures by offering "assurance that creaturely time has depth and direction, that it does indeed work for good.[118]

The idea that God has a plan or pre-existing pattern can bring up some questions about human freedom. Webster acknowledges this issue in the following: "Freedom is existence in accordance with created nature and towards created ends, not self-authorship or aseity."[119] The free will of creatures is moved interiorly and voluntarily. Thomas Aquinas affirms the dignity afforded to creatures through providence: "In light of the gospel, providence dignifies creatures. As with creaturely freedom, so with creaturely dignity: it does not consist only in being *agens seipsum*, one's own director."[120] *Agere sequitur esse* applies in this situation as doing or working follows being. Every creature depends on God in being, therefore also in working. If left to ourselves, our own self-government is "destructive and enslaving".[121] It does not lead to our happiness. But God in God's providence overrules this "without our invitation or consent'"[122] Webster positively states: providence is "gospel consolation".[123]

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[116] Ibid., 131.
[117] Ibid.,137, quoting Calvin from *Institutes* I.xvi.3.
[118] Ibid, 138.
[119] Ibid, 139.
[120] Ibid, 140, quoting from Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* Ia.103.1 ad1.
[121] Ibid, 141.
[122] Ibid, 141.
[123] Ibid, 141.

> Trust in providence signals the end of the evil self-responsibility which so afflicts our civil life (this we might expect), and of our ecclesial life (of this we should be ashamed). To embrace and trust ourselves to divine government is not resignation, but hopeful action towards the end secured for us by a loving creator.[124]

Embracing and trusting ourselves to divine government is to be in a state of dependence rooted in the fear of God. John Calvin, having brooded on the fragility of creatures and the fleeting nature of life, offers these comforting words:

> A [creature] cannot go about unburdened by many forms of [the creature's] own destruction, and without drawing out a life enveloped, as it were, with death … Yet, when the light of divine providence has once shone upon a godly [creature], [the creature] is then relieved and set free not only from extreme anxiety and fear that were pressing [the creature] before, but from every care.[125]

Calvin is pointing out the vulnerability and finitude of creatures and this is an explanation with which Webster aligns. God's providence takes into account the nature of creatures: both creaturely finitude and corruption by sin. God's providence outbids and limits evil. But it also includes a longer-term plan to eradicate evil. This plan is found in the gospel.

The doctrine of Providence can be a difficult matter which most everyone will struggle with. Gospel consolation can be hard to hear for creatures who have experienced the harsh realities of human life. For this reason, Webster writes: "we need to learn what it is to apply belief in providence, and how to apply it, in order to be persuaded of the viability and fruitfulness of making the application."[126] Providence is the belief that God outbids any and all evil.[127] Reconciling the knowledge of God's providence with the reality of human evil and

[124] Ibid, 141.
[125] Ibid., 141. Webster quotes from John Calvin, *Institutes* I.xvii.11.
[126] Ibid., 127.
[127] Ibid., 129. Providence is a dispersed doctrine which means that it is present in other areas of theology. Likewise, the doctrine of providence is informed by other doctrines such as the doctrine of God, creation, soteriology and anthropology.

suffering, is a task undertaken within fellowship with God.[128] Fellowship between creator and creatures is necessary in order to reconcile providence with human life as creatures experience or witness it. This fellowship is based on the ordering of natures we learned about in chapter one. As finite creatures the condition for knowledge of God is friendship with God. Knowing God's perfection and correct ordering of nature's are the two principles of the fear of God.

Webster adds a further thought about the pace of our belief in providence, "We must reach that comfort at the right pace – not too fast, lest we treat it lightly, not too slowly, lest we be overtaken by melancholy… belief is learned, not given all at once."[129] We are taught by the doctrine of providence to look to God for comfort through fellowship. And the comfort we receive over time is paced to be not too fast and not too slow. It is an ongoing fellowship.

Revelation

The providence of God upholds creation and God reveals Godself in creation. God communicates a portion of God's unrestricted knowledge of Godself and all things by God's works of revelation and illumination.[130] "Revelation is the self-presentation of the triune God, the free work of sovereign mercy in which God wills, establishes and perfects saving fellowship with [God]self in which humankind comes to know, love and fear [God] above all things."[131] In response to this revealed knowledge, the human creature contemplates God, orders life before God and tells of Christian truth. For Webster, this is the goal of theology; it is a work of love for God. This intellectual inquiry requires the principle of 'creatureliness'.[132] The creature receives

[128] Ibid., 127.
[129] Ibid, 141.
[130] Webster, "Editorial: [theology, the church, and the university]", *IJST* vol. 15, no. 3 (July 2013), 237.
[131] Webster, *Holy Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13.
[132] Webster, "Editorial: [theology, the church, and the university]", 237.

the Word of God as God's self-communication. Webster's use of the term 'Word' means God's communication with creatures which is powerful to save.[133] 'Word' is also a metaphor showing how personal God is in terms of how God addresses creatures.[134] "So the Word became human and made his home among us. [The Word] was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son" (Jn. 1:14).[135] God is so personal that God sent God's Son to address God's creatures. The end goal of God's address to creatures is not divine self-display. The end goal is "the overcoming of human opposition, alienation and pride, and their replacement by knowledge, love and fear of God. In short: revelation is reconciliation."[136]

God upholds creation in its finitude and despite its fallenness, so that God might reveal Godself within creation. For creatures to trust themselves to divine government is to act towards the creaturely ends already secured for them which includes this state of dependence stemming from the fear of God. This kind of embracing and trusting of God cannot fail. The knowledge of providence gives confidence that fearing and trusting God to govern God's creation is to act in light of the bigger picture of what is to come. Reconciling the knowledge of God's providence with the reality of human evil and suffering, is a task undertaken within fellowship with God.[137] The necessity of fellowship between creator and creature in order to reconcile providence with human life as creatures experience or witness it, requires the fear of God: rooted in knowing

[133] "'Word' is a complex term whose usage varies across different areas in which it is put to work, such as Trinity, incarnation or revelation. Here we are using the term to refer to God's self-communication, the revelatory self-gift of the triune God which directs the creation to its saving end." (John Webster, *Holy Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 44.)
[134] Elsewhere, Webster writes of 'Word' as a metaphor indicating that God is "outgoing, communicative, antecedently one who comes to and addresses creaturely reality, making [Godself] present as that which conditions and determines that reality in its entirety." (Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 14.)
[135] Biblical quotation taken from the NLV.
[136] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 15-16.
[137] John Webster, "On the Theology of Providence", 127.

God's perfection and approaching God in finite dependence. It is in fellowship with God that creatures come to know, love and fear God above all things. The gospel is the focal point of God's self-revelation. We now turn to the subject of the gospel as God's address to the church.

Gospel

The Christian context for hearing God's self-revelation is within the community of faith known as the church. The first thing the church is called to do – the church's vocation – is to hear the gospel. Living and proclaiming the good news follows out of hearing. Again, we are comforted with the reality that God does not need creatures in order to fulfill God's purpose for creation, but creatures do need God. It is the posture of the church, being itself a creature, to be one of hearing the gospel – not once – but over and over again. This a repeated event of being encountered by the word.[138] The repeated event of hearing the gospel is described by Webster in the following: "Hearing the gospel in this way involves repentance and faith, that is, constantly renewed abandonment of what the gospel excludes and embrace of what the gospel offers."[139] This exclusion and embrace are an active response to what is heard. Creatures cannot observe the gospel because it is mystery, but creatures can hear the gospel. The inability of creatures to deduce the gospel is due to the fact that the mystery of the gospel is "known only in the miracle of revelation and faith."[140]

The gospel is the good news in at least three ways. The good news is primarily the good news of God's action; the action itself and the content of the action. The longing of the human heart that creatures might be saved from their predicament – *someone, do something!* – has been

[138] John Webster, "What is the Gospel?" *Grace & Truth in the Secular Age*. Edited by Timothy Bradshaw (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's, 1998): 109-118, 110.
[139] Webster, "What is the Gospel?", 110.
[140] Ibid, 110.

fulfilled by God's presence and God's action. God has acted and acts. The Son's work of redemption is at the center of God's action.

Second, the good news is the news of salvation in which creatures proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord (2 Thess. 1:8). God's salvific action as "the freeing of all things from disorder and confinement and the gift of life in fellowship with God" is the active reality of God's grace.[141] The gospel inherently "constitutes a judgement of human life in its fallenness; but it does so only because it is the unsurpassably good news of the grace of God in Jesus (cf. 2 Cor. 1:19ff)."[142] The gospel message is a "matter of disorientation" because it is the good news of salvation in which creatures have been delivered by God from darkness and death.[143] The good news includes learning the nature of creaturely disorientation.

Third, the gospel is good news because it is the good news of our reorientation – what God has done about corruption by sin – and it is comprehensively true. In its comprehensiveness, the church community can commit to focus solely on the gospel – the self-gift of God in the good news. Webster identifies this focus on the gospel as a refusal to focus on other things. The gospel reveals itself when there is no other agenda to contend with.[144] The amazement at the good news is not something we get over and then move on to other interests.

> The acts of the church in gathering include praise and prayer, attention to Holy Scripture, and the celebration of the sacraments of the gospel. Praise and prayer are delight in God and appeal to God for God's renewed presence and activity. They display most clearly the proper passivity which characterizes the being of the church, even in its most strenuous activity. In praise as celebration of the divine goodness and beauty, and prayer as invocation of the mercy of God, the church manifests what makes it into itself – dependence upon God's gift of [God]self. Furthermore, the public reading of Scripture as the address of God to the community of faith underlines that the church does not make up

[141] Ibid., 112.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid., 114.
[144] Ibid., 115.

> its own understanding of itself but receives it in the struggle to listen faithfully to the divine word.[145]

Webster has outlined in the above passage that the church is dependent upon God's gift of Godself.

God is personal in how God addresses the church. The gospel of salvation is announced by the risen Christ.[146] God's address through Christ crucified and made alive, could not be more personal. The church is brought into being by the Word of God and the church is a finite creature of the Word.[147] Just as we have our creaturely being in God, so too the church. The church's relation to Holy Scripture is determined in relation to Word and faith.[148] Holy Scripture is the Word's servant.[149] Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit[150] Webster asserts that "faith entrusts itself to the gospel as to a divine declaration."[151] Webster goes on to write of a 'Word – faith – church nexus' which can be understood in the following negations: without God's Word, no faith; without faith, no church; without Scripture, no knowledge of the Word of God announced in the gospel of salvation which creates faith.[152] Put forth positively, God's Word creates faith; through faith the church is brought into being; reading and hearing Scripture reveals knowledge of the Word of God in Jesus Christ which creates faith.

Webster comments on the relationship of tradition to the Word of God. Tradition is a "hearing" of the word versus a fresh act of "speaking".[153] Webster believes that Scripture should be given primacy over tradition.[154] The context for hearing Scripture is that of God addressing

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[145] Ibid., 116-7.
[146] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 44.
[147] Ibid., 44, 47.
[148] Ibid., 44.
[149] Ibid., 46.
[150] John Calvin, *Institutes*, Book III.
[151] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 45.
[152] Ibid., 66. Webster gives credit to I.U. Dalferth in note 55.
[153] Ibid., 51.
[154] D'Costa offers an alternative: "*sola scripture et ecclesia…* a delicate balance here whereby

the community, and the church receives its creaturely identity in listening to the divine word. Out of the church's creaturely identity, the church is called to participation in the good news.

Proclamation and service are two ways in which the church participates and demonstrates the gospel. Both "emerge from a deep delight in the gospel, and from confidence in its capacity to look after itself."[155] Proclamation is a matter of celebration! "Such celebration certainly entails protest (against the rebellion, ignorance and half-heartedness of sin); but such protest is properly rooted in an abiding trust in the gospel's truth and effectiveness."[156] Service is understood as a showing what Jesus manifested in his ministry by following him. Service is not doing in the Son's place what the Son has not done already. The gospel's capacity to look after itself can be understood in the following way: creatures are not given the responsibility to "look after" or "defend" the gospel – that is God's job.[157] Creatures and faithful disciples are called to hear the gospel and then gladly, cheerfully live and proclaim.[158] Webster writes,

> Attending to Scripture, therefore, is not a matter of being socialized, but of being caught up in the dissolution of all society – including and especially church culture – through the word of the one who smites the earth with the rod of his mouth (cf. Isa.11.4).[159]

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scripture is both given a primacy (that accords with Webster's position) as well as an equality with tradition (that does not accord with Webster's position) that actually safeguards its primacy. One cannot be had without the other." In Gavin D'Costa, "Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Some Comments on John Webster's Conception of 'Holy Scripture'", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* Volume 6 Number 4 October 2004: 337-350, 350.

[155] Webster, "What is the gospel? 117.

[156] Ibid., 117.

[157] Ibid., 117.

[158] Ibid., 118.

[159] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 50.

D'Costa offers the following critique: "While healthy iconoclasm is important, Webster's position here seems again to veer towards anarchic individualism, and is actually belied by Webster's own reverence for the major Fathers in his tradition: Calvin, Ursinus, Barth, Bonhoeffer and Berkouwer. Presumably the dissolution of 'especially church culture' is not to apply to them, or to the Creed?" In D'Costa, "Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Some Comments on John Webster's Conception of 'Holy Scripture'", 342.

This verse refers to the power of the one known as the shoot from the stump of Jesse. Righteousness and justice are his delight.[160] The 'Word' can be used to refer to both gospel and Scripture. We will now turn to consider further the subject of Holy Scripture.

Holy Scripture

The character of Scripture is described by Webster as "the work of Word and Spirit, through which God gives creatures a share in [God's] knowledge of [God]self, [and] is mediated through creaturely auxiliaries. Of these, Holy Scripture is the chief."[161] Scripture is the prophetic and apostolic testimony in which prophets and apostles were sent by God, commissioned and given authority. The status of Scripture as prophetic and apostolic testimony is ontological, not evaluative. 'Inspired' means, superintended by the Spirit. Scripture commands our 'hearing'. "The end of their embassy is that creatures should know and love God, and knowing and loving are creaturely acts. Scripture engenders such acts; it is their occasion and regent."[162] "Holy Scripture serves [God's] self-communicative presence."[163] God's presence is clarity – God's self-communicative presence to the community. We have faith in God's presence, which is not a matter of rational judgement.[164] The luminosity and clarity of the text does not mean that it is transparent for the average rational person, but it is "spiritually perceived" by those within the faithful community "who receive the Word with trust and fear of the Lord."[165] Webster is

[160] John D.W.Watts, *Isaiah 1-33: Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 24*. Revised Edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 208. The fear of God is a "complex phrase, despite being so common in the OT. The complexity begins with the old question of whether it is a subjective or objective genitive. Does the fear come from YHWH, or is it directed to YHWH? Hebrew does not distinguish the two. Probably overtones of both should be heard in the phrase.", Watts, 210.
[161] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 120.
[162] Ibid, 121.
[163] Webster, "On the Clarity of Holy Scripture" in *Confessing God*, 33.
[164] Ibid., 43.
[165] Ibid., 53.

asserting that dependence, stemming from the fear of God which is rooted in knowing God's perfection and correct ordering of natures, is required in order to spiritually receive the clear Word as encountered in the text of Holy Scripture. In addition, the primary virtue of reverence is required for the reception of instruction and is itself one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.[166] Reverence, or piety, is a humble posture. As a virtue, gifted by the Holy Spirit, reverence can be used when the creature wishes. God not only addresses creatures through God's self-revelation, but God also provides the means for creatures to receive God's knowledge made known in the gospel and through Scripture.

As we have read, hearing the gospel is a repeated event of being encountered by the word. This encounter is possible from a state of reverent dependence upon God's gift of Godself, stemming from being relationally rooted in the fear of God. The mystery of the gospel is "known only in the miracle of revelation and faith", therefore we need the gifts of the Spirit.[167] The Word is spiritually received and God provides the means for creatures to receive the Word: beginning with the primary virtue of reverence which is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The humble posture beginning with the fear of God is one of creaturely dependence, receptivity, and openness to the gifts of the Holy Spirit beginning with the gift of reverence.

II. Addressing Ourselves to God's Address

"To be and to act as a creature… is to be in the communicative presence of God."[168] And furthermore, "God establishes and maintains fellowship with his creatures by addressing them through his Word, thereby summoning them to address themselves to his address. Fellowship

[166] Ibid., 46 referring to note 10 (p. 45) H. Bullinger, *The Decades I & II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849), 61, 64.
[167] Webster, "What is the Gospel?" 110.
[168] Ibid., 115.

with God includes rational fellowship; and of this rational fellowship, Christian theology is an instance."[169] God summons creatures to address themselves to God's address. Creatures addressing themselves to God's address, do so as an active response of worship to what God reveals about God's self through God's Word. Acts of piety or religion stem from the recognition of the reality of the differing natures of God and creatures which establish the type of fellowship the creator has with creation. The correct ordering of natures is one of the principles of the fear of God. Fellowship is a summons on the side of God and worship on the side of the creature.

"The Christian interpreter of Holy Scripture is summoned and empowered humbly to venture interpretation of the clear Word of God."[170] Interpretation of Scripture is part of the way God works among the saints. The fellowship between God and creatures includes the human part. "The human creature is restored to life from, with and for God."[171] The Holy Spirit generates within the creature the ability to hear and see in order that mutual understanding may take place.[172] "Interpretation of the clear word of God is therefore not first of all an act of clarification but the event of being clarified. Reading, therefore, always includes a humbling of the reader."[173] Reading Scripture involves mortification as well as vivification in which exegetical reason is renewed, making interpretation possible.

[169] Ibid., 115.
[170] Webster, "On the Clarity of Holy Scripture" in *Confessing God*, 59.
[171] Ibid., 59.
[172] Ibid., 63.
[173] Ibid., 64.

Exegesis

The nature of Scripture's place in the economy requires exegesis and theological interpretation in service of the church's reception of God self-revelation. Webster argues that the 'most fruitful' way to practice theological interpretation of Scripture is to do it; to do exegesis.[174]

Webster identifies two conditions for exegesis flourishing, including: not subdividing theology and biblical study, and allowing for conflict, since conflict about the teaching of the prophets and apostles can keep the church in truth.[175] One condition Webster identifies is not subdividing theology and biblical study. This is based on Webster's teaching that theology consisting of two tasks: exegesis and dogmatics. Exegesis is one theological task which is the theological interpretation of Scripture. It is misleading to conclude that theology *is* exegesis. Instead, theology does exegesis as one of its tasks. Another condition Webster identifies for exegesis flourishing is about allowing for conflict. Much of church culture is conflict-averse. Webster is offering a correction by stating the positive outcome of conflict around biblical teaching which is that the church is kept in truth.

In addition to these two conditions which allow exegesis to flourish, Webster notes that the theological interpretation of Scripture requires the exercise of patience because "in theology things go slowly."[176] We are all frail creatures. We do not receive revelation in a single moment. Change is gradual.[177] Recognizing creaturely finitude as it effects the creature's ability to receive revelation, is part of the humble posture of the fear of God. The manner which begins with the fear of God is a continual [re]turning in dependence toward the creator. This exercise in patience

[174] John Webster, "Editorial: [Five Thoughts on Theological Interpretation of Scripture]." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no.2 (April 2010): 116-117, accessed August 12, 2017, 116.
[175] Webster, "Editorial: [Five Thoughts on Theological Interpretation of Scripture]", 116-117.
[176] Ibid., 117.
[177] Ibid.

Webster is referring to includes patience in suffering God's works, watching for the Spirit to instruct us in God's Word. This patience is also a patience with others while in the act of biblical interpretation. Webster calls this "an exercise of charity through mutual learning" that involves unity and intermingling.[178] Webster also quotes Augustine's phrase 'a way of love' to emphasize the charitable action involved.[179] Another element of theological interpretation is prayer – prayer to be taught. Webster refers to Calvin's prayer that "…we may be attentive to hear thee and submit ourselves to thee in true fear, meekness and humility, so that we may be prepared to receive…"[180] This prayer captures the posture of approaching the theological task beginning with and rooted in the fear of God, which Webster and Calvin are demonstrating for the reader.[181] Creatures are always in process of receiving God's self-communication, and for this creatures need prayer and patience, a humble posture stemming from a state of dependence.

Webster's understanding of exegesis can best be understood by examining his exegesis of Hebrews 1:1-4 in the essay "One who is Son".[182] Webster reveals remarkable theological consistency in this essay. Much of Webster's theology concerning God and the works of God which we have already explored is present in this example, being clearly applied to this passage. For the purpose of this thesis, this example shows *how* Webster undertakes the theological task of exegesis in the fear of God.

Webster divides the opening passage into eight assertions which then serve to guide the reading of the letter as a whole. But first he begins by laying some groundwork for both the practice of exegesis, and understanding the context for the letter to the Hebrews. For the practice

[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid.
[182] John Webster, "One Who Is Son" in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume I: God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016).

of exegesis, Webster draws our attention to biblical interpretation as Chrysostom understands it in his second homily: "Everywhere indeed a reverential mind is requisite, but especially when we say or hear anything of God."[183] Chrysostom is making a broad statement concerning a reverential mind that may be surprising to the reader. Webster explains that Chrysostom is not recommending "a certain mood" but rather "a stipulation about the practice of exegetical reason."[184] Reverence is not limited to an emotional experience, although it may include that. Reverence is a desire to please God and those who serve God. It is a humble posture which stems from knowing God's perfection and the finite dependence of creatures. Webster continues to unpackage the idea of a reverential mind,

> Reverence is rational, intellectually fitting to the object by which the mind is engaged, which is God[self] in [God's] self-disclosure. Such reverence is required also of exegetical reason. What does exegetical reason do? The work of exegetical reason is to be characterized above all by what the Vulgate… calls *abundantius observare* (Heb. 2.1), that exceeding attentiveness which is the only appropriate posture of the mind before God's self-witness.[185]

Webster is describing what the mind is like when influenced by reverence. The mind is rational and exceedingly attentive which is the only "appropriate posture" before God.[186] This working of the mind in its exceeding attentiveness is an active expression of worship as well as devotion. This "appropriate posture" is what in this thesis we are calling the "manner" appropriate to the methods of theology.

Turning to the context for the letter to the Hebrews, Webster writes that the letter addresses a community in defect. There exists a mismatch between their Christian performance and two realities foundational to their existence. The first reality is "the reality of unsurpassed

[183] Webster, "One who is Son", 60. Quoting Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews* II.1.
[184] Ibid., 60.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.

revelation."[187] And the second is "the reality of a single, complete and entirely sufficient sacrifice for sins."[188] The apostle exhorts, confronts, exposes and provides them with resources in order that they might renew their obedience.[189] "Though the community has once heard, it has become 'dull of hearing' (5.11) and 'unskilled in the word of righteousness' (5.13)."[190] Now they live in the reality of a new covenant which involves new possibilities of fellowship as well as new imperatives. "And it is to this novum that the apostle directs his hearers' attention, appealing to them to 'bear with his word of exhortation' (13.22)."[191] The apostle is writing to teach the community the good news of their place in history which is within the new covenant.

The first four verses of Hebrews can be thought of as pastoral or moral dogmatics – not free-standing but compact and functioning. The exordium functions to show "the revelatory and soteriological determinants of the situation into which the community has been introduced but whose implications the community is in its practice resisting."[192] Webster is clear that the emphasis on grace is not to prioritize the economic and functional ahead of the ontological. "Without the [ontological], the exhortation is simply without force. Only because the revelation and the sacrifice are metaphysically determinative of the community's life does it make any sense to exhort its members to resist their own drift."[193]

Regarding Heb. 1:1, Webster teaches that within Scripture there exists a connection between the Law and the Gospel. God spoke in both together and therefore they are episodes in the history of Revelation – both Israel and the church are "addressees of God's speech."[194]

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[187] Ibid., 61.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid, 62.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid., 63.
[194] Ibid., 64.

> This messianic or final time is brought into being by a singular and unsurpassable divine act: God spoke. Here the apostle gathers up the entirety of the Son's existence under the concept of speaking… The agency, we should note, is God's: eschatological existence is not a discovery, still less an invention, but a disclosure. The action is speech. There is no sense in Hebrews that revelation is a suffused, general presence of God, a dimension of natural existence. Coming to its recipients *ab extra*, revelation is speech and act. This speech-act is the declaration of the mind, will and purpose of God, and therefore the establishment of fellowship. Precisely because God has spoken, creaturely existence is not self-sufficient, but existence in relation to God, communicative existence and therefore communion. This communicative action of God's is singular. As God's eschatological disclosure of [God]self it does not share in the diversity of form which characterizes the word spoken to the fathers in the past; and it is not, like the word delivered to Israel through the prophets, an interim word, a word on the way to something else. It can neither be supplemented nor superseded. It is an act of speech which brings the former era to fulfillment by establishing a new.[195]

An approach which begins with the fear of God recognizes that we are not self-sufficient – and extends even further – that the relation between God and the creature is communicative and therefore communion, including the potentiality of intimate communion. God spoke to us in a Son (1.2). To be 'Son' is to share the nature of the Father. It is a particular and unrepeatable relation that exists between the members of the Holy Trinity. The church is tasked with paying close attention to what we have heard (2.1). 'Listen to him' (cf. Matt.17.5). This kind of attentiveness is an example of the attentiveness associated with reverence that we have explored as the appropriate posture before God.

Webster now comments on the eight assertions within the exordium. The first assertion is: God appointed [the Son] the heir of all things (1:2).[196] "Although it certainly looks ahead to the coming dominion of the Son, it roots that dominion in the eternal relation of the Son to God as one who appoints him to exercise universal rule."[197] The Son's appointment is the "enactment of

[195] Ibid., 66.
[196] Ibid., 70.
[197] Ibid.

the relations of paternity and filiation which, along with spiration, are the manner in which God eternally is."[198] Webster is drawing on the understanding of divine relations which we discussed in the first chapter, in order to comment on what is being said in this first assertion about the Son's nature and appointment.

> Even as the one who brings many sons to glory; as the pioneer, as the sanctifier of his brothers, as the one who is in the midst of the congregation, sharing in flesh and blood and partaking of the same [human] nature – even as all this, he is different to the utmost. And yet, even in this utter difference, he is indeed the one who glorifies and sanctifies others, partaking of their nature that he might share his inheritance with them.

Here we can see how Websters prioritization of the unique nature of the Trinity, impacts his interpretation of what the Son's work of redemption means. The Son does not only lead the way as a pioneer of creatures, the Son glorifies and sanctifies creatures because the Son is God.

The second assertion is: Through him God created the world (1.2). "[The Son's] instrumentality is not an indicator of inferiority but of the perfect accord of will and activity between Father and Son."[199] The Son's role in creation is one of enacting the purpose of the Father.

The third assertion is: [The Son] is the effulgence of God's glory (1.3). Here exists a metaphor of the Son as the radiance of God's glory. Webster explains that "because God[self] is light, [God] pours forth light."[200] The metaphor of the Son as the radiance of God's glory "indicates the unbroken continuity of being between God's glory and its effulgence; light and its splendor are one. The Son is not a body illuminated by a light outside himself, which light he then reflects; rather, his being and act are the actuality of the divine radiance, not simply its

[198] Ibid.
[199] Ibid., 72.
[200] Ibid., 73.

mirror."[201] Again, Webster is pointing to the reality of the shared nature between the Father and the Son. Additionally, the metaphor of light can be understood as the Son being God's act of self-communication; the Son being the "human visibility of God."[202]

The fourth and fifth assertions are: [The Son] bears the very stamp of God's nature (1.3) and [The Son] upholds all things by his powerful word (1.3). The phrase "upholding all things" in the fifth assertion is the language of providence. God has a pre-existing plan in which the Son is performing the task of divine government. Webster points out that it is important to notice the location of this teaching: it follows the discussion of the immanent relations as well as the Son's agency as creator, savior and Lord. This assertion of the Son upholding all things is pastorally directed because the knowledge of providence brings comfort and encouragement to creatures. The Son's governance is comprehensive and not just about individual Christian experience. And the Son's governance is enduring and purposive. "The community need not stall from anxiety but can with good confidence confess: 'The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?' (13.6; Ps. 27.1; 118.6)."[203] "Anxiety" is not "fear" in the sense we are discussing in this thesis. Anxiety can be associated with emotional pain that has not yet been fully resolved. It is in fellowship with God that the community's pain can be processed. The act of upholding also carries the meaning of "bearing-up" and "bearing along".[204] "In bearing up all things, the Son preserves them in their proper state as creatures who have been given the gift of life, preventing their disintegration from within or their destruction from without."[205] The Son does this by the

[201] Ibid. Webster gives credit to A. Vanhoye in footnote 43 for this idea.
[202] Ibid., 74.
[203] Ibid., 75.
[204] Ibid., 76.
[205] Ibid.

Son's powerful word. "The Son's word is the enactment of [God's] will, which is divinely potent and effective."[206]

The sixth assertion is: The Son made purification for sins (1.3). This assertion moves from cosmic scope to the historically particular. However, "the one who effected cleansing is none other than the heir of all things, their creator and preserver."[207] Webster writes, "Purification rests on an act of fellowship in which the one who sanctifies shares the nature of those who are sanctified. In this act, he is not ashamed to unite himself to them in their shame, to exist in the midst of the congregation."[208] The Son shamed shame through the cross (Col. 2.15) bringing about a new situation – a better hope – which allows for creatures to draw near to God (7.19).[209] Webster continues by following up on what this means for the community:

> Far from encouraging indolence, however, this places the community under the most severe obligation: 'Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering' (10.23). To fail to do this – to treat the purification achieved by Christ the high priest as simple absolution, without mandate – is to fall into fearful judgement.[210]

Here too, we encounter the fear of God as a manner which takes into account that in our creaturely form, we are subject to wavering, as well as to treating the work of Christ as simple absolution. Both our sinful nature and the limits of our creatureliness expose us to falling into fearful judgement. We are invited to address ourselves to God's address beginning with the fear of God in order that we might stay in close fellowship with God – ever aware of our need of God.

The seventh assertion is: [The Son] sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high (1.3). "'Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever' (1.8) and 'he sat down at the right hand of the

[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid, 77.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Ibid.

Majesty on high' (1.3) are not competing elements; they go together. The Son shares in the fulness of God's being. Webster writes, "[The Son] is what he is: he is king." And Webster continues, "to stand beneath his rule is to be absolutely protected and no less absolutely commanded." As we follow his task of exegesis, we see Webster go back and forth between these two truths: the comfort of our place as creatures in fellowship with God, and the obligations that come with this position.

Moving on, Webster comments on the sitting down of the Son:

> Standing signals a work unfinished and unfinishable; sitting down signals a perfect and sufficient work. That is why (according to 10.13) one of the things which the Son does as the enthroned Lord is… wait. This waiting is not enforced inactivity, or patience in the face of delayed completion, but a resting in his achievement which now takes its course and subdues everything to itself… Further, the Son's being seated doesn't mean removal and immobility; it is presence and activity as well as waiting.[211]

The Son is portrayed as being present and active in God's works even while the Son rests in his achievement.

The eighth and final assertion is: [The Son] has obtained a more excellent name (1.4). The Son's perfect name is incomparable – not just in superiority but different in kind. "As the final word of the exordium, stands a name: but it is a name which we do not know. Son?" The fact that the name is not revealed is significant. Webster includes a reference to Ceslas Spicq's comment about a possible biblical connection to this unknown name: "Spicq draws an intriguing parallel with Rev.19.12, where the figure seated on the white horse (later called 'the Word of God' (Rev. 19.13)) has a name inscribed which no-one knows but himself."[212] Webster continues, "For as one whose name is unknown, the Son is transcendentally excellent, not

[211] Ibid, 78 "waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet." Heb. 10:13.
[212] Ibid, 79.

specifiable, infinitely regressive, hearer of the name above all names. And all this because he is the Son of God."[213]

Webster ends his essay on exegesis of the letter to the Hebrews, with a list of virtues fitting for the exegete and dogmatician, which include: "faithfulness to the apostolic gospel, attentiveness, perseverance, charity in debate and humility under correction, openness to the gifts of God, a desire to serve the church."[214] Webster is highlighting the possibilities available to creatures and in particular to theologians. Virtues operate under the movement and activity of the creature, moved by God. We have touched on some of these virtues in this chapter in an attempt to describe the manner of the theological task: faithfulness to the gospel, attentiveness and perseverance. A more robust consideration of virtue is ahead in chapter 3: the redeemed intellect.

In this section on exegesis, we have learned that the creature's ability to receive revelation is gradual. The fear of God cuts off pride in order for a continual turning from self-sufficiency to dependence on God. Receiving revelation requires true fear, meekness, and humility. Webster describes what the creature's mind is like when influenced by the posture of reverence. The mind is rational and exceedingly attentive which is the only "appropriate posture" before God.[215] This "appropriate posture" is what in this thesis we are calling the "manner" appropriate to the methods of theology. The fear of God, rooted in correct ordering of natures, takes into account that in our creaturely form we are subject to wavering, and taking the work of Christ for granted. Both corruption by sin and the limits of creatureliness expose the creature to the possibility of falling into fearful judgement. Creatures must address themselves to God's address beginning with the fear of God in order to stay in close fellowship with God.

[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid, 80.
[215] Ibid.

Biblical Reasoning

To further our exploration of addressing ourselves to God's address, we turn now to Webster's essay on "Biblical Reasoning." For Webster, Christian theology is biblical reasoning. It is "part of reason's answer to the divine Word which addresses creatures through the intelligible service of the prophets and apostles."[216] Webster defines 'Scripture' and 'reason' in order to understand both what they are and what they are for – specifically asking what their place is in the divine economy.[217]

We have already considered Webster's definition of Scripture's role in God communicating to creatures. In biblical reasoning, reason also plays a role in how God communicates to creatures. "Scripture and reason are elements in the economy of God's communication with creatures, aspects of the cognitive fellowship between creatures and their loving creator."[218] Both Scripture and reason function within the economy of divine revelation. For Webster, the divine economy is a history of fellowship in which creatures are summoned to know and love God. "To love is to will another's good, and God's love of creatures is such that he wills and effects their being, bestowing life upon them."[219] Knowledge and love are essential to fellowship, whether between creatures or creator and creatures. Knowledge and love involve intelligence. On the divine side, knowledge is "God's free communicative self-gift, his 'Word' in which he addresses creatures and his Spirit in which he quickens creatures to love and knowledge. The creator speaks, bestows life and makes [God]self known and loved above all

[216] Webster, "Biblical Reasoning" in *Domain of the Word* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 115.
[217] Webster, "Biblical Reasoning", 115.
[218] Ibid., 117.
[219] Ibid.

things."[220] On the creaturely side, it is an exercise of intelligence to the knowledge God has shared with the creature.

Reason plays an important role in fellowship with God which Webster calls an "ordered friendship." [221] Again, this ordering tells us something about the different nature of God and creatures and the different manner each bring to this fellowship. The manner of appropriate attentiveness of the creature includes the redeemed vocation of reason.

> Reason is a primary instrument of fellowship with God. By reason, we are brought to apprehend, cleave to and obey God – to 'contemplation' in the sense of intelligent adoration. But this is possible only as reason is first humbled into the realization that it is neither author nor magistrate. The sanctifying Spirit must reorient reason to the divine Word, and only after that reorientation is reason authorized and empowered to judge and direct. Yet, as it is reoriented, reason really is authorized and empowered. And Christian theology is an instance of this redeemed intellectual judgement.[222]

Reason is created, fallen, redeemed. Creaturely finitude and corruption by sin means that there are two ways in which reason can fall into error. In the depravity of reason, there is an 'err in excess' which is the creature overrating its own creaturely reason. And the second way in which reason can fall into error, in the redemption of reason, is an 'err in defect' which is the creature underrating the role of creaturely reason. In light of the frailty of creatures to fall into either error, excess or defect, Webster commends the proper use of reason in fellowship with God. "Christian theology is biblical reasoning. It is the redeemed intellects reflective apprehension of God's gospel address through the embassy of Scripture, enabled and corrected by God's presence, and having fellowship with him as its end."[223] Reason can be sanctified; the divine promise of baptism allows for both regeneration and participation. In addition to exegetical

[220] Ibid, 118.
[221] Ibid, 122.
[222] Ibid, 123.
[223] Ibid, 128.

reasoning as commentary in contemplative paraphrase, a second way for reason to participate in theology is through dogmatic reasoning.

Dogmatic reasoning is the matter of Scripture being "set out in a different idiom, anatomized. A conceptual and topical form to undertake certain tasks with respect to Scripture … seeing Scripture in is full scope as an unfolding of the one divine economy; seeing its interrelation and canonical unity; seeing its proportions."[224] Dogmatic reasoning can be understood as a "low-level sense of gathering together what is dispersed through the temporal economy to which the prophets and apostles' direct reason's gaze."[225] In the tasks of exegesis and dogmatics, reason is slowly redeemed as the intellect is drawn away from idols and brought to life.

God summons creatures to address themselves to God's address. Fellowship is a summons on the side of God and worship on the side of the creature. As a manner of worship beginning with the fear of God, the creaturely side of fellowship with God includes the exercise of intelligence in response to the knowledge God shares with the creature.

Conclusion

In our exploration of Webster's approach to the task of theology as a work undertaken in the fear of God, we have considered the order of "being" and the order of "knowing". In this chapter God addresses creatures through providence and revelation, gospel and Scripture. Creatures address themselves to God's address through the tasks of exegesis and biblical reasoning. For Webster, the organizing principle of theology is the perfection of God and the material order of Webster's theology is foundational to his task. These two principles: knowing

[224] Ibid, 131.
[225] Ibid.

God's perfection and correct ordering of natures are what make up the fear of God. Fellowship with God is described in this chapter as ordered friendship and saving fellowship. And the gospel is the gift of life in fellowship with God. This fellowship is one of knowledge. It is intelligent and involves creaturely reason. In addition to God's holy manner in fellowship with creatures as "majesty in relation" from chapter one, God's providential manner is "faithfully continuous and governing". God provides the means for creatures to receive the Word through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Webster identifies this gift of the Spirit as the virtue of reverence: a humble posture stemming from a state of dependence on God. This state of dependence is rooted in the fear of God. Reverence is the only "appropriate posture": what we are calling "manner" in this thesis. This posture of reverence is described as rational and exceedingly attentive. Being encountered by the Word through Scripture requires reverence to receive the knowledge God is offering. God's address to creatures includes the good news that God outbids and limits evil through God's providence. And God has acted through the Son and the Spirit to redeem creatures from corruption by sin. Within the correct ordering of natures, creatures in their finite dependence need the fear of God for two reasons: (a) creaturely finitude, and (b) corruption by sin. Knowledge of providence and knowledge of the gospel through Holy Scripture, directly address corruption by sin, confirming the hope creatures have in God.

Creatures are redeemed in fellowship with God. Reconciled creatures are on their way to perfection. Creaturely perfection is both now and not yet. The intellect is redeemed through mortification and vivification. Virtues issue forth from this process of slaying and making alive. Some of these virtues are particular to the theologian. We now turn to the order of "doing" in the next chapter on the redeemed intellect.

Chapter 3 – Redeemed Intellect: **Systematic Theology's Internal Cognitive Principle**

The cognitive principles of theology are the objective: God's infinite knowledge of Godself and all things, and the subjective: regenerate human intelligence or the redeemed intellect. Reflection on these cognitive principles begins with God by contemplating on God who is 'a God of knowledge' (1 Sam. 2:3). This manner of approach, beginning with God and contemplating on God's perfect nature, is "in repetition of [theology's] creaturely condition."[226]

Created intelligence is a legitimate knowing. It is bestowed by God and preserved by God. Created intelligence is a finite process because creatures are finite; intelligence and knowledge are received over time and never fully achieved. Created intelligence is also fallen and regenerate. In its fallenness it is always susceptible to idolatry, and in its regenerate form created intelligence is free to operate to capacity.[227]

In this third chapter we are considering the order of doing which flows from the order of being (Chapter 1) and the order of knowing (Chapter 2). The "doing" that we are now considering has to do with the redeemed intellect. Here we are in the realm of theological ethics which asks the question: how do we participate in our vocation as redeemed creatures? The context for the discussion in this chapter on the redeemed intellect is the area of moral and ascetical theology. And we are considering ethics as a joyful science. We will begin by considering the matter of reading Scripture in the economy of grace, then look at the task of theology before moving to some of the Christian practices, habits and virtues John Webster identifies as important to the task of sanctification as well as to the task of theology.

[226] John Webster, "What makes theology theological?" *Journal of Analytic Theology*, vol.3, May 2015: 17-28, 20.
[227] Webster, "What makes theology theological?", 22.

Reading Scripture

"Reading in the economy of grace" is a chapter in Webster's book *Holy Scripture.* In it Webster relies on two examples in Calvin and Bonhoeffer to show what it means to read Scripture in this way. According to Webster, Calvin is a scriptural theologian who sees Scripture's place in the divine work of salvation as: "announcing the gospel, reproving idolatry and fostering true piety."[228] Calvin lists three characteristics of the reader of Scripture: concentration on the speaking person of Christ, attentive, and undistracted exclusivity.[229] Webster continues, "And there is a direct consequence here for the reading of Scripture: what is required of the reader is not simply intellectual skill, but above all a certain brokenness, from which alone truly attentive reading can follow."[230] The outcome for the reader is a heart of understanding, made possible by possessing an attitude of "reverence and obedience towards the divine self-witness."[231] In response to revelation, the creaturely manner can be described as one of "reverent attention" to the One who speaks.[232] This manner of reverent attention to God's self-revelation is one we will encounter again in this chapter.

Bonhoeffer's work is described by Webster as biblical exposition.[233] Bonhoeffer's understanding of the task of exegesis is led by the following: "Holy Scripture is the *viva vox Dei*, and that this living voice demands an attitude of ready submission and active compliance."[234] For Bonhoeffer, what is most important is listening or attention.[235] In this way the self is "grounded

[228] Webster, *Holy Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 74.
[229] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 75.
[230] Ibid., 74.
[231] Ibid., 78.
[232] Ibid.
[233] Ibid., 78-79. See note 29.
[234] Ibid., 80.
[235] Ibid., 83. See note 48.

in the Word of Christ."[236] Bonhoeffer places the listening self as basic.[237] In *The Way to Freedom*, Bonhoeffer writes,

> The Word of Scripture must never stop sounding in your ears and working in you all day long, just like the words of someone you love. And just as you do not analyze the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you, accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart, as Mary did. That is all. That is meditation.[238]

Listening attentively to someone's words and accepting them at face value, without analyzing the words or the person, is a loving action which befits the humble posture which begins with the fear of God.

Webster prefers the term "reading" over the term "interpretation" because "reading" is a modest low-level activity which better conveys the nature of the communion with the text through which God reveals Godself. "Reading Holy Scripture is 'faithful' reading: exegetical reason caught up in faith's abandonment of itself to the power of the divine Word to slay and to make alive."[239] Webster expands to include the role of mortification and vivification in molding the will:

> Reading Scripture is thus best understood as an aspect of mortification and vivification: to read Scripture is to be slain and made alive. And because of this, the rectitude of the will, its conformity to the matter of the gospel, is crucial, so that reading can only occur as a kind of brokenness, a relinquishment of willed mastery of the text, and through exegetical reason's guidance towards that encounter with God of which the text is an instrument.[240]

Brokenness, or relinquishing a willed mastery of the text, is similar to what Bonhoeffer describes as meditation. Listening to someone's words and accepting them at face value requires humility. In order to lovingly attend to someone's words, we must give up the need to see things our own

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[236] Ibid.
[237] Ibid.
[238] Ibid., 84. Quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom* (London: Collins, 1966), 59.
[239] Ibid., 86.
[240] Ibid., 88.

way or analyze the other as though they were an object. Loving attentiveness, free from analytical pursuit, involves humility and brokenness. This too is a characteristic of the manner which begins with the fear of God, highlighting its relational nature.

In this context Webster elaborates on the role of mortification and vivification in the reader's Christian experience:

> An especially important aspect of the mortification and vivification of the reader is the discipline of what might be called 'focused attentiveness'. The Christian act of reading Holy Scripture is to be characterized by a certain exclusiveness, a deliberate directing of attention to the text and equally deliberate laying aside of other concerns. Negatively, this involves a refusal to allow the mind and the affections to be seized by other preoccupations. Reading Scripture thus involves mortification of the free-range intellect which believes itself to be at liberty to devote itself to all manner of sources of fascination.[241]

Attentiveness to God is focused. Webster depicts mortification as the humble putting away of distraction.[242] The manner which begins with the fear of God is both attentively focused, and through the act of reading Scripture, continually dependent on God the Spirit to perform this action of mortification in order to be more available in creaturely fullness.

Likewise, we can have confidence that the work of vivification makes it possible to read Scripture well. "This confidence is not the antithesis of fear and trembling: like all truthful human action, it emerges out of fear of God. And, because it is wholly dependent upon the illumination of the Spirit."[243] Webster refers directly to the fear of God as that which brings about truthful human action – in this case, reading Scripture well. It is a confidence in vivification which is the process of the creature being made alive to God.

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[241] Ibid., 90.
[242] "Humility has at its root interior fear of God." Matthew Levering, "On Humility", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* Volume 19 Number 4 October 2017: 462-490. doi:10.1111/ijst.12254. Accessed 28 February, 2022, 480.
[243] Webster, *Holy Scripture,* 91.

> One of the chief fruits of the Spirit's conversion of the reader is teachableness, a teachableness which extends into the disposition with which Scripture is read. To read Scripture as one caught up by the reconciling work of God is to abandon mastery of the text, and, instead, to be schooled into docility.[244]

Vivification is a fruit of the Spirit making the reader teachable: going from mastery to docility. Webster includes that teachableness "extends into the disposition with which Scripture is read."[245] The reader is changed in their disposition. And this changes how the reader reads Scripture. The reader approaches God in a fearful manner, looking to be made teachable in their disposition and in their reading.

We are beginning to get a description of the manner of theology which begins with the fear of God. This manner is reverent in its attention to God and what God reveals about Godself. This manner listens without analyzing and is humble, relinquishing its own way, its own ideas, its own distractions. This manner makes room for confidence in the creaturely task of reading Scripture and of being made teachable. Having confidence extends to the creaturely task of theology as well.

Theology

The task of theology is undertaken in various settings including the university and the Church. In the chapter "The Holiness of Theology" in Webster's book *Holiness,* Webster shares some thoughts about the holiness of reason which tie in with our look at biblical reasoning in chapter two and move us forward in considering the work of theology within the context of the subjective cognitive principle of the redeemed intellect.

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[244] Ibid., 101.
[245] Ibid.

Webster notes four things about holy reason. The first is that the primary act of holy reason is prayer for the assistance of the Holy Spirit. The second is that the setting of holy reason is the fellowship of the saints. The third is that the manner of holy reason is fear of the holy God. And fourth, the end of holy reason is the sanctifying of God's holy name.[246]

The primary act is prayer. "As the exercise of holy reason, Christian theology is a venture undertaken in prayerful dependence upon the Holy Spirit."[247] The Holy Spirit brings God's holiness "to bear on the work of reason."[248] God's holiness has two aspects: the counteraction of God to sin which is *mortificatio*, and God's sanctification or separation of creatures which is *vivificatio*. The works of holy reason are dying and rising again. Webster refers to Psalm 25: 4-5 as an example of a prayer asking God for instruction: "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me."[249] We will look further at the role of prayer in the section to come on habits.

The setting for the activity of theology is within the community of faith which is the Church. Theology serves the confession of the saints by asking if the church is conforming to the gospel. And it does this work by submitting to the gospel.[250]

Now we come to an important point for this thesis: that the manner of holy reason is fear of the holy God. The manner of theology as holy reason is "a work in which holiness is perfected in the fear of God."[251] The outcome of the acts of holy reason plus the manner of holy reason (fear of God) results in holiness perfected. What does Webster mean by this? He continues, "The perfection of holiness – that is, its completion or fulfillment – involves the fear of God (2 Cor.

[246] Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 21.
[247] Ibid., 22.
[248] Ibid., 23.
[249] Ibid., 24.
[250] Ibid., 25-7.
[251] Ibid., 27.

7.1). Holiness is set out by Paul in 2 Cor. 6 as a cleansing which involves both a radical separation from that which is unclean, and also fellowship with God the Father. And holiness reaches its completeness in the fear of the Lord who is the beginning of wisdom."[252] Webster brings together the biblical use of the phrase "fear of God" as used in Old Testament wisdom literature (beginning of wisdom) as well as the holiness Paul calls the Corinthians to perfect through the practice of radical separation from idolatrous worship. Webster also notes that the holy cleansing Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians 6 includes fellowship with God the Father (18).[253] Holy cleansing includes both separation from sin (mortification) and fellowship with God as sons and daughters (vivification).[254]

God is to be feared. "Because God is majestic and therefore to be feared above all things, to encounter him is to be encountered by that which we can never master, which can never become an object, an idea or pattern of words or experience that we can retrieve and inspect at will."[255] Treating God as a disposable asset is idolatry. In light of this human tendency, which includes both creaturely finitude and sin in the form of idolatry, fearing God as the manner of doing theology requires modesty, weakness, a sense of inadequacy.[256] "This requirement – that God be feared and his name hallowed – is in many respects the requirement for theological reason. Reason can only be holy if it resists its own capacity for idolatry…"[257]

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[252] Ibid., 27. 2 Cor. 7.1: "Since we have these promises beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God." Or from the NIV: "… perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."

[253] 2 Corinthians 6:18: "and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.'" Colin G. Kruse, *2 Corinthians : An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. Revised [edition]. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: IVP Academic), 185.
In his commentary on this verse, Colin Kruse writes: "What greater incentive could there be to abandon all idolatrous practices than knowing there was a welcome from the Lord Almighty who will treat them as his children?".

[254] Fellowship with God as sons and daughter corresponds to the idea of "filial fear" which is the devotion and respect one has towards their parents and that creatures have toward God the Father.

[255] Webster, *Holiness*, 28.

[256] Ibid., 28.

[257] Ibid.

Webster moves to consider Ex. 3.5 'Do not come near' as the prohibition theology stands under. Along with this prohibition is the "imperious command to speak" which is found in Ex. 4:11-12.[258] Theological reason involves this command to speak gospel truth. Webster continues, "Idolatry is reproved, not by silence, but by speeches that set forth what God has taught. And in such speeches, holy reason gives voice to the fear of God."[259] Webster is indicating that the manner of the fear of God keeps the theologian from idolatry both through prohibition and through speaking up about truth learned in the context of fellowship with God the Father.

Fourth and finally, the end of holy reason is the sanctifying of God's holy name. The goal of theology as holy reason is praise and blessing of God as acknowledgement and indication of this Holy One.[260] Theology is a human work of thinking about God but it both praises God and serves the Church.

Theological ends

In Webster's essay, "What makes theology theological?" Webster takes up the task of describing the nature of theology by taking account of its ends.[261]

> Ends are not the same as purposes… an end, by contrast, is not intentional but natural, belonging to the nature of something itself independent of human desire. To speak of the end of a thing is to indicate the completeness or perfection which it comes to have when its nature is fully achieved, when it is what it is to the maximal degree.[262]

An example of an end of theology is for the creature to love God and enjoy fellowship with God forever. This end belongs to the nature of the creature in relation to God. Purposes, on the other hand, are human intention which take the form of wishes which become acts. When it comes to

[258] Ibid.
[259] Ibid., 29.
[260] Ibid.
[261] Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?" *Journal of Analytic Theology*, vol.3, May 2015: 17-28, 18.
[262] Ibid., 22.

deciphering the difference between ends and purposes, "in human creatures, ends and purposes are not easy to disentangle."[263] We go through processes of deliberation and choice. Ends are meant to govern purposes. Yet, purposes can be driven by our desires. Due to the incomplete regenerative state of the creature, it means creatures find it difficult to distinguish between ends, purposes and desires.[264] Theological ends can be scientific, contemplative and practical. "Theology will be theological when it makes these ends into its purposes, directing and moderating its activities accordingly."[265]

Scientific ends involve learning and acquiring knowledge of its theological matter which is knowledge of God and all things relative to God. This kind of knowledge is proper to creatures and is sometimes referred to as 'truth'. The way in which this knowledge is gained is through study. Being studious is part of human nature. Through the activity of study, "revelation awakens theological science."[266] Pursuing scientific ends is done in the order we have been discussing so far which is beginning with God as theology's ontological principle and object. Webster offers a couple of cautions here: scientific ends are 'instrumental' and 'interim' because they lead to creatures knowing God.[267] Too much devotion to scientific ends for their own sake misses the intrinsic end of theology. "Much harm to theology is done by this disordered purpose."[268] In addition, when we try to master the science of God, "the dependence of theology on divine instruction is neglected."[269]

[263] Ibid., 23.
[264] Ibid.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Ibid.
[267] Ibid.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Ibid.

Contemplative ends are pursued in addition to scientific ends. Webster describes contemplation with the help of Aquinas, Gregory the Great and Augustine in the following excerpt:

> Contemplation – what Aquinas call 'the simple act of gazing' (*Summa theologiae* IIaIIae.3 ad 1) – requires the mind to move through created things to the divine reality of whose self-communication they are signs and bearers. Contemplation is rapt attention to God the cause of all things rather than to the things of which he is the cause. '[I]n contemplation "the Beginning", which is God, is the object we seek' (Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job* VI.61). This contemplative end of theology expresses a certain teleology of human nature, according to which that nature is completed in knowledge of God. 'The contemplation of God is promised us as being the goal of all our actions and the everlasting perfection of all our joys' (Augustine, *On the Trinity* I.8).[270]

Contemplation is a proper end of theological intelligence, the elimination of which is an inhibition of the character of theology. The assumption that the human intellect can go no further than textual study or moral practices is an impatient assumption.[271]

Contemplation on the scientific ends of theology leads to understanding which leads to good deeds in the realm of human conduct. These are the practical ends to theology. "Contemplated truth forms and governs the enactment of our lives, because this truth presents us with the law of our existence."[272] We are each placed in a particular situation within a community and established in a vocation. "In Christian theology the appropriation of ends cannot take place without mortification and vivification, the repetition in the life of the mind of the baptismal pattern of all Christian existence."[273] Practical ends of theology involve learning to love.

[270] Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?", 24.
[271] Ibid., 24.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Ibid., 25.

The manner which begins with the fear of God is the requirement for the task of theology. Theology is conducted in prayer. Its setting is the Church. Its manner is modest, weak, humble, aware of the need for both separation from idols and fellowship with God. Webster describes this manner as one in which holiness is perfected in the fear of God. Idolatry is reproved through separation and through giving voice to the truth.

Mortification and Vivification

In this section we are doing a close reading of Webster's essay, "Mortification and Vivification."[274] Webster writes of Christian ethics as being "a *contemplative* as much as *practical* science, an orientation of redeemed reason to *being* as much as to *action*."[275] "Why must Christian ethics contemplate being? In order that our moral lives can be conducted away from idols towards reality."[276] The Christian gospel, which we learned something about in chapter two, provides how-to instructions on how creatures may pass from death to fullness of life, by God's goodness (Eph. 2.1ff.). This new life which God bestows on the creature "flourishes only as it is exercised in dedicated fellowship with its creator."[277]

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[274] Webster, "Mortification and Vivification" in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume II: Virtue and Intellect* (London: T&T Clark, 2016). Brash offers other synonym pairings for the concept of mortification and vivification: "Critical and consoling; ⁱ devastation and renewal; judgement and the giving of life." (Richard Fraser Brash. "Ex Humano Tempo Loquitur: The Eloquent God and Holy Scripture in the Theology of John Webster." The University of Edinburgh, 2020. doi:10.7488/era/223.), 210). "Webster at times moves beyond this relatively simple positive–negative pairing of mortification and vivification to discuss more specific spiritual means that are a necessary accompaniment of good reading, and that function within the overall process of readers having their sin put to death and receiving new life in Christ. These practices include prayer, a readiness to receive divine instruction and a willingness to live out the text's message (John Webster, 'Illumination', in *The Domain of the Word*, p. 63). But in Webster's overall corpus, these are a sideline, which developed later in his career, while the note that sounds more regularly and strongly is that of mortification andvivification (A theological concept companionable to mortification and vivification is illumination, which features mainly in Webster, 'Illumination', pp. 50–64.)." (Darren Sarisky, "The Ontology of Scripture and the Ethics of Interpretation in the Theology of John Webster" *IJST* Volume 21, no. 1 (January 2019): 59-77, 66).

[275] John Webster, "Where Christ Is" in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume II: Virtue and Intellect* (London: T&T Clark, 2016),12.

[276] Webster, "Where Christ Is", 15.

[277] Webster, "Mortification and Vivification", 103.

In order to understand more of the two creaturely conditions of death and life, let us consider the following from Webster:

> At the Father's behest, God the Son takes to himself the creature's wasted nature and bears (carries and suffers) its mortal corruption. In him, death runs its full course, his death – because it is *his* death, the death of the one appointed by the Father to take away the sins of the world – is the death of death, the termination of death's regime. Overcoming death, he manifests himself to be limitlessly alive and so the undefeated divine giver of life.[278]

In rising from death, Christ set in motion our new nature. The "new form of creaturely being and activity is not autonomous or separate from its author."[279] Regenerate life is life together (Eph. 2:4ff.) also known as fellowship.[280]

This new condition is appropriated by divine grace. "In the course of this appropriation, the regenerate must address themselves to an aspect of their situation which, more than any other, threatens to disrupt the tranquil unfolding of the new nature: though overwhelmed and set aside, the corrupt nature and its habits linger."[281] Regeneration is not only a "received and completed condition", but also a call to die to the old nature and rise to the new nature, "not only once for all but also continually."[282] The creature's response to this reality can be one of "reverent enactment" and this process entails mortification and vivification.[283] The posture of reverent attention that we encountered in the section on reading in the economy of grace, is now followed by reverent enactment. Reverent enactment is action taken out of the desire to always do that which is pleasing to God and others who also serve God in their own lives.

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[279] Ibid., 103.
[280] "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved through faith – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." Eph. 2:4
[281] Webster, "Mortification and Vivification", 104.
[282] Ibid., 104.
[283] Ibid.

Christian practice can be "marred by self-absorption" in two ways: 1) Either too much confidence in self-realization, or 2) too much anxiety about performance. Perhaps even both! Both errors reveal a mistrust in the new condition which God bestows on the creature and can cause the creature to detach the practice of mortification and vivification from regeneration. In order to combat this tendency, Webster suggests that we begin by contemplating God. The best way to lose preoccupation with Christian practice is to start with God and God's works. "It is of the essence of creaturely activity that it is derivative, action which is set in motion and continues by virtue of antecedent principles"; God being both author and source.[284]

> The new nature includes a gift of powers and habits: 'power' in the sense of the 'ability given unto us of living unto God' (John Owen, *Pneumatologia*, p. 491), 'habit' in the sense of the orientation, inclination or disposition of our new nature to regenerate living. Such powers and habits are not acquired by practice but infused by the Spirit, laid into the mind, will and affections, and preserved by God. Their presence indicates that regeneration entails obligation to a course of life, among whose chief acts are mortification and vivification.[285]

The new nature is not acquired by practice or by effort. Instead, the presence of habits in the life of the regenerate creature indicates that this process involves the ordering of life before God as well as the work of the Spirit.

Webster offers a couple of illustrations to help his readers understand the two ways in which the creature undergoes regeneration. The first illustration is that of becoming free from a fever, and then the recovery period which involves growing strong again following the illness the fever produced. The second illustration is that of a knife being removed from a body in the case of a stab wound, and then the period of healing of that wound. In both cases there is a removal (fever, weapon) which is the first cure. This cure is immediate and in the context of regeneration,

[284] Ibid.
[285] Ibid., 107. See Webster note 10.

this takes place at baptism. The second cure involves healing and this is a gradual experience that is referred to as the process of sanctification or perfection.

"This movement of the Christian life toward perfection is not the easy enlargement of the condition of regeneration: it is conflictual, a matter of warfare or combat. 'Whoever wishes to please God and truly make himself an enemy against the adversary must wage battle.'"[286] Renewal takes place day by day – it is a gradual process. The two states of the creature cause internal discord: "Already the new man … he is still the old."[287] As regenerate creatures we are both new and old. Evil is not removed all at once, which Paul attests to in Rom. 7.21-24:

> So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Webster's portrayal of the regenerate condition being conflicted and yet on the way to perfection, is different from a perfectionist view which believes in the possibility of sinlessness and the resolution of internal conflict before death. The problem with the perfectionist view, for Webster is that "perfectionism simplifies the regenerate condition by holding out the …prospect of early resolution of its mixed, conflict-laden character."[288] Webster's view that there is no early resolution, but rather a gradual process of sanctification, means that we are dependent on God to bring us to perfection. Regeneration doesn't end sin, but it alters "the Christian's relation to the sin which continues."[289] The sins which the regenerate commit have "no deep ground" because they are in Christ.[290] "No deep ground" implies that sin cannot take root in a way that would be

[286] Webster, "Mortification and Vivification", 109 with Webster quoting Pseudo -Macarius, *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992), XXI.9.
[287] Webster, "Mortification and Vivification", 109 quoting Karl Barth, *CD* IV/2, 571.
[288] Ibid., 110.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid., 111.

problematic to the work God is doing in the creature. Instead, the regenerate are rooted in Christ (Col. 2.7).

> Perfectionism treats regeneration as a visibly completed accomplishment rather than as a divine transformation which anticipates a conclusion. The cost of this early resolution of Christian conflict is not only a diminished sense of the Christian life as temporal process involving repeated confession and absolution (1 Jn. 1.8 ff), but also a failure to grasp that sanctification no less than justification is inseparable from faith, that is, from reliance upon an extrinsic life-principle which is not identical with our persons and conduct.[291]

Reliance on God through faith, stems from the fear of God. And this applies to our sanctification process as well as to our justification. Our deliverance, by Jesus giving himself for our sins according to the will of the Father, includes an "objective change in condition and the renewal of creaturely nature and capacities."[292] In this way Christians are "freed from accusation by the drive to sin diminished by Spirit-bestowed habits of holiness."[293]

Webster refers to Aquinas' observation, "'The baptized are enlightened by Christ in the knowledge of truth and made fruitful by him in the fruitfulness of good works by the infusion of grace.'"[294] Webster asserts that the principal forms of these good works are mortification and vivification. This assertion is one of Webster's most unique theological contributions.[295] The reason this assertion is unique is that 'love' has traditionally occupied this position as the principal form of good works.[296] What are we to make of Webster's assertion? Before we can

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[291] Ibid. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." 1 Jn. 1:8-10
[292] Ibid.
[293] Ibid.
[294] Ibid. quoting Aquinas, *ST* IIIa.69.5 resp.
[295] Oliver O'Donovan, "John Webster on Dogmatics and Ethics", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* Vol. 21 no.1 (Jan 2019): 78-92, 78. Oliver O'Donovan refers to Webster's assertion as "troubling".
[296] O'Donovan, 90. O'Donovan's main critique is with Webster's suggestion that mortification and vivification are chief actions – "that they give form to whatever action is required of us as baptized and redeemed creatures." O'Donovan continues: "To which s ask what has authorized the displacement of love from this chief position which it is assigned in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles." O'Donovan expresses concern with what will happen to loving duty if love is displaced. In addition, the area of focus is also a concern for O'Donovan as he describes mortification and vivification as "self-referring where love is other-referring" and asks if prioritizing mortification

have a robust answer to this question, we need to learn more about what Webster means by mortification and vivification. "Mortification and vivification do not effect regeneration (how could creatures cause themselves to be born anew? Jn.3.5…) but endorse the regeneration which has already been instituted."[297] Mortification and vivification are bound up with 1) looking to Jesus and 2) being awake to the Spirit. Looking to Jesus involves recalling the Sons' achievements of dying and rising again. This is to be the shape of Christian conduct. The Spirit facilitates the Son's work of regeneration by applying and advancing it to completion.

In no way is mortification and vivification about self-strength or self-invention. Instead, they are practices of faith. The nature of the creature is finite which is why the fear of God is needed; the creature cannot save itself. Webster elaborates on what is meant by 'faith':

> [Mortification and vivification] are not a frantic struggle to maintain fellowship with God: that struggle lies behind the believer, finished on Easter Day. Christians do not persevere because they put off the old nature and put on the new, they put off the old nature and put on the new because in faith they trust that they will persevere.[298]

These practices are not motivated by fear of abandonment or failure, but rather by faith in the one who is faithful. "Faith refers creatures and their practices to the divine work which precedes them and brings them to life."[299] The fear of God is not a fear of losing fellowship because of the faithlessness of the other, but a healthy fear which maintains fellowship. Fear as a healthy reality for the affective creature means that in loving and preserving life, they would flee from danger that could result in loss.[300] However, if the creature becomes presumptuous, Webster writes,

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and vivification will "lead us to assign care-of-the-self a priority in thought and action over engagement with the world?"

[297] Webster, "Mortification and Vivification", 112. "Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God'" Jn. 3:5.

[298] Ibid., 113.

[299] Ibid.

[300] John Webster, "Courage" in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume II: Virtue and Intellect* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 95.

"More deeply, there is in presumption a disturbance of the creature's relation to God: sometimes a failure to realize that we are to rely upon divine help; or perhaps excessive confidence in God's mercy, and lack of fear of God."[301] Courage or "the grace of courage" is a human virtue associated with action and is not synonymous with the fear of God although courage flows from the manner which begins with the fear of God.[302] Courage is paired with other graces: magnanimity, magnificence, patience, and perseverance.[303] Courage is the ability to resist evil and face fear. "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of who shall I be afraid?... Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!" Ps. 27:1, 14. The Lord is faithful and can be trusted to come through for the creature.

Mortification and vivification are "creaturely movements moved by God."[304] They are not self-initiated, and at the same time they are "proper creaturely movements whose integrity is not compromised but upheld by the work of the Spirit who causes them, invests them with power, accompanies them and brings them to fulfillment."[305] This moving of God can be opposed just as it can be welcomed. "Cultural and spiritual bad habit inclines us to oppose God's moving and our moving of ourselves, fearing that acts caused by God are not properly ours.[306] But 'God is at work in you, both to will and to do' (Phil. 2.13). God works 'interiorly', animating

[301] Webster, "Courage", 98. Webster's footnotes 52 and 53 refer to Summa theologiae IIaIIae 130.1 ad 3 and 130.2 ad1.
[302] Ibid., 88.
[303] Ibid., 97.
[304] Webster, "Mortification and Vivification", 113.
[305] Ibid., 113.
[306] In another essay, Webster describes creaturely movement moved by God in the following way: "Like all creaturely virtue, courage is a moved human movement: no less a movement for being moved, no less moved for being a movement." (Webster, "Courage", 100).

and preserving the exercise of created will and aptitudes; grace does not devastate creatures but rectifies them and sets them to work."[307]

Mortification and vivification are works of 'evangelical obedience.' First, Webster defines 'evangelical' as the: "lively apprehension of and attachment to what the gospel announces about God's renovation of creatures."[308] Next, Webster describes obedience as "dutiful, loving compliance", with regard to gospel instruction.[309] The gospel declares and exhorts: declares rebirth, and exhorts the believer to walk in new life.[310] Mortification and vivification are good works. Webster writes that good works are "human practices which proceed from trust in 'the completed good work of God'[311], which observe the law of the gospel, which have God's honor as their end, and which cause creaturely nature to flourish."[312]

Mortification and vivification are simultaneous rather than sequential.[313] Mortification is not a first stage which then is done away with during the creature's earthly life. Our mixed state persists throughout life making mortification an ongoing process and an 'interim necessity.' Vivification, however, is the "implementation of the new nature and stretches out to perfection."[314] Vivification has material priority because the new nature will endure. "The object of mortification is the sin which remains in regenerate persons." Sin is illegitimate and intrusive. "Because [mortification] is directed against what trespasses upon the renovated

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[307] Webster, "Mortification and Vivification", 113-114. "For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Phil. 2:13. This verse preceded by: "…work out your salvation with fear and trembling." Phil, 2:12.
[308] Ibid., 114.
[309] Ibid.
[310] Ibid.
[311] Ibid., quoting Karl Barth, *CD* IV/2, 589.
[312] Ibid.
[313] O'Donovan takes issue with Webster "lifting mortification and vivification out of their narrative sequence, to become complementary" saying that by doing this Webster "risks a great deal". O'Donovan continues, "If what one is doing in mortifying-and-vivifying is simply reviewing and resetting one's moral compass, that is essentially one act, not two." For O'Donovan the narrative sequence is present because we model ourselves on Jesus' death and resurrection (O'Donovan, Oliver, "John Webster on Dogmatics and Ethics", 89).
[314] Webster, "Mortification and Vivification", 116.

creature, mortification is not an assault on created nature but precisely the opposite: an assault on the sin which opposes created nature's regeneration."[315]Embodied life is not what is being opposed, but the sin which stands in the way of ordering and forming righteous conduct. Augustine characterizes mortification as 'healthy chastening', not 'hostile persecution'.[316] Recovery and flourishing are what are intended for the creaturely nature.

How does this process actually unfold? The first act of mortification is faith in Christ. Webster notes that, "John Owen's treatise on mortification is deeply stirred by the thought that Christ's priesthood is fundamental to ascetical practice, reassuring believers with the expectation that mortification takes place in the domain of Christ's mercy, tenderness, fidelity and assistance."[317]

Mortification is a work of continence. By continence, Webster means a restraint of appetites and a setting aside of wickedness. There is also the idea of 'virginal' in the sense of having integrity in every action.[318] The need for restraint is due to the fact that "sins persistence depends upon consent."[319] The prospect of pleasure is held out by sin on order to win compliance. Mortification withholds consent. This action "clears a space for the operation of the new nature."[320] The withholding of consent is an act of self-denial.

> Despite their new condition and nature, the regenerate continue to love evil things, or to love good things immoderately, and as they do so they consent to the falsehood that they

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[315] Ibid., 116.
[316] Ibid., 116-117. Quoting from Augustine, *De continentia* XII.26.
[317] Ibid., 117, referring to John Owen, *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers* [1656] in *The Works of John Owen*, vol.6 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 82.
"The name of Jesus is a field of force; to speak or call upon his name is to appeal to an authority which is antecedently capable and effective. In the matter of mercy, therefore, Christian theology knows no other way of proceeding than to speak of 'the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Jude 1.21). (John Webster, "Mercy" in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume II: Virtue and Intellect* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 49.) "Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life." Jude 1:21.
[318] Ibid. See Webster note 38.
[319] Ibid.
[320] Ibid.

> will only be fulfilled, at rest and intact, if they maintain these loves. Renunciation breaks such attachments, freeing believers from the entanglements which may be contracted by the use of the world, and so freeing themselves for service to God.[321]

The detachment from cherished things and habits is rarely painless. In this way, the regenerate believer bears the cross and experiences affliction. Webster includes a section of Cassian's instruction to 'renunciants': "Piercing our flesh in the fear of the Lord, we may have all our wishes and desires not subservient to our own lusts but fastened to [the Son's] mortification."[322] Cassian appears to suggest that the renouncing of our attachments flows out of a manner which begins with the fear of God and takes the shape of the crucified Lord. It is a manner of humble posture that imitates Christ.

Self-denial can also involve 'cultivating indifference' to our attachments. By indifference, Webster is not suggesting that we can check out emotionally, nor shirk our communal duties and responsibilities. It is not selfish. Rather, it is to not be so attached to created things and relationships "that our welfare becomes unthinkable without them."[323] Mortification takes the form of discipline or training. "Training in godliness pertains to intelligence, emotions, and social relations as much as to bodily life."

"Though mortification requires engagement in conflict, its end is peace."[324] This conflict may be external but most likely internal because of the old and new natures being in conflict. One example is the presence of anxiety. Webster elaborates: "The movement of mortification reaches out beyond present discord to rest and the full tranquil enjoyment of our new nature."[325]

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[321] Ibid., 118.
[322] Ibid. Quoting from Cassian, *Institutes* (NPNF 2.11), IV.34.
[323] Webster, "Mortification and Vivification", 119.
[324] Ibid., 119.
[325] Ibid., 120.

Cassian writes of the process of vivification (which, for Webster, is undivided from mortification):

> '"The beginning" of our salvation and "of wisdom" is, according to Scripture, "the fear of the Lord". From the fear of the Lord arises salutary compunction. From compunction of heart springs renunciation, i.e., nakedness and contempt of all possessions. From nakedness is begotten humility, from humility the mortification of desires. Through mortification of desires all faults are extirpated and decay. By driving out faults virtues shoot up and increase. By the budding of virtues purity of heart is gained. By purity of heart the perfection of apostolic love is acquired. [326]

From the fear of God arises a sharp pricking of the heart that is beneficial for us. If the appropriate posture begins with the fear of God, then through prayer and fellowship with God, it is conceivable that we experience divine judgement on our motives and conduct – a pricking of the heart that it good for us. Webster calls this "an instance of the proper use of conscience."[327] It is possible to see how Cassian's description is all one process, a single process that is repeated over and over so that little by little sin is rooted out and virtue grows, with the end result being love.

Webster identifies the most basic movement of vivification as 'yielding to God' (Rom. 6.13).[328] "Yet this yielding is not mere resignation; it is surrender to a divine movement which sets creatures in motion. This creaturely movement extends into human existence in its entirety: the domains of religion, charity and justice."[329] By religion, Webster agrees with Augustine that religion is a relationship with God that is characterized by aliveness and devotion.[330] Charity and justice involve human relationships in the church community and in civil and domestic life. Sin

[326] Ibid., 120. Quoting from Cassian, *Institutes* IV.43.
[327] Ibid., 119.
[328] "Neither yield ye your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness unto God." Rom. 6:13 (KJV)
[329] Webster, "Mortification and Vivification",.120.
[330] Ibid., 120-121.

damages relationships but vivification brings about growth in love (1 Jn 3.14).[331] Webster includes a list of various aspects of love: "Compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and much else (Col.3.12ff; Gal. 5.24ff; 1 Cor. 6.6ff; Eph. 4.25-32; 1 Pet. 3.8-12). To walk in newness of life is to 'walk in love' (Eph.5.2)."[332]

Now let us return to Webster's assertion that the principal form of good works are mortification and vivification rather than love. Webster suggests that by yielding to God through mortification and vivification, creaturely movement is set in motion. And this movement includes growth in love which is both love for God and love for neighbor. If love is the virtue most desired (Col.3.14), then undergoing the process of mortification and vivification makes loving possible and is in itself a loving movement.[333] Webster's humble manner can be seen at work in his reasoning: by "yielding" to God, by "being" a creature in relation to God and approaching God from that position, then creaturely movement is set in motion. The reverent enactment of the process of mortification and vivification endorses the work of regeneration. This humble manner is to be the basis for reverent activity in the life of the regenerate creature. The creature relies on God for this process to unfold which may involve the renouncing of created attachments, a healthy use of conscience and of fear, and a yielding as surrender to the divine movement of God.

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[331] "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death." 1 Jn. 3:14.

[332] Webster, "Mortification and Vivification", 121. "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Eph. 5:2.

[333] "And above all put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." Col. 3:14.
O'Donovan ends his critique with, "there is a time to be self-critical and self- exhortatory, and there is a time to respond to immediate demands that come from outside ourselves." O'Donovan's assertion about love holding the chief position is that,

> The sovereign place accorded to love in Christian moral teaching, then, secures the moral starting-point in the complex new reality God has wrought, the new world that meets us surprisingly at every turn from behind and within the interstices of the old world we thought we knew. And if we begin there, we shall then find love 'poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit', matching the external field of action with an internal field of renewed sensibility. (O'Donovan, Oliver, "John Webster on Dogmatics and Ethics", 92.)

Holiness and Love

Just as God shares God's perfection with us through the process of sanctification, so too God shares God's holiness with us, making us holy. "Communicated holiness is not transferred or possessed holiness, but derived holiness; and the primary mark of creaturely holiness is thus its external orientation, its ordering towards God as its source and the object of its praises."[334] Webster turns to the personal life of the saint in the last chapter, "The Holiness of the Christian".

Webster acknowledges that there may be some issues with 'individual piety', particularly, the historical practice of piety, the similar contemporary interest in spirituality as self-fulfillment, as well as the self-concern which can afflict the life of piety. However, Webster concludes that there is "legitimacy to talk of individual sanctity."[335] To do so, Webster continues, "all that is required is good dogmatic order."[336] Therefore, sanctity must be rooted in: God, the holy trinity; and considered in the context of the communion of the saints. Webster carries this good dogmatic order into his proposition which reads thus:

> The sanctification of the Christian is the work of the Holy Trinity in which the reconciled sinner is renewed for the active life of holy fellowship with God. Grounded in the electing, reconciling and perfecting work of Father, Son and Spirit, the active life of holy fellowship is the work of faith, which is at every moment characterized by mortification and vivification, and which is actual as freedom, obedience and love.[337]

Let us move through the proposition in order by way of four parts. The first part is: The sanctification of the Christian is the work of the Holy Trinity in which the reconciled sinner is renewed for the active life of holy fellowship with God. The active life of fellowship with God is grounded in the sanctifying work of Father, Son and Spirit.

[334] John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 77.
[335] Webster, *Holiness*, 78.
[336] Ibid., 78.
[337] Ibid., 78-79.

(a) The Father's work is the work of election which "does not originate in any human decision or determination, but rests on a divine determination of utter gratuity and sovereign freedom."[338] "Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him." (Eph. 1.4) Because human holiness does not originate with us but with God, human holiness doesn't shift to self-agency or cooperation. It does not involve human autonomy. Here we are reminded of the point in the first chapter that creatures are dependent on God to share God's holiness with creatures.

(b) The Son's work is the work of reconciliation which is resolved by the Father and accomplished in the Son.

> Sanctification rests on the divine act of salvation accomplished in the death and resurrection of the Son and pronounced in the gospel promulgation of acquittal. Consequently, the agent of Christian holiness is not the Christian but God. In effect, the rooting of sanctification in justification prohibits any conversion of sanctification into ethical self-improvement, as if justification were merely an initial infusion of capacities which are then activated through moral or spiritual exertion.[339]

Jesus makes the creature holy not only by acquitting but also consecrating, as Jesus himself was consecrated (Jn. 10.36).[340] And this renews the creature's vocation – to be holy.[341]

(c) The Spirit's work is the work of sanctification. Resolved by the Father, accomplished in the Son, realized in the Spirit. Webster reiterates, "the Christian's sanctity… is always and only an alien sanctity. Sanctification does not signal the birth of self-sufficiency, rather it indicates a 'perpetual and inherent lack of self-sufficiency.'"[342] Creatures need the fear of God for two reasons: creaturely finitude and corruption by sin.

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[338] Ibid., 79.
[339] Ibid., 81.
[340] "… of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world…" Jn. 10:36.
[341] Webster, *Holiness*, 82.
[342] Ibid., 83. Quoting from G.C. Berkouwer, Faith and Sanctification (Eerdmans ,1952), 83.

The second part of the proposition is: Grounded in the electing, reconciling and perfecting work of Father, Son and Spirit, the active life of holy fellowship is the work of faith.

> Christian holiness is holy fellowship; it is the renewal of the relation to God which is the heart of holiness. To be a creature is to have one's being in relation to God, for 'to be' is 'to be in relation' to the creator, and only so to have life and act. To be a sinner is to repudiate this relation, and so absolutely to imperil one's life by seeking to transcend creatureliness and become one's own origin and one's own end.[343]

Concerning the holiness of the Christian, to be a saint is to be a sinner who has been reconciled to God and brought into fellowship with God again. This renewal is the work of God. What this involves on the side of the Christian is to be renewed for "the active life of obedience."[344] And the active life, Webster's proposition states, is the work of faith. Faith leads to renewal which leads to the active life of obedience. The reconciling work of God is a 'double grace' as Calvin puts it. The first grace is that the gospel declares and the creature believes. This is done though faith. *Sola fide* means faith alone.[345] The second grace is that the gospel also commands and the creature acts. In both cases, it is the work of grace – the great history of God's mercy – extending the gift of life to the creature.[346]

"Sola fide means that in all acts, the being of the sanctified sinner refers to the lordly creativity of God – to the Father's electing mercy before all time, the Son's finished work, and the Spirit's presence and promise."[347]

The third part of Webster's proposition is: which is at every moment characterized by mortification and vivification. Holy, faithful activity includes, or "at every moment" is characterized by mortification and vivification which are not two separate acts. "Nor are

[343] Ibid., 84.
[344] Ibid., 85.
[345] Ibid., 86.
[346] Ibid., 87.
[347] Ibid., 88.

mortification and vivification themselves distinct acts, distinguishable from other works of the Christian; rather, they are characteristics of all the patterns of activity that comprise the life of holiness."[348] In keeping with the pattern of dying with Christ and rising with Christ, Webster elaborates: "Mortification and vivification signify the extension of the baptismal pattern into the life of the Christian, so that Christ's dying and rising, in – not despite – all their objectivity and perfection, are the shape of the Christian's own personal history."[349]
Mortification involves abandonment or self-abandonment. It is not self-hate or self-accusation but it is "a horror at sin which flows from absolution, and a resolve to live out the release which God has won for us."[350]

The fourth and final part of Webster's proposition is: and which is actual as freedom, obedience and love.

(a) Holiness equals freedom, which equals restored covenant fellowship.[351] "Drawn by the divine mercy into holy fellowship, I am bound to God – I am, in Paul's terms, a slave of Jesus Christ, my autonomy at last broken."[352] Webster explains that this is not the antithesis to freedom – it is its 'essential condition'. "No other power can come between me and my flourishing. In [Christ], God has set a distance between me and all other bonds in which I find myself, and that distance is 'the distance of freedom.'"[353]This may include freedom from those things which inhibit us, especially ourselves. "Evangelical freedom is the freedom that comes from not being finally responsible for my own being; by the mercy of God I am restored to know

[348] Ibid., 89.
[349] Ibid., 89.
[350] Ibid., 91.
[351] Ibid., 92.
[352] Ibid., 93.
[353] Ibid. Including a quote from H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, 459.

myself to be a creature in fellowship with my creator and savior."[354] This is very good news indeed.

(b) Obedience is the second way in which faithful activity is actual. "Holy obedience has two moments: teachableness and active service."[355] These are the practical ends to theology in the form of good deeds in the realm of human conduct. Together, freedom and obedience direct us outwards.

(c) "Liberated from willful and fearful self-seeking, I am consecrated for works of love."[356] Here Webster attempts to articulate how mortification and vivification make it possible to have faithful activity which is actually loving. The sincerity of our motivation to be loving and to act in a loving way does not become actual unless our faithful activity is characterized – indeed our Christian life is characterized – by mortification and vivification.

> Love is the free obedience in which I acknowledge my neighbor's cause and make it my own. Fellowship with God entails human fellowship. In the sphere of holiness, my neighbor is no longer a threat or an obstacle, nor a function of my self-interest. My neighbor is the presence to me of a truth which obliges me to act in his or her regard. Love, like freedom and obedience, involves mortification and vivification.[357]

Human fellowship is God-given. And this knowledge can be enough to move us out of complacency into activity. The way in which human fellowship is God-given is found in the correct ordering of natures. The finite dependence of the creature includes the need for fellowship with God and with creatures. Therefore, love and fellowship among people is an integral part of the fear of God. The state of dependence on God that creatures experience, is one of interdependence between creatures. Reverence as a desire to serve God extends as a desire to

[354] Ibid., 93-94.
[355] Ibid., 95.
[356] Ibid., 96.
[357] Ibid.

serve others. The humble posture creatures have before God is the posture creatures can have with other creatures: attentive, teachable, modest.

Webster offers some examples of basic acts of human fellowship: "such as mercy to strangers, fidelity, patient attentiveness to the unlovely, devotion to long-standing and largely unreciprocated care of the comatose and handicapped..."[358] These basic human acts involve an acknowledgement of the creaturely worth of the other regardless of whether they possess useful or pleasant characteristics. And through these interactions of fellowship with our neighbor we cannot measure whom is doing the giving and the receiving.[359]

Webster continues, "My neighbor obliges me because he or she is the presence to me of the appointment and vocation of the holy God."[360] We have been set apart by God for acts of holiness which involve both a dying to self and a rising to love for our neighbor.[361] Love flows from mortification and vivification.

Intellectual Virtue

This leads us to conclude with Webster's identification of the virtues and habits of a theologian who approaches the task of theology as a work to be undertaken in the fear of God.[362] A sketch of personal graces of the theologian, "is a necessary extension of an account of the

[358] John Webster, "The Human Person", 233.
[359] Robert Spaemann, "Is every human being a person?" *Thomist : a Speculative Quarterly Review*; Jul 1, 1996; 60, 3; pp.463-474, 470. "Those who are totally debilitated challenge and bring out what is best in humankind, the authentic foundation of our self-respect. That which they thus give to humanity by their taking, is more than what they receive." I would add that the foundation of our self-respect is the knowledge that creatures are created by God and have their being in God.
[360] Webster, *Holiness*, 97.
[361] Ibid., 96.
[362] Essays on virtue include: "Mercy", "*Dolent Gaudentque*. Sorrow in the Christian Life", "Courage", "Sins of Speech" and "Intellectual Patience", in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume II Virtue and Intellect*, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

theological intellect in the realm of regeneration."[363] The process of sanctification includes our intellectual life – the renewal of the mind (Eph. 4:22-24).[364] Sanctification is both a condition and a vocation of which theology is an instance.[365] Webster reiterates some of what we considered in chapter one, and extends those ideas in the following:

> God is the maker and instructor of created intellect, creating, preserving, and addressing [God]self to us. Our intellect is therefore possessed by us as creatures. To have intellect is to stand in relation to God its giver; as a property of our created nature, it remains an endowment, and in having it we are, as Calvin puts it, 'clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts' (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* II.ii.5). In the exercise of this endowment, we enact our creaturely condition, because that exercise is a self-movement which is moved by God who, Calvin continues 'fills, moves and quickens all things by the power of the Spirit, according to the character bestowed upon each kind by the law of creation' (II.ii.16).[366]

The intellectual nature which we are endowed with has had its performance distorted by the fall. How this distortion manifests itself is: the intellect is not as well directed, there is propensity to wander into error, and studiousness turns to curiosity. Curiosity is a desire to know about created realities without keeping the creator as the reference point. It is characterized by a certain restlessness. "Curiosity enters when theology distorts its proper ends, attaching itself so intently and exclusively to the ends of science that contemplation and the formation of conduct are allowed to atrophy."[367] Through the process of regeneration, the intellect seeks divine instruction (Ps. 119: 15, 24, 66), trusts in divine counsel, and senses the loveliness of divine teaching.[368] This is a description of fellowship with God. Concentrating on the ways of God restricts

[363] Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?", 25.
[364] "to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." Eph. 4:22-24.
[365] Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?", 25.
[366] Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?", 25.
[367] Ibid., 26.
[368] Ibid.

theology in such a way that it will have "something to say about everything."[369] This regenerate activity will be accompanied by religious practices.

> The practices of religion are those acts which are fitting expressions of the situation of fellowship with God into which, after the long exile of sin, we have been newly introduced by the reconciling missions of the Son and the Spirit. Fellowship with God and the religion to which it gives rise are the setting for all regenerate life: domestic, civil, practical, and intellectual. Theology cannot long retain its theological character in the absence of religion.[370]

Religion and religious practices flow from piety or reverence. Their expression is characterized by a humble posture which begins with the fear of God.

The manner which begins with the fear of God can be seen in the life of the creature in the form of the active life of obedience which is faithful, loving, and characterized at every moment by being slain and made alive. Fellowship with God which begins with the fear of God, is described by Webster in terms which highlight the use of redeemed intelligence (the mind) as well as the affections of the heart.

Habits of the theologian

In "Habits", the final chapter in *The Culture of Theology,* Webster writes that becoming good theologians involves acquiring habits of the mind, heart, and will. This acquiring and practicing is a "bruising business" because "those habits shape the soul as it were against the grain. They lead us in a way we would rather not go; they press us to become what we would rather not be."[371] Webster quotes Augustine, "It is necessary that we should be led by the *fear of*

[369] Ibid.
[370] Ibid., 27.
[371] John Webster. *The Culture of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 131-132.

God to seek the knowledge of His will… It is necessary to have our hearts subdued by *piety*."[372] This being led by, and being subdued by, implies being the willing recipient of the actions of another. This leads Webster to ask, can the theologian's soul be cultivated? And he declares this human cultivation to be an 'impossibility' in one important sense. "We can no more make ourselves or others into theologians than we can raise the dead; indeed, it's precisely because we cannot raise ourselves from the dead that we cannot make ourselves or others into theologians. The first and last act of theological existence is crying to God: "Be pleased, O God, to deliver me!" (Ps. 70.1)[373] In between this first and last act of crying to God, cultivation has its place. And having said that, "all the cultivation in the world can never be anything other than an appeal to God for the miracle of mercy."[374] This pattern of crying out to God, appealing to God for mercy, and crying out again, highlights the primacy of prayer.

"Prayer is speech addressed to God in which we ask for help with an urgency and intensity which only makes sense if we really are in dire straits. Prayer is that basic human action which corresponds to our unsuitability for what is required of us, and therefore to the utter necessity of the merciful intervention of God."[375] The 'unsuitability' Webster is referring to is the finitude of creatures and the sinfulness of creatures. These two realities mean that by nature we are dependent on God for our existence as well as for our flourishing. The spiritual formation that we seek is wholly dependent on God to do something. "The fundamental dynamic of formation is appeal for the gracious action of God."[376] Webster commends the prayer for "an

[372] Webster, John. *The Culture of Theology*, 132. Emphasis original. Quoting from Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1873), II.7.9. Augustine differentiates between the fear of God and piety.
[373] Webster, *The Culture of Theology*, 132.
[374] Ibid., 132.
[375] Ibid., 143.
[376] Ibid., 144.

especial measure of three things" that a theologian might ask God for: 1) fear of God, 2) teachability or deference, and 3) freedom from self-preoccupation.[377]

Webster writes, "The first is fear of God. Little progress is possible in theology unless one's will is broken, in order to be redirected by God to the true ends of human flourishing."[378] This is a natural starting point for Webster. He describes the fear of God as "the result of finding oneself set in the light of God's truth, and so is a readiness for that dying to self which is the dark side of resurrection."[379] The humbling process involves the breaking of the will in preparation for "dying to self". Pride is cut off and the creature is brough to a state of dependence on God. From this position, the creature is "set in the light of God's truth". "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight" (Pr. 9:10). Beginning with the fear of God is a beginning which is experienced repeatedly. We can ask God for an 'especial measure of' the fear of God because it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Dying to ourselves and our own will is a gradual process. Webster takes an interesting turn and continues, "In theological work, fear of God means realizing that what we do when we do speak and think about the God of the gospel is a matter for wonder rather than curiosity."[380] Webster continues to unpackage this point: "Thought and speech about God are propelled into existence by a question posed to us. And the question which is posed to us is not a simple proposition with which we may play until our interest falls upon something else more enticing; it is the question posed by the living, judging presence of God. Theological existence is existence in the light of the indicative imperative of the first commandment."[381] Webster does not state the question. Instead, he leaves

[377] Ibid., 145.
[378] Ibid.
[379] Ibid.
[380] Webster, *The Culture of Theology*, 145.
[381] Ibid., 146.

it for the reader or the hearer to ponder and engage. The first commandment: You shall have no other gods before me (Deut.5.7) gives us a strong nudge of where we might begin. In concentrating on the speaking person of Christ, the question Jesus asks Peter comes forward: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (Jn.21:15-17)

The second thing to ask God for, is 'patient teachability' or 'deference'. This includes deference to the gospel of Christ and deference to the saints in the community of faith. Through the work of reception, we can learn from their testimony. Webster calls this 'orthodoxy' and defines it as: "participation in a shared, comprehensive culture, within whose scope one learns…"[382] Webster also quotes from Aidan Nichols, a Dominican theologian, who writes that the first thing a theologian needs is "docility [:] an active, eager, lively willingness to be formed, instructed and inspired."[383]

The third thing to ask God for, is freedom from self-preoccupation. "Orthodoxy becomes dangerous when its maintenance is a matter of self-protection: anxious patrolling of the perimeter fence around our cultural space, sniping at intruders or at any poor souls trying to escape." Webster encourages his readers that there is instead the possibility of a cheerful belonging to a tradition which remains open to other articulations of the gospel.[384]

Webster acknowledges some other habits that are fitting for a theologian and for a Christian because theological existence is Christian existence. In response to the claim of the gospel, we are called to be ready. This includes, "readiness for the kinds of personal growth and change which inevitably afflict us in engagement with God."[385] This may include the abandoning

[382] Ibid.
[383] Ibid. Quoting from Aidan Nichols, "T.S. Eliot and Yves Congar on the Nature of Tradition," in *Scribe of the Kingdom: Essays on Theology and Culture*, vol.1 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 78-89, at 87.
[384] Ibid., 147.
[385] Ibid., 133.

of self-mastery. This might involve attention to our dispositions, as inattention to them can be damaging. [386] Readiness for growth and change might highlight patterns of fellowship with the theological school as a community of learners.[387] Webster offers his own account of what the theologian ought to be like – a Christian rule – coming from Calvin: "*non nostri sumus, sed Domini* [We are not our own, but the Lord's]."[388] What does this mean for human life? Webster writes, "If it is true that to be human is to subsist in the reality of Jesus Christ, then human beings are most fundamentally defined not by what they have been, nor by what they are, nor by what they make of themselves, but by what, under the impulse of the gospel, they become."[389] This means that the center of our lives lies in another, and that the endeavors of our lives lies in the sufficiency of another.[390] There is an eschatological focus to Webster's definition of what human beings are: what "they become".

The humble posture which begins with the fear of God resides in the mind, heart and will of the creature. Therefore, the theologian can ask God for more of those gifts and virtues which will endorse the regenerative work God is doing through the Spirit.

We are close to reaching the extent of what can be said about theological "manner" and just glimpsing what could be said about theological "method", which would be the focus of another kind of project. It is time to summarize what Webster has to say about the manner of the theological task.

[386] Ibid.
[387] Ibid.,136.
[388] Ibid., 138. Quoting from John Calvin, *Institutes* III.vii.1 evoking 1 Cor. 6.19.
[389] Ibid., 141.
[390] Webster, *The Culture of Theology*, 142.

Conclusion

Creatures are designed to be relationally rooted in God. The fear of God serves creatures by providing the relational conditions for fellowship with God, including the reproval of idols. This thesis has argued that Webster described this process of being brought to dependence as a work of faith: faith leading to renewal. It is the work of the Holy Spirit which cuts off pride. Idolatry is reproved by: the reading of Scripture, separation from idolatrous worship, fellowship with God as sons and daughters, and speaking the truth of God. This reproval of idolatry takes into account the imperative of the first commandment: You shall have no other God's before me. The knowledge of God and God's plan for creatures is made known through revelation. This includes the good news that God has acted to bring creatures from a state of disorientation to one of reorientation to God. The good news of Jesus Christ is made available through the Scriptures. Reading Scripture is an event of being encountered by the Word. This encounter brings about understanding through scientific and contemplative ends in order that creatures may know the truth and speak the truth of God.

From a state of dependence on God, the appropriate posture is formed. This humble posture is what we have called "manner" in this thesis. This manner is rooted in the fear of God. It is reverent. It is a holy manner. As God's manner in approaching creatures is one of "majesty in relation", the creaturely manner in approaching God is "fear of God". Because fellowship with God includes cognitive fellowship, the appropriate posture for theology is rational and attentive. Exceedingly attentive. It is humble, possessing a certain brokenness. This manner is teachable. Teachableness extending into the disposition of the creature. It is modest, weak, inadequate. From this attitude of reverence comes reverent enactment in the form of mortification and vivification. Webster identifies this as the primary form of good works in the regenerate creature.

And the fruit which good works produces is actual in the form of love. Virtues are formed through faithful activity and practices of faith.

The end of creaturely flourishing is fellowship with God. Creatures were created to need friendship with God and to know God. It is a fellowship of holiness and love. Webster describes fellowship with God in a variety of ways: an ordered friendship, a perfecting saving fellowship, fellowship as sons and daughter. Creatures are also created for fellowship with other creatures. Therefore, love and fellowship among people is an integral part of the fear of God. The state of dependence on God that creatures experience is one of interdependence between creatures. Reverence as a desire to serve God extends as a desire to serve others. The humble posture creatures have before God is the posture creatures can have toward other creatures: attentive, teachable, modest.

Theology is a work of love for God done in the service of the church and by extension the world. The working of the mind in its exceeding attentiveness is an active expression of worship as well as devotion. Webster identifies prayer as the primary act of the theologian. The fear of God is something which we can ask God to give us. As a theologian, Webster's humble manner, rooted in knowing God's perfection and correct ordering of the natures and relations of creator and creatures, consistently exemplifies what it means to have an especial measure of the fear of God.

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