

# Deriving Pedagogical Models for Theological Education from a Biblical Theology of the Acquisition, Transmission and Effects of the Knowledge of God

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## **Abstract**

The practice of theological education throughout the world has been predominantly shaped by the research university model and has been characterized by fragmentation. Although numerous critiques have been made and alternative pedagogical practices proposed, there has been a paucity of integrative theological reflection on pedagogical practice. This study constructs a biblical theological foundation for the knowledge of God, and adopts an integrative, multidisciplinary approach to developing pedagogical models of theological education that better align with what the Bible says about the knowledge of God (i.e., theology). This is done by first engaging in a biblical theological analysis of how the knowledge of God is acquired and communicated throughout the canon, and what effect the knowledge of God has on those who know him. The results of

this analysis are then brought into conversation with the most significant contemporary pedagogical developments to determine which might best reflect a biblical understanding of how the knowledge of God is acquired and transmitted and so best serve the enterprise of theological education. The nature of divine self-revelation, the significance of Christian community, and expectations about personal transformation emerge as key factors in determining pedagogical approaches. Developments in transformative learning that acknowledge situated cognition, experiential learning, and problem-based learning are found to be particularly apt. The research concludes by proposing a new structure for theological curricula, organized around two poles (the word and the world), which lead toward one another, rather than the traditional silos of theological departments.

## **Keywords**

Theological education, biblical theology, pedagogy, knowledge of God

## **1. Introduction**

A growing sense of dissatisfaction with the results produced by contemporary models of formal theological education has led to many critiques of current practice (Elmer and Elmer 2020; Cairney 2018; Shaw 2014; Hibbert and Hibbert 2012; Smith 2012; Benefiel 2008; Ott 2001; Heywood 2000; Banks 1999; Kelsey 1993). Critiques often concentrate around aspects of perceived fragmentation; separation of elements within theological curricula; separation between theory and practice; and separation between the world of the academy and the needs of the church. Critiques and proposed solutions have approached the practice of theological education from historical, pedagogical, philosophical, pragmatic, theological, and biblical

perspectives. In order to address the fragmentation of the discipline, however, these various perspectives and the solutions that emerge from them, need to be synthesized and integrated. This dissertation responds to that need by developing a biblical theological foundation for the knowledge of God, and pursuing an integrative, multidisciplinary approach to arrive at conclusions regarding models of theological education.

The profound link between knowing God (theology) and serving God (ministry) is recognized in the use of the term “theological education” to refer to formal ministry training (Harkness 2001, 142). All those concerned with the training of future generations of Christian leaders must consider the extent to which the models of theological education they rely upon are consistent with how they believe God is known, and the impact they believe a knowledge of God ought to produce. Those who hold a theologically conservative view of the inspiration and authority of the Bible as the word of God should be concerned to see that the model of theological education they adopt reflects what the Bible teaches about the knowledge of God (Banks 1999, 75).

The first (and largest) part of this dissertation sets out to explore what the Bible teaches about:

- 1) How people acquire a knowledge of God,
- 2) How that knowledge is communicated from person to person, and
- 3) What effects that knowledge should produce in those who possess it.

A biblical theological approach that presupposes the centrality of Christ, the unity of the Scriptures, and God’s progressive self-revelation is followed. This approach self-consciously works toward the integration of insights from throughout the canon; taking note of the uniqueness of the parts, as they contribute to a developing and united whole. The study is structured around the examination of those three questions throughout

eight significant epochs in salvation history. Tracing answers to these questions throughout Scripture represents a new contribution to biblical theological studies.

The second part of this dissertation brings the results of that biblical theological analysis into conversation with the most significant contemporary pedagogical developments. While there is no one approach to teaching and learning that can be universally considered ‘best practice’ in higher education, there is an important relationship between any subject and the pedagogical approaches that are most appropriate for it (Entwistle 2010, 48; Palmer 1993, 29). The most significant pedagogical developments are identified through a literature survey of key texts in higher education. Special attention is be paid to developments which show promise in terms of addressing the concerns and priorities raised in the biblical theological analysis. The conversation is organized around an alignment of the three elements of the biblical theology mentioned above, with corresponding questions in secular pedagogical literature regarding: epistemological convictions, pedagogical practices, and desired learning outcomes.

Decisions made between alternatives in these three categories drive distinctive approaches to teaching and learning (Kolb and Kolb 2017, 28; Entwistle 2010; 17, 34, 48; Dabbagh 2005, 26).

The conversation between the conclusions of the biblical theological survey and the corresponding pedagogical alternatives provides a fresh perspective for the evaluation and development of models of theological education. This dissertation presents a mechanism by which the biblical data regarding the knowledge of God can supply a foundation upon which pedagogies of theological education can be built (cf. Shaw 2014, 68).

The final section of the dissertation presents a series of conclusions regarding a framework for theological education and puts forward a novel example curriculum constructed from these insights.

## 2. A Biblical Theology of the Knowledge of God

### *2.1 The knowledge of God in creation*

In the creation accounts, Adam and Eve know God as his image bearers who share his “likeness” (Gen 1:26–27; cf. 3:5; Garr 2003, 175). The knowledge of God can also be deduced from observing the evidence of his character in what he creates (e.g., 2 Kgs 19:15, Job 38:4–8, Ps 19:1; 96:5; 119:90; 135:5–9; 146:6; Isa 41:21–26, Jer 32:17, Amos 4:13, Acts 4:24, Rom 1:20, Rev 4:11). Beyond what can be deduced by observation, however, God makes himself known through speaking. Through speaking God provides instruction and an interpretive lens through which his creation is to be understood (Thompson 2006, 63). God takes initiative in creation to make himself known, but also, in commanding Adam “not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:17), sets clear limits on human knowledge.

### *2.2 The knowledge of God and the fall*

The limits which God set are challenged and rebelled against in Genesis 3. Although many contemporary OT scholars argue that this chapter is primarily about the human acquisition of knowledge and ethical awareness (Zevit 2013, 261; Mettinger 2007, 1–4; Barr 1993, 4), Adam and Eve had knowledge before they took the fruit and already knew that taking it was wrong (Gen 3:2, 6). Their rebellion was a willful grab for a knowledge “that distrusted and excluded God” (Palmer 1993, 25). From that point forward, humanity has been separated from God and crippled by the noetic effects of sin, which renders people incapable of knowing God through intellect, wisdom or perception (Isa 44:17–20; Rom 1: 21–22, 25, 28; 1 Cor 1:21; 2 Cor 4:4; cf. John 1:13). This incapacity is further complicated by a persistent, stubborn, rebellious disposition that actively chooses to distrust God’s

wisdom or goodness, while asserting our own (Gen 6:5; 8:21; Ps 14:1–3; 53:1–3; Rom 1:18; 3:10–12; 8:5–8; Col 1:21).

Recognizing the noetic effects of sin means that theological study must proceed on the basis of epistemic humility. Not only are we unable to come to know God by the power of our intellect, but we will not even necessarily be aware of our own rebellion or distorted perception. Human incapacity and rebellion mean that people can only come to know God if he chooses to give sight to the spiritually blind and reveal himself. Theological education must take account of the noetic effects of sin and be built around a reliance on divine revelation and illumination.

### *2.3 The knowledge of God in the patriarchal period*

Throughout the patriarchal period, God made himself known primarily to and through the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He appeared to them, and especially to Abraham, with a physical immediacy unique in the OT. Even amid the appearances and the activity of God however, the patriarchs and their generations came to know God most profoundly through what he said, and especially through his making and keeping of covenantal promises. As the patriarchs sought to pass on what they knew of God, they focused on recounting these promises. This was how others came to know God; not through direct revelation themselves but through hearing the testimony of the patriarchs either directly or second-hand. Knowledge of these covenant promises, and the God who made them, was expected to produce a response of faith in the hearer that would be seen in a life of obedience and relational intimacy with this covenant God.

## 2.4 *The knowledge of God in the exodus and the law*

Throughout the period of the Exodus, God not only acted to redeem the nation of Israel, but he did so intentionally to make himself known (Blackburn 2012, 40–41). God made himself known most clearly through his speech which accompanied his action and appearances. In this regard, the giving of the law at Sinai provides an important point of transition in salvation history. God's appearances to Moses were intimate and proximate (as with the patriarchs) but less anthropomorphic than those experienced by Abraham. Moses was also more overtly designated as a mediator of God's self-revelation to others than the patriarchs were. He was instructed specifically so that he could instruct others.

As the nation prepared to enter the promised land without Moses as their leader, however, the way God continued to make himself known changed significantly. God's appearances shift from being forbiddingly potent before the exodus, to being more ephemeral beyond it. Once Yahweh had given the law at Sinai, the law became the chief means by which the people had access to the knowledge of God. God continued to be present, but the law set out the terms of the covenantal relationship from that point forward (Blackburn 2012, 112–113). There was no need for him to continue to appear to the whole nation to reveal himself.

Israel was to pass on the knowledge of God from generation to generation through teaching the law (Lev 10:11). In family homes and everyday life, the Israelites were to recall, recite, discuss, and meditate on the law. Every seven years they would come together as a nation to hear the Levitical priests read the law. The writing down and reading out of the law (Deut 31:11) would provide a consistent national point of reference, from which to test any claims of advanced knowledge of God or his will (Deut 18:22).

As Yahweh chose to reveal himself through history in action and speech, recounting these things (i.e., hearing the word of God), must be the basis for knowing God. Furthermore, the knowledge of God given in the period of the exodus was expected to effect real and observable change in the lives of those who knew God. The love of God that he revealed to the nation through Moses was to be reflected back to him, and also imitated in love for others. The knowledge of God was also expected to engender obedience, fear and worship.

The Deuteronomic pattern, based on God's self-revelation in the law, provides an integrated national system of theological education. The system, however, is incomplete. The self-revelation of God in the exodus was not exhaustive, and there are hints in the narrative that further revelation will follow (Niehaus 1995, 224). After Moses's death, there would need to be another prophet who was a covenant mediator, like him (Deut 18:15–18). We are pointed forward expectantly, and ultimately to God's self-revelation in the person of the Lord Jesus.

### *2.5 The knowledge of God while Israel occupies the promised land*

In the period that Israel occupied the promised land from the time of Joshua through to the exile, God appeared less frequently than during the exodus, and by the end of this period these appearances were limited to the prophets through visions. The manner and frequency of God's speaking also changed and developed during this time. The prophets emerged as the key recipients and mediators of God's word. The prophets mediated the knowledge of God to ordinary people, firstly through the leaders and kings, but more directly as the period proceeded. While the prophets dialogue and sometimes bargain with God, this form of engagement was



not normative (cf. Job 38:1–2) and the nation was called to listen and obey, not to negotiate with God (Lamb 2012, 865).

The prophets consistently called people back to the covenant and reminded them of what they should already know of God through his past actions and words. This shift to calling the nation back began immediately with the transition from Moses's to Joshua's leadership, where Moses's words continued to be authoritative (Deut 34:9). In the years leading up to the exile, although God continued to reveal himself and appeal to his people through the prophets, due to the prevalence of false prophets, the prophetic office had fallen into significant disrepute (e.g., Isa 28:7; Jer 14:14–16; 23:9–40; Ezek 13:1–23; 21:29; 22:28; Eccl 5:7).

In contrast to this dwindling esteem, the Torah is elevated, and an expectation expressed that one could relate to the Torah in ways previously only used to describe how one would relate directly to God. Psalm 119 provides a valuable demonstration of this shift. The psalmist lifts his hands towards Yahweh's commandments, which he loves (Ps 119:48) and expresses trust in Yahweh's word (119:42) and faith in his commandments (119:66). Honor, love, trust and faith are characteristic responses to the knowledge of God, ordinarily expected to be directed toward Yahweh himself. Consistently through this psalm, however, the psalmist relates to the Torah, the commandments, the law and the word of Yahweh, as if relating directly to Yahweh himself. This is a significant shift in expectations about how one knows and relates to Yahweh in an immediate and personal way.

Psalm 119 also demonstrates a remarkable development in the language of visual appropriation of the knowledge of God. Verbs used to describe theophanies in the patriarchal and exodus narratives are applied by the psalmist to describe his gazing on the word (e.g., Ps 119:6, 15, 18). Rather than the psalmist having a visual experience which brings him

knowledge of God, he describes his “looking into,” or contemplating God’s word as the means of revelation. The effect of this shift is profound. Psalm 119 generates an expectation then, that God will continue to reveal himself, not necessarily directly through a theophanic pronouncement to select individuals, but to any who would gaze upon, that is seek to comprehend, his word.

In another development toward democratization, wisdom literature also arose during this period. The Israelite wisdom tradition was tied closely to the home and family rather than to the priests and temple. With its focus on the lordship of God in creation, wisdom literature engaged with the world as it could be observed and studied. Tradition, relationship, and character formation were prized above novelty and abstract cognition. The element of Israelite wisdom literature that distinguished it from all others, was its insistence that the fear of Yahweh was both the beginning and the goal of wisdom.

Knowledge of God and the fear of God grow together in a recursive<sup>16</sup> relationship of deepening intimacy (See Figure 1). Reverential fear is the appropriate response to coming to know God (Prov 2:5, Eccl 12:13), but as a right disposition, it also provides the grounds for further growth in one’s knowledge of God (Psa 111:10, Prov 1:7, 9:10). This is so because people do not know God by virtue of human reason, but rather through God granting knowledge of himself. This knowledge of God depends upon, but eclipses, a true cognition of facts about God as it is a personal and relational knowledge. Knowing God in this manner is a transformative experience.

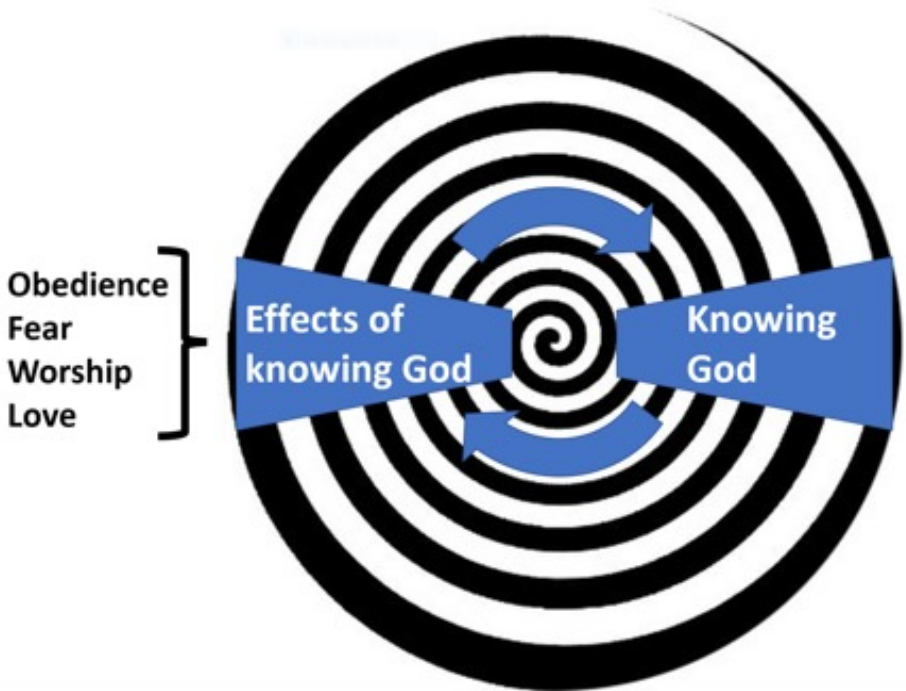
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1 Although the term ‘recursive’ is most commonly used within mathematics, it has more recently been applied in a variety of fields, including linguistics and pedagogical literature. In these cases, it is used to refer to a repeatedly cyclical relationship between two or more elements.

Those who know God in this way fear him, obey him, worship him, and love him and others. Those who fear, obey, worship, and love God and others are well placed to grow in their knowledge of him (e.g., 2 Sam 23:3; Job 1:1; 2:3; 28:28; Ps 19:10; 111:10; Prov 1:7; 8:13; 9:10; 14:26-27; 15:33; 16:6; 22:4; Isa 11:3; 58:1-2). That is what is meant by a recursive relationship between knowing God and the effects of knowing God.

Taken with the repeated examples throughout the period of recalling narratives of God's great deeds and singing his praises together, this emerging focus on the written word of God provides shape for our

Figure 1: Recursive relationship between knowing God and the effects of knowing God



enterprise of developing models for theological education. It is a shape consistent with hearing, recounting, and responding to the word of God in community. A community in which this occurs should be characterized by increasing knowledge of God, evidenced in fear, obedience, worship, and love, and ought to stand in stark contrast to the Israelite nation that imploded throughout the period in the promised land, due to their culpable rejection and lack of knowledge of God.

### *2.6 The knowledge of God from the exile to Jesus*

During the exilic and post-exilic periods, we witness a continued decline in appearances of God, accompanied by a further decline in the prophetic office, both in terms of prophets' reputations, and in terms of their intimacy with God. In contrast to the prophets themselves, during this period the writings of previous prophets were highly valued, becoming recognized and revered as the word of God. This marked a shift from prophecy to scribal teaching as the expected mode of God's self-revelation (Shead 2012, 267; Schniedewind 1995, 21).

The promised new covenant announced a coming day where the knowledge of God amongst his covenant people would be universal and unmediated. This knowledge would be based on God's forgiveness of iniquity and promise to remember sins no more, and would be accompanied by the gift of his Spirit and the writing of his word on the new heart of his people. There would continue to be a need for teachers to live exemplary lives and to recite and teach the word of God, but no longer would they have to exhort the people to "know the LORD," because all of the covenant people would know him (Jer 31:34). The people then should pass on the knowledge of God to one another through corporate remembering and teaching, including singing psalms to one another.

As we continue to work toward developing models of theological education, what emerges is a picture of a community of forgiven people who, with the help of the Spirit of God and a renewed corporate heart, teach one another the word of God and live in obedience to it.

### *2.7 The knowledge of God and the person of the Lord Jesus*

Moving from the OT to the NT, we must reckon with the seismic shift in God's self-revelation that the incarnation of Jesus represents. All the ways in which God had made himself known in the past were surpassed as the Word became flesh and not only appeared, but lived in the midst of his people. In Jesus, God made himself known through manifestations of his divine power, through personal interactions demonstrating his grace, love, and compassion, and, most clearly, in his death and resurrection. To accept Jesus is to accept God, to reject Jesus is to reject God, and to know Jesus is to know God because Jesus is God (John 14:5–11; cf. Kruse 2003, 75). Even in the study of the Law and the Prophets, one's knowledge of God is obscured unless the Scriptures are read as pointing toward Jesus, and the Holy Spirit provides illumination (John 5:37–40; cf. Luke 16:31; Hays 2014, 16).

Jesus passed the knowledge of God on through teaching the truth about himself. His teaching came in the context of the situations that he and the disciples were in, including his actions which demonstrated the truth of what he said. The gospels describe both knowledge and pedagogy in personal and relational terms, centered around the Lord Jesus. The discipleship model which Jesus employed lends itself to a holistic and integrated approach to learning in all of life, where cognition, character and competency in ministry can be explored, modelled and developed in the context of personal relationships.

Evidence that one knows God through Jesus can be seen in a life of obedience and in relational intimacy, characterized by love for God and love for others. A lack of these things can be both evidence of ignorance of God, and a barrier to growth in knowledge of God. By implication, models of theological education consistent with the gospel accounts will also be centered around the pursuit of a personal knowledge of Jesus, in relationship with him and others. Loving relationships provide an appropriate context in which to grow in one's knowledge of God and should also be an expected outcome of attaining such knowledge.

### *2.8 The knowledge of God in the last days*

The physical departure of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus ushered in the final period of redemptive history: the last days. No longer could people see or hear Jesus themselves, and thereby meet and know God. The witness of the apostles to the Lord Jesus, their exposition of the OT Scriptures in light of his fulfilment, and their explanation of the consequences of these things became the authoritative channel of divine self-revelation. Pentecost marked the beginning of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all God's people, enabling them to prophesy. This prophecy is described throughout the NT in various ways that draw attention to the bold speaking of all of God's people, that others may come to know him. The speaking of all of God's people pointed back to the apostolic witness to the Lord Jesus.

New Testament churches were characterized as learning communities, where the word of God would be read, heard, and taught, as each member spoke the truth to one another in love. These communities were to be transformed and transformative as members encouraged one another to respond appropriately to the relational knowledge of God that they had. The same recursive relationship between knowing God and the

effects of that knowledge (evidenced in transformed lives of ‘knowers’) that was observed in the OT is on view. One’s personal knowledge of God should lead to repentance and faith seen in a life of fruitful obedience, love and worship. Such a life opens a knower to possibilities of deepening relational knowledge of God, which would lead to further transformation, and so on (Rom 12:1–2; Col 1:9–10; 2 Pet 1:2–9). Theological education then, ought to be carried out in contexts of learning communities characterized by loving relationships between people who are committed to being transformed by, and growing in, their knowledge of God, as they pass that knowledge on to one another.

In the last days people can truly, but not fully, come to know God (Thompson 2006, 155). A consummation awaits where all of the promises and blessings of the new covenant will be realized, where God’s people will be with him and know fully, even as they are now fully known (Rev 21:3; 1 Cor 13:12, cf. Williamson 2007, 209–210). Until then, theological study ought to be characterized by an epistemic humility that acknowledges that God has sovereignly revealed himself in the Scriptures and that we rely on the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit to know him. Indeed, although the careful study of Scripture is commended, the comprehension of Scripture is no mere intellectual pursuit, so theological study ought to be characterized by prayer to the God who reveals himself.

### **3. A Conversation with Contemporary Pedagogical Approaches**

We turn now to consider pedagogical approaches that may be adopted for theological education, bringing various contemporary alternatives into conversation with the details of our descriptive biblical theological analysis. Several standard education textbooks are used as key conversation partners to introduce a variety of alternative approaches and further scholarship.<sup>17</sup>

The three key research questions that have structured our engagement with the biblical material are closely related to three key elements underlying any pedagogical approach. We then structured our conversation around these three key synthetic questions:

- 1) What epistemological foundations best account for how the knowledge of God is acquired?
- 2) What pedagogical methodologies best align with what the Bible says about how the knowledge of God is passed on?
- 3) What pedagogical approaches are best designed to produce outcomes consistent with the Bible's descriptions of the effects that the knowledge of God has on knowers?

*3.1 What epistemological foundations best account for how the knowledge of God is acquired?*

Significant points of tension exist between the epistemological foundations that underlie most contemporary pedagogical approaches, and the emphasis we have seen through the Bible on divine revelation and the need for epistemic humility. Despite more than two hundred years of philosophical critique, models of contemporary higher education (and particularly the research university) are dominated by a Cartesian dualism that privileges reason and scientific method over other forms of knowledge,

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- 2 Due to their comprehensive breadth and widespread contemporary adoption as standard introductory texts in faculties of education around the world, Brookfield (2015), Merriam and Bierema (2014), and Schunk (2014) have been chosen as the key conversation partners. The conversation is not be limited to these key partners but they are used to provide a structure for considering a broad range of pedagogical approaches.



and assumes an objective separation between a knower and an object that might be known (Cairney 2018, 48; Meek 2011,18). Post-modern critiques of objectivism gave way to the rise of relativism and subjectivity which preserves Cartesian dualism but draws attention to the self and one's own perspective and away from any sense of an objective "other" (Meek 2011, 90). More recently this has led to a constructivist approach to epistemology, whereby each knower creates reality and knowledge in their own minds.

Christian theologians and educators have proposed several helpful alternatives or correctives to these dominant epistemological foundations. Critical realism seeks to preserve the existence of ontological, external reality that affirms that authors intend meaning and we have some access to this as we read, even if our access entails some subjectivity. Further, we can gain confidence in discerning truth as we engage texts critically, in relationship with others who are also seeking to discern truth. Critical realism needs further buttressing as an epistemological framework for knowing God however, because it doesn't account for the essentially relation nature of this knowledge as well as it might (Cairney 2018, 113–117; Smith 2009, 41; Clark 2003, 170; Palmer 1993, 14). We must not, however, draw a false dichotomy between personal and propositional knowledge (contra Hibbert and Hibbert 2016, 47; Palmer 1993, 47).

Following Polanyi (2005) and Palmer (1993), Meek's (2011) covenantal epistemology accords very well with what we have seen throughout the Bible. Rather than the purely cognitive and linear description of learning engendered by Cartesian dualism, Meek describes learning and knowing as interactive experimentation, observation, dialogue and integration of the previously disconnected or unknown. We are engaged and interact in the world as whole persons and we are in a form a personal relationship with all that we seek to come to know. In this context though, the word

of God functions as an authoritative self-disclosure of the God who wants to be known personally. Our knowledge of God is a work in progress, a “coming to know [that is] integrative and transformative, rather than deductive and linear” (Meek 2011, 70). This directly addresses the problems of fragmentation in theological education with which this study began. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7), dispassionate, detached objectivity is a wholly inadequate stance to take for one who seeks such knowledge. Jesus taught his disciples to know and relate to God conscious of their standing as beloved children before a graciously righteous Father (Matt 5:9ff; cf. Jer 3:19; Mal 2:10; 1 Pet 1:17; Moser 1999, 594).

The significance of this discussion about epistemology is brought into sharp focus as we see the implications of various epistemological assumptions not just on learning theories, but on qualification frameworks that influence higher education globally. The most prominent example of this is the adaptation of Bloom’s taxonomy for qualification and accreditation frameworks. This practice embeds an understanding of cognitive knowledge that increases in complexity and value in a linear fashion, culminating in novel creation (Shaw and Dharamraj 2018, 434; Merriam and Bierema 2014, 34). This embedded understanding sits at odds with the picture of the knowledge of God generated by our biblical theological survey, both in terms of being a linear progression (rather than recursive), and in terms of valuing analysis, evaluation and creation more highly than remembering, understanding, and applying knowledge.

### *3.2 What pedagogical methodologies best align with what the Bible says about how the knowledge of God is passed on?*

Several contemporary pedagogical methodologies and insights hold promise for theological education due to their coherence with the biblical

theological insights gleaned regarding how the knowledge of God is communicated. *Situated cognition* is a methodology that recognizes that cognition (and the world of ideas) cannot be abstracted from physical context. The environment in which someone learns and especially the relationships that learners have with other learners and with their teachers is significantly formative. This account of learning resonates strongly with the biblical emphasis on discipleship, the significance of communities of learning, and the importance of the character of teachers (Cairney 2018, 17; Shaw 2014, 96–98; C. S. Smith 2012, 386; Meek 2011, 138).

The cycle of *experiential learning* provides an explanatory framework for a process that lines up closely with the recursive pattern observed throughout Scripture. Knowledge is gained as we encounter experiences, reflect, theorize, apply our new knowledge—which generates a new experience that we can reflect on—and so on (Kolb and Kolb 2017, 26–27). Building on experiential learning, *problem-based learning* offers a particular pedagogical methodology for working from experience toward integrated knowledge (Schunk 2014, 264ff). *Transformative learning* describes a broader category of pedagogical methodology that self-consciously works to achieve transformative goals for students by focusing on “deep learning” which is integrative of as many insights and experiences as possible (Weimer 2013, 30–31). Transformative learning may well engage experiential and problem-based learning strategies to achieve transformative goals. Transformative learning will also readily engage the use of narrative as a key learning strategy (Kolb and Kolb 2017, 180), and this too accords well with the Bible’s own commendation of the re-telling of the great acts of God, the gospel, as a key means for passing on the knowledge of God.

These methodologies all aim at and promise far more than the research university model in terms of forming people for ministry. The

expectations of teachers and learners in these models will be that cognitive apprehension of facts about God must go along with growth in relational awareness and the living out of the implications of this knowledge. The separation of these things is at the heart of the critiques of contemporary theological education based on the research university model.

*3.3 What pedagogical approaches are best designed to produce outcomes consistent with the Bible's descriptions of the effects that the knowledge of God has on knowers?*

Theological education should be intentionally designed to produce the transformative effects in students that the knowledge of God produces in the Bible, rather than simply passing on information. Educators can neither be satisfied with simply passing on information about God in the hope that application will follow, nor with providing a transformed practice or experience in the hope that knowledge of God will follow. The recursive pattern observed throughout Scripture leads us to expect that transformed behavior ought to both provide a foundation for knowing God better, and to be an appropriate expression of the knowledge of God that they already have. Following the lead of outcomes-based and competency-based education models, theological curricula should be designed with outcomes in mind (Cairney 2018, 7; Shaw 2014, 73; Ball 2012, 20). These outcomes ought to routinely embrace affective and behavioral elements, in addition to cognitive ones.

#### **4. Principles and Proposals for Theological Education**

A desire to improve approaches to theological education has motivated this research. We began by noting a broad discontent with the dominant,

research university model of theological education, and particularly around the fragmentation that regularly attends this model. On the understanding that approaches to theological education ought to reflect and express the nature of theology itself in some way, we undertook a biblical theological survey to determine how the knowledge of God was acquired and communicated throughout the Bible, and what impact that knowledge had on knowers. This survey provided a basis for examining contemporary pedagogical theory and practice.

The following principles and proposals are structured around three different elements of pedagogical approach: (1) The posture and content of theological education: Knowing the God who reveals himself, (2) The context of theological education: Knowing God in community, and (3) Theological pedagogy from two poles (the word and the world): Communicating the knowledge of God.

#### *4.1 The posture and content of theological education: Knowing the God who reveals himself*

We begin with a set of relevant principles drawn from the biblical data we have examined.

##### 4.1.1 Epistemic humility

To be consistent with what can be seen throughout the biblical theological survey, theological education must adopt a posture of epistemic humility, seeking to know and respond to God as he has revealed himself. An approach to independent research which seeks to not only discover but create knowledge results in a posture that seeks to master the object of research and reject received orthodoxy (Shermer 2011, 135; Palmer 1993, 21).

This posture is unfitted for acquiring or growing in one's knowledge of God because a relational knowledge of God leads to submission and obedience rather than self-confident mastery.

#### 4.1.2 Studying the written word of God

God has actively made himself known, progressively through salvation history and ultimately in his Son. Throughout this study a growing emphasis has been noted within the word of God, on God revealing himself through his written word. His written word preserves and transmits his progressive revelation, including the apostles' testimony of what they saw and heard from the Lord Jesus. More pointedly, the manner in which Jesus claimed to be the hermeneutic key to the OT Scriptures pushes us toward an approach to biblical studies which integrates rather than separates the study of OT and NT. The study of Scripture as a whole, and the various parts of Scripture in relationship to the whole, must therefore be the core content of any program of theological education.

#### 4.1.3 Relying on divine illumination

There is every warrant for intellectual rigor in studying Scripture and its implications (Acts 17:2, 11; Deut 6:6-7; 11:18-20; Josh 1:8; Ps 1:2; 119:15; 97-99; 1 Cor 14:29; 1 Th 5:21; 1 John 4:1), but this must be applied in a context of prayerful dependence on the illumination of the Spirit (Keener 2016, 259). God must grant insight and understanding for anyone to know him. Even in a formal academic setting then, the study of Scripture must not be separated from the practice and posture of prayer and worship.

#### 4.1.4 Integration of theology and life

Teachers and learners should increasingly exhibit lives transformed by what they know of God. Therefore, transformation in terms of repentance, faith, obedience, worship and love (amongst other fruit of the Spirit) should be evident among the intended outcomes of theological education. This transformation provides both evidence of an appropriate response to the knowledge of God and an epistemological foundation for further growth in that knowledge.

#### *4.2 The context of theological education: Knowing God in community*

Our consideration of the posture and content of theological education leads directly to the second set of principles that emerge from this study. Because knowledge of God is personal and relational, the context in which this knowledge is communicated is of the utmost importance. The NT presentation of churches as reciprocal learning communities, and its emphasis on the character of Christian leaders and teachers, has special relevance for our consideration of approaches to theological education.

Discipling relationships are a particularly potent expression of situated cognition that are employed by Jesus and Paul, and commended as an example to be followed. Whatever other formal structures and relationships might be created within an approach to theological education, the comprehensive sharing of life which is intrinsic to discipling relationships will be indispensable. A learning community characterized by mutually loving relationships provides a point of clear contrast with the competitive individualism that characterizes most Western education.

It is important to note that none of the above just automatically happens by getting people into the same physical space. Even residential

programs set up for this purpose will rely on the character of teachers and students, and intentionality in planning, for the formation and maintenance of communities of learning. Recent shifts toward more flexible study options, including part-time, distance, and online learning, raise questions about whether and how the need for Christian learning communities might be met in other ways. It is important that whatever models or modes of delivery are adopted, the notion of learning in Christian community is seen as intrinsic to the process and not an optional extra. Studying theology on your own is a fundamentally different activity from engaging the same material as part of a Christian community.

### *4.3 The structure of theological education: Pedagogy from two poles*

#### **4.3.1 Transformative learning**

Our analysis of contemporary pedagogical methodologies concluded that an approach built around transformative learning would be well suited for theological education. Problem-based learning provides a structure for experiential, transformative learning that integrates growth in knowledge and development of practical skills around ‘real world’ problems. In theological education a problem-based learning approach that draws upon biblical, theological, historical, and practical ministry disciplines to work toward creating ministerial ‘solutions’ has significant integrative potential.

Transformative learning also embeds an expectation that learning ought to produce results beyond merely the cognitive. This expectation fits well with the recursive relationship observed in Scripture between the knowledge of God and the effects of that knowledge. Knowing God leads people to respond in faith, obedience, love, and worship. Those who are



faithful, obedient, and loving, and who worship God, are disposed to grow in their knowledge of him.

#### 4.3.2 A proposed new structure

Theological study is traditionally structured around departments (OT, NT, theology, history of the church, and practical ministry) which functionally become silos of learning (Shaw 2014, 94; Farley 2005, 200; Moberly 2000, 5; see Figure 2). As a way of breaking down the fragmentary effect of this structure and implementing the insights of problem-based learning, formal theological education curriculum can be structured with subjects predominantly being taught from one of two poles (Figure 3). The first pole being the word, and the second pole the world. Subjects being taught from the word pole would begin with the word of God, and work toward application in the world; they would therefore comply with the transformative learning description of the use of narrative. Subjects being taught from the world pole would begin with problems or ministry tasks and utilize a problem-based learning approach to work toward integrating biblical, theological, historical, and ministerial knowledge and skills to provide a solution or develop a response.

In contrast to the innovative and excellent curriculum implemented at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) which Shaw (2014) presents and explains in *Transforming Theological Education*, this proposal preserves more than half of the curriculum for engagement with Scripture apart from problem-based learning subjects. Beginning with studying Scripture on its own terms and working toward application in the world better reflects God's divine initiative in revealing himself chiefly today through his written word.

Figure 2: Silos of theological learning



Figure 3: Pedagogy from two poles



#### 4.3.3 Limitations and scope for further work

This research has been undertaken in a self-conscious attempt to push back against the drift toward fragmentation in theological education. The study has been far more wide-ranging and multidisciplinary than is traditional for doctoral dissertations. While this has been intentional, and has been fruitful in engaging and modelling a more integrative approach, it does

mean that there is great scope for further research. The biblical case for establishing how the knowledge of God is acquired and communicated, and what effects it has could be pursued at far greater detail with more focused research on individual books of the Bible. The contribution of the wisdom literature to these things is certainly a path ripe for further exploration, as is the post-exilic shift in further emphasis toward hearing God speak through the written word.

The range of pedagogical literature is enormous and unfamiliar to many in theological education. It is hoped that this work might present a framework for further multidisciplinary studies, providing Christian educators with a stronger theological basis for evaluating and developing pedagogical models, and theologians with an introduction to the world of pedagogical alternatives.

One further limitation of the model proposed here is that students taught through this model are unlikely to be as well prepared for post-graduate study as they might be under the current model. This is a point of tension. At one level, if the preparation of students for further academic research is a high priority, this model will be ill suited for that application. However, if growing people in their knowledge of God so that they might serve his people is the highest priority, this model offers great promise. A curriculum restructured in this way will rely on resources written by those who have engaged in specialized biblical and theological research. Can this kind of research be effectively ‘decoupled’ from its epistemological roots and re-tooled to better serve theological education as it has been described here?

## **5. Conclusion**

Models of theological education must be centered around knowing God as he has revealed himself through his written word and situated in the context

of a Christian community committed to learning and being transformed by their relational knowledge of God. Formal theological studies should be intentionally transformative. Modelling teaching and learning around engagement with Scripture on its own terms and a problem-based learning approach to Christian life and ministry is consistent with the kind of personal and transformative knowledge of God that is described throughout Scripture. Theological education constructed along these lines should produce a learning experience where theology and ministry, academia and church, and indeed the various elements within a theological program, are far better integrated than is presently the case. All this that people may better know God and make him known.

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