

THIRD EDITION

Created *for* Community

Connecting Christian Belief *with* Christian Living

Stanley J. Grenz & Jay T. Smith


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To Roger E. Olson
Scholar, Educator, Friend

In Memory of Stanley J. Grenz

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Foreword

The writings of Stanley Grenz remain one of the treasures of evangelical theology. He pioneered evangelical engagement with postmodern thought and culture, remaining faithful to the historic traditions of the church without being enslaved by them. His concern to bear witness to the truth of the gospel in a way that was comprehensible to contemporary people led him to be creative and innovative in connecting Christian faith to the day-to-day complexities of life and the shifting cultural landscape. In order to do this most faithfully, he believed it was important to do the sort of rigorous scholarly research and analysis characteristic of academic inquiry as a means of demonstrating the coherence of the Christian vision. He also believed it was important to make the results of this work available in a form that could be grasped and appreciated by those in the church, many of whom were keenly interested in the contents, conversations, and controversies of their faith but who often had little interest in the intricacies and nuances of technical scholarship.

In keeping with this conviction, Stan wrote for both the academy and the church. On the academic side, the two published volumes of his projected six-volume *The Matrix of Christian Theology* series make a significant contribution to the field of systematic theology and set an agenda for one of the most ambitious undertakings of trinitarian theology in recent years.¹ On the more generally accessible side, his book *What Christians Really Believe & Why* led

1. The published volumes are: Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); and Stanley J. Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being: A Trinitarian Theo-ontology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

one reviewer to consider whether Stan was the next C. S. Lewis.² The present work, *Created for Community*, brings together Stan's commitment to doing serious thinking about the meaning of Christian faith in our time with his conviction that theology is not simply an intellectual enterprise for a few highly trained scholars. Rather, it is intended to be a transformative discipline that is ultimately in service to the life, witness, and mission of the church. Three aspects of this volume are particularly noteworthy in this regard.

First, one of the central concerns of the book is that the goal of theology is not simply intellectual reflection or right thinking but also the activity of bearing witness to the good news of God's presence in the world through a distinctive way of life. This theme is clearly set forth in the subtitle, *Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*. From this perspective the way we live becomes a central element in the task of theology, for it is when our beliefs actually make a difference in our lives that we are most fully engaged with the transformative significance of thinking carefully and critically about Christian faith. Therefore, the ultimate purpose of theology is not simply to establish proper belief but rather to assist the Christian community in its calling to live as the people of God in the particular social-historical context in which they are situated. For Stan, one of the most basic characteristics of good theology is that it facilitates and leads to authentic participation in the mission of God by enabling faithful performance of the gospel by the Christian community.

Second, the emphasis on community as an integral part of God's design for creation is an important corrective to the individualism that permeates both our society and the church. This was a central component in all Stan's thought and functions as an important integrative motif in his theology. The intention of God is to establish community that transcends every human division, people from every nation and ethnicity, every socioeconomic status, consisting of both male and female who find their identity in Christ (Gal. 3:28). While the fullness of this community will be realized only at the completion of God's creative intentions, it is the vocational calling of human beings created in the image of God to anticipate this community in a partial yet genuine fashion. The biblical characterization of the church as the image of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit points to its significance as a focal point of the representation of God in the world. In light of this, Stan articulates a theology that does not lose sight of the individual but asserts that individuals are created for the purpose of participating in community.

2. Stanley J. Grenz, *What Christians Really Believe & Why* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998); William C. Placher, "The Next C. S. Lewis?," *Christian Century* (August 12–19, 1998): 759–61.

Third, the book takes seriously the significance of culture in the work of theology. Because Christian communities are always situated in particular social and historical settings, it is important to remember that all expressions of Christian faith are shaped by the cultural context in which they are embedded. One of the implications of this is that theology is an ongoing discipline and not something that can be done once and for all. Rather it draws on the language, symbols, and thought forms of a particular time and place in order to communicate the gospel and the biblical story in ways that will be intelligible to contemporary people. In light of this state of affairs, we must be careful not to absolutize any particular cultural model lest it impair our ability to discern the teachings and implications of Scripture. We must also remember that because culture is diverse and ever changing, particularly in the technological and fragmented age in which we live, we need to be alert to shifting developments and trends in order to communicate the Christian message as clearly and effectively as possible. In light of Stan's convictions on the importance of the contemporary setting in the articulation of theology, *Created for Community* is full of cultural connections and allusions. However, since the volume was first published in 1996, much has changed and many of the cultural references are dated. In order to do justice to Stan's approach to theology, this new edition has been capably updated by Dr. Jay Smith, who served as Stan's research assistant for many years.

May this revised edition of *Created for Community* introduce a new generation of readers to Stan's work and help to spark and continue the ongoing reformation of evangelical theology for which he worked, hoped, and prayed.

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Preface to the Third Edition

In 2015, the theological vision of Stanley Grenz continues to be meaningful and challenging for both the inquisitive seeker and the post-conservative evangelical. Roughly ten years after his untimely passing at the age of fifty-five, Grenz's work has spawned numerous doctoral dissertations and theses from inspired young theologians seeking to embody the erudition and ethos that was Stanley Grenz. I am one of those students. I met Stan Grenz in the summer of 1998 and moved to Vancouver to study with him at Regent College, where I was his teaching and research assistant from 1999 to his untimely death in 2005. His understanding of convertive piety as trinitarian participation shaped my own doctoral work. In both my life and work, I am indebted to Stan's love of God, of the church, and of the theological task.

This revised edition of *Created for Community* contains a new foreword by Dr. John R. Franke. Dr. Franke was Grenz's coauthor for *Beyond Foundationalism*, the provocative construal of evangelical theological method in a postmodern context. Additionally, Franke has taken Grenz's method and ethos to the next level with his construal of missional theology. For many, myself and John Franke included, Grenz's work not only stimulates and invigorates our own theological projects but also serves to enrich our daily spiritual lives. This is one of the enduring qualities of his work—it is both theologically engaging and spiritually encouraging. Not many theologians can make that claim. The parsing of theology into a variety of subdivisions, such as systematic, practical, historical, and spiritual, has had the effect of segregating the intellectual from the spiritual. Not so in Grenz's work. By his own estimation, Grenz was “a pietist with a PhD,” and all of his readers will benefit from that understanding.

The body of *Created for Community* basically remains as Stan wrote it, with a few notable changes, including footnotes with references to his other works and updated cultural references. The discussion questions have been updated and expanded as well. This edition also contains a bibliography of Grenz's works and a postscript. The goal of this edition is to provide more resources and access to Grenz's work for both serious laypersons and undergraduate theology students. Many thanks go to Bob Hosack and Christina Jasko at Baker Academic for their commitment to this project. Bob, a longtime friend of Stan Grenz, is committed to Stan's vision of a "generous theology," and Christina is a patient and insightful editor. Without both of them, this project would still be a dream.

Both John Franke and I dedicate this new revision to Stan Grenz and the generations of students yet to be touched by his life and theological vision.

Preface to the Second Edition

Peppermint Patty was describing to Charlie Brown the exam she took in school that day. One question on the test read, “How many angels can stand on the head of a pin?” Peppermint Patty queried her friend as to how a person could answer such a question. True to form, Charlie Brown offered an astute, carefully crafted explanation. He informed Patty that her teacher had posed an old theological problem, for which there is no answer. Oblivious to her friend’s display of theological acumen, Peppermint Patty expressed her dismay. She had answered, “Eight, if they’re skinny, and four if they’re fat!”

Many people cringe at the thought of reading a theology book. They are convinced that theologians are stuffy academic types who hang out in ivory towers where they discuss obscure, unknowable, and irrelevant questions like the one posed to Peppermint Patty. Unfortunately, many theologians provide ample support for this stereotype. They are sometimes content to argue with each other about issues that are of no concern to most people, even to most Christians. And they often give the impression that their discussions have no bearing on life in the real world. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Theology is by its very nature connected to life. Each of us, regardless of religious affiliation (or lack of it), has a core set of beliefs (a worldview) about God and the world (or ultimate reality). And these beliefs form the foundation for how we live.

This book is about theology, and more specifically, Christian theology. It sets forth my understanding of the core beliefs we share as believers. My goal is to make theology accessible to people who are reticent to read a theology text. More specifically, I want to survey the Christian theological landscape with you, so that you might sharpen your core set of beliefs—not for the sake of priming you to win theological arguments but to assist you to *live* as a

Christian in the society in which God has placed you so that you can connect Christian belief with Christian living.

The theme around which this book revolves is given in the title, *Created for Community*. At the heart of the Christian message is the good news that the Triune God desires to bring us into fellowship with himself, with each other, and with all creation. I believe that this biblical vision of community—this core set of beliefs—can provide the foundation for truly Christian living, as we are drawn by the Holy Spirit to live on the basis of this vision.

In a sense, this volume is the distillation of my lengthier book, *Theology for the Community of God*, published in 1994 by Broadman & Holman. In that volume I take the reader through the process by which I arrive at the theological conclusions presented in more summary fashion here. You might view *Created for Community* as an extended sermon, similar to what a pastor might say in twenty-five minutes. *Theology for the Community of God*, in contrast, represents the diligent work that would occupy the pastor throughout the week of preparation for that Sunday sermon.

Roger Olson represents those theologian-pastors who have devoted their lives to assisting Christians—especially younger Christians—in discovering and clarifying the core beliefs we share. In addition, over the years he has become a close and cherished friend. In gratitude for his partnership in the theological enterprise, for his personal scholarship, but above all for his friendship, I dedicate this book to him.

Introduction

Christian Belief and Christian Living

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:5

“Don’t let that theology professor destroy your faith!”

I had worked at the Northwest Church for three years as youth director during my seminary days. Now I was preparing to leave for graduate studies in Germany. A dear saint in the congregation was concerned that further academic training would undermine the firmness of my Christian convictions and deaden my zeal for serving the Lord. His concern led him to caution me with this well-meaning warning about what he feared might be the result of my desire to pursue further theological education.

Rather than unfounded and misguided, my church friend’s caution reflects many tragic experiences. Theological studies are sometimes the enemy of faith. Yet his warning strikes at the wrong target. The problem is not theology itself but the incorrect conclusions some practitioners of the discipline draw from their studies.

Contrary to what certain Christians suggest, there are no simple believers who can remain untainted by theological reflection. Whether consciously or unconsciously, each of us has a set of convictions about ultimate reality. We believe *something* about God, ourselves, and the purpose of life. And these

foundational beliefs surface in what we say and how we live. Every person is in this sense a theologian.

Although all persons have beliefs, many people give little thought to how they form their fundamental convictions. And they rarely reflect on how these convictions are affecting the way they live. Christians, in contrast, take convictions seriously. We know that all beliefs are not equal; some are better than others. And certain convictions are true, whereas others are false.

The Bible confirms the importance of convictions. It emphasizes the role of the mind in discipleship. Jesus, for example, reiterated the Old Testament command to love God with all our being, including our minds (Matt. 22:37). Similarly Paul admonished his readers to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). The attempt to give serious place to this dimension of discipleship—to ask, “What *do* I believe?”—brings us into the realm of theology.

What Is Theology?

Our English word “theology” arises from two Greek terms, *theos* (“God”) and *logos* (“word,” “teaching,” “study”).¹ Hence, “theology” means “the teaching concerning God” or “the study of God.” The authors of Scripture constantly engage in this activity. All of their writings speak about God and his dealings with creation.

“Theology” can also carry an expanded meaning. In academic circles, it is a generic term referring to the various aspects of the study of the Bible and the church. Scholars often organize these studies into three major divisions:²

- *Biblical theology* is the study of the doctrine espoused by the individual books or authors of Scripture.
- *Historical theology* describes the development of doctrine in the church, whereas *systematic theology* delineates an understanding of the faith in the contemporary situation.
- And *practical theology* applies doctrine to contemporary church life.

Today, however, Christians often use “theology” in a more specific sense. The word denotes the set of beliefs about God and the world that are uniquely ours. Thus, we may offer this definition:

1. Frank Whaling, “The Development of the Word ‘Theology,’” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981): 292–300.

2. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *A Brief Outline of the Study of Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1966).

Theology is the systematic reflection on, and articulation of, the fundamental beliefs we share as followers of Jesus Christ.

Theologians generally organize our foundational beliefs into several major categories. This organization of theology by category is often referred to as systematic theology in that theologians organize these categories or topics in systemic relationships. Following their lead, we will arrange the twelve chapters of this book according to a sixfold division of theology:

God	theology proper
humankind and the created universe	anthropology
Jesus and the salvation he brought	Christology
the Holy Spirit and the Spirit’s work in us and in the world	pneumatology
the church as the fellowship of Christ’s disciples	ecclesiology
the consummation or completion of God’s program for creation	eschatology

Why Theology?

Theology arises out of an attempt to describe what we believe as Christians and to connect our beliefs with Christian living. But why is this important? Why be concerned to know what we believe?

Since the first century, the church has continually affirmed the importance of theology to its mission. Theology assists the church in at least three ways.³

- First, theological reflection helps us sift through the many belief systems that vie for attention. With the help of theology, we are better able to affirm correct doctrine.

As in every era, we are bombarded with the teachings of people who claim to offer a fuller understanding of Christianity. Contemporary claimants carry a variety of labels. These range from the more familiar (e.g., Jehovah’s Witnesses) to the more esoteric (e.g., Scientology).

In addition, we find ourselves bombarded with an unprecedented number of competing religious systems and views of the world. These include not only the older world religions (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism) but also a host of newer proposals. Beginning in the early twentieth century and extending to our contemporary context, many new religious and metaphysical

3. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), 93–96.

movements⁴ have challenged the faith of Christians. Each of them appeals to a purported fuller revelation from God and promises a fuller life to its adherents.

In the midst of this situation, the study of Christian belief can help us differentiate true belief (orthodoxy) from false teachings (heresy). Thereby, theology grounds us in the truth so that we are not “blown here and there by every wind of teaching” (Eph. 4:14).

- Second, theology serves the crucial task of instructing believers in Christian doctrine.

New converts are especially dependent on sound teaching. They may have only a minimal understanding of Christianity. Or their previous conception of the faith may have been ill-informed. For them to become stalwart believers requires that they be instructed in the fundamental beliefs that lie at the heart of the Christian faith. In instructing new believers we are following Jesus’s example. Indeed, our Lord commands us not only to evangelize the world but also to “make disciples of all nations.” And this task includes “teaching them” (Matt. 28:19–20).

God desires that we all become mature, stable disciples of our Lord (Eph. 4:11–14). Therefore, we never outgrow the need for instruction. Theological study can deepen our understanding of the distinctively Christian teaching about God and the world.

- Third, theology brings together in summary form what the Bible teaches about God and his purposes.

As Christ’s disciples we naturally desire to be biblical Christians. We want our conception of God and our understanding about what God has done for us to reflect that of the prophets and apostles. Theological reflection assists us in this task.

The desire to summarize our faith is not unique to contemporary Christians. Even the biblical peoples capsulized their beliefs. At the heart of the faith of the Hebrews was their belief in the God who had called their forefather Abraham and had rescued their ancestors from Egypt (Deut. 26:5–9). This God was the sole God and the only one worthy of love (Deut. 6:4–5). In a similar manner, the New Testament church summarized what they had come

4. E.g., Transcendental Meditation, Divine Light, New Age, the Unification Church, Raëlism, Scientology, and countless other cults.

to believe about Christ and the salvation he brought (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:3–8; Phil. 2:6–11; 1 Tim. 3:16).

Theology, then, helps us to

- differentiate true belief from false teaching,
- gain a firm grounding in the Christian faith, and
- understand what the Bible teaches about God and the world.

Because it aids us in this manner, the study of theology is vital to every Christian. Rather than undermining the firmness of our convictions, such study should enhance our faith.

Of course, theology exercises a critical function. It leads us to jettison certain beliefs that we thought were true but that in fact do not square with sound teaching. But even this critical aspect serves to strengthen faith, not destroy it. The study of theology should cause us to become more steadfast in faith and more sure of what we believe.

*Our study of Christian belief
ought to enhance our faith.*

Theology and Christian Living

Because of this connection to the what and why of our beliefs, Christians generally view theology as a purely intellectual discipline. This perception is, of course, partially correct. Theology can be heady stuff. And theologians often appear to split hairs about seemingly inconsequential matters. But the study of theology includes more than an academic debate about intellectual questions.

While it is an intellectual activity, theology is immensely practical. In fact, theology is among the most practical endeavors of the Christian life!

- First, theology is practical because of its link to our encounter with God in Christ—to that marvelous transaction we call “conversion.”

The Bible narrates God’s saving activity on behalf of sinful humankind. For us to receive God’s salvation, however, we must not only hear the gospel story but also be told the meaning of God’s saving acts. Specifically, we must hear not only *that* Christ died and rose again but also *why* he sacrificed his life and how in him God acted for us.

Theology seeks to understand the significance of the gospel we proclaim. In so doing, it assists the church in declaring the good news in ways that people

from varied backgrounds can understand so that they too may encounter God in Christ.

Once we have committed our lives to Christ, we naturally desire to know more about the God who has acted to save us. In this quest, theology also serves the people of God. Through theological reflection we wrestle with how we can best conceive of and speak about the God who is the Author and object of our faith. Hence, faith—conversion—naturally leads to theology.

- But theology's purpose is not merely to satisfy our intellectual curiosity. It has another practical goal in view—to provide direction for Christian living.

Regardless of religious orientation, a person's basic beliefs (or worldview) affect his or her way of life. And the way people live is the best indication of what they *really* believe about reality—in contrast to what they may profess to believe.

The Christian life flows out of a set of beliefs shaped by the Bible. Theology sets forth the uniquely Christian understanding of the world, at the heart of which is the story about Jesus of Nazareth. It explores Christ's significance for all of life. In this way, theology provides the needed intellectual resources for facing the challenges of the historical and social context in which God

Our study of Christian belief ought to enhance our lives as disciples.

calls us to live. Our theological orientation—our fundamental beliefs about who God is, who we are as God's people, and what God is seeking to accomplish in the world—offers needed direction as we seek to live as Christ's disciples.

The practical goal of theology stands as a warning against the persistent danger of intellectualism.

We pursue theology with the goal of understanding our faith in a systematic manner, of course. But constructing a theological system cannot be our ultimate purpose. Instead, we engage in theological reflection so that our lives might be changed. We desire to become stronger and more effective disciples—to connect Christian belief with Christian living.

Sound theological reflection will make a difference in how we live. Doctrinal conviction provides the foundation for our attempts to determine the best way to live out our Christian commitment in the midst of the varied situations that confront us. And it motivates us to act continually in accordance with our commitment to Christ. Whenever our theological work stops short of this, we have failed to be obedient to our calling as thinking Christians. Indeed, our goal must always be to link Christian belief with Christian living.

Theology and Faith

What we have said so far suggests that theology is closely connected with faith. Yet we must never confuse the two.

We may characterize the difference by suggesting that biblical faith is immediate. Indeed, faith comprises our personal response to the God who encounters us in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And this response involves all aspects of our personhood—specifically, our intellect, volition, and emotions.

- Faith includes our intellect. Faith means accepting as true certain specific assertions about reality. For example, we believe that God is our Creator, that humans are fallen, and that Christ died for us. As we acknowledge these truths, we come to view the world in a specific way.
- Faith includes our will. Faith means willingly committing our entire life to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. By faith we cast ourselves on Christ alone to save us.
- And faith includes our emotions. Faith is our heartfelt response of love to the One who saves us. This love for God, in turn, translates into love for others.

If faith touches on all three aspects, what about theology?

Immediately we must note that theology is closely related to faith, because it studies the response that God desires of us to the good news. But theology approaches faith from a unique vantage point. As Christian theologians, we seek to understand faith and to articulate the content of the Christian faith. In this endeavor, we raise certain specifically intellectual questions:

- What statements best express the nature of the God who is the Author and resting point of our faith?
- What is God “up to”—what are God’s intentions for creation? And how is God accomplishing these goals?
- Who are we as participants in God’s program?

But above all, our theological reflection focuses on the significance of Jesus of Nazareth for our understanding of God, creation, and history. By engaging in theology, we seek to assist the Christian community in understanding the importance of Jesus Christ to the divine program. And we seek to understand the significance of our commitment to Jesus for all human life.

In short, therefore, theology probes the intellectual dimension of Christian faith. Consequently, theology is called forth by faith. We engage in

theology because we naturally want to articulate the intellectual content of our faith.

We must note as well, however, that theology is likewise subservient to faith. That is, it seeks to serve faith. We engage in theology so that we may better understand our faith. A deepened understanding of faith, in turn, is one means whereby our faith is strengthened.

Because theology is the servant of faith, we must be vigilant against another danger—substitution. People who study theology sometimes allow theologizing to become a substitute for genuine, personal faith. But we cannot fall into this trap. We dare never replace commitment to the Triune God with our doctrines about God. We dare never allow our enthusiasm for our ability to formulate statements about Christ to diminish our love for him. And we must resolutely avoid placing confidence in our abilities to develop a theological system. Our hope for salvation can rest only in the God in whose service we stand.

The danger of substitution is real. Yet when theology truly does its work, the result is the opposite. Our theological reflections will lead to a deeper love for Christ and a deepened trust in the one true God.

Our Resources as Theologians

Because theology's wider goal is practical—to connect Christian belief with Christian living—theological reflection ought to foster in us a truly godly spirituality and obedient discipleship. What resources or tools are available to us as we engage in this?⁵

Central to the theological task are three resources (which theologians often refer to as “sources” or “norms”):⁶

- the biblical message,
- the theological heritage of the church, and
- the thought forms of our culture.

By properly using these tools—which includes valuing them in this order—we can construct a helpful theology for our day, a theology that is biblical, Christian, and contemporary.

5. For a more detailed discussion, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 87–108. See also Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996); Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000); and Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

6. For a similar delineation, see Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 40.

- Our *primary* resource as we engage in the theological task is the divine message inscripturated in the Bible.

Faith is our response to the God who encounters us in the gospel. Therefore, our articulation of the Christian faith naturally looks to the good news that we find in the Bible. For this reason, our theology must arise from the story of God's saving activity. God has disclosed this saving activity in the history of Old Testament Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in the New Testament church.

Through the pages of Scripture, the Spirit speaks to us about what it means to be the community of those who confess faith in the God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. And the Bible guides us in our task of verbalizing and embodying our devotion to Christ in the context in which we live.

Some Christians strive to establish the authority of Scripture by elaborate proofs. While these attempts are sometimes helpful, we do not need to prove the Bible in order to begin the theological task. Instead, we may simply assume the Bible's authority.

As we will elaborate in chapter 7, the Bible is the Spirit-produced document through which the Spirit has always spoken to God's people. For this reason, it is the foundational document of the Christian church. Therefore, its message remains the central resource for Christian theology in every age.

- Of *secondary* importance to us in the theological task is the theological heritage of the church.

Throughout their history Christians have joined together to express their faith in the God revealed through Jesus. This has resulted in a rich deposit of theological reflection within the church. The creeds and confessions of the past offer guidance for us as we engage in the same task today.

Past theological statements are instructive in our attempt to set forth a statement of Christian doctrine that is relevant to our contemporary context. They remind us of previous attempts to fulfill the theological mandate. In so doing they alert us to some of the pitfalls to avoid. And they point us in directions that may hold promise for our attempts to engage in the theological calling in our own situation.

Certain past formulations—often called “creeds” or “confessions of faith”—carry special significance. These classic statements express what has been the doctrine of the church throughout the ages. Because we are the contemporary expression of the one church, we should take seriously those doctrinal formulations that have engendered broad acknowledgment among Christians of many generations.

Of course, creeds and confessions of faith are not binding in and of themselves.⁷ They must be tested by the Scriptures and by their applicability to our situation.

- Theology's *tertiary* resource lies in the thought forms of contemporary culture.

We are called to express the Christian faith within the context of the world in which we live. One aspect of this calling is the task of articulating Christian doctrine in a manner that speaks to people today.

Engaging in this task requires that we understand our culture.⁸ We must become aware of the longings of people today. And we must be thoroughly acquainted with the ways people around us view their world and speak about life. Only then are we equipped to express Christian belief in a way that connects with life—in a way that can address the problems, felt needs, and valid aspirations of people today.

In exploring Christian belief, we use the tools of the Bible, Christian heritage, and contemporary culture.

We can discuss the resources for theology in isolation from each other. However, when we engage in the theological enterprise, we discover that they are inseparable. In seeking to express the faith of the people of God we must look simultaneously to the biblical message, the theological heritage of the church,

and our contemporary cultural context. At the same time, we keep our focus on the Bible as our “norming norm,” as the one authoritative standard for Christian belief and Christian living.

Theology and the Concept of Community

The pages of this volume seek to build from these three resources. Our goal is to offer a systematic statement of the faith of the church in a manner that can speak to contemporary culture. To this end, we will order our theological reflections around the concept of community, understood as the goal of God's program for creation. God is at work in our world, we declare. And God's

7. The Westminster Confession of Faith, which formed the apex of Puritan efforts to delineate a proper recounting of biblical doctrine, declares that the final authority in the church is “the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures.” See “The Westminster Confession of Faith,” 1/10, in *Creeds of the Churches*, 3rd ed., ed. John H. Leith (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 196.

8. For a discussion of theological use and study of culture, see Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 39–74.

purpose in this activity is the establishment of community—a reconciled people who enjoy fellowship with him, with one another, and ultimately with all creation.

Why community? Because the focus on community encapsules the biblical message, it stands at the heart of the theological heritage of the church, and it speaks to the aspirations and the sensed needs of people in our world today.⁹ In short, as we realize that we are created for community, we are in a position to connect Christian belief with Christian living.

The following chapters describe the Christian faith by speaking about community. Our discussion opens with the central doctrine of the Christian faith—God (theology proper). In chapters 1 and 2 we explore the nature of the Triune God who is at work in establishing community in the highest sense.

Standing in relationship with the sovereign, community-building God are God’s moral creatures. The discussion of who we are—as those God has designed for community—forms the subject of chapters 3 and 4 (anthropology).

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus the Christ (Christology). In this section we reflect on what it means to confess that the man Jesus is the eternal Son whose earthly vocation was to initiate community between God and sinful humans.

God’s goal for creation is community—a redeemed people dwelling in a renewed creation, enjoying the presence of the Triune God.

In chapters 7 and 8 (pneumatology) the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, comes into our purview. We explore the Spirit’s role in Scripture and in effecting personal salvation, which we will view as community with God and others.

Chapters 9 and 10 (ecclesiology) and 11 and 12 (eschatology) view the Spirit’s corporate and consummative work. In these chapters, we explore the activity of the Holy Spirit as God at work establishing community in history and ultimately in eternity. The bringing about of the eternal community brings to completion the divine goal for creation.

A Closing Connection

Each of us is a theologian, just as God intended. Consequently, our question is not, Will we be theologians? but, Will we be good theologians? Will we

9. For a lengthier discussion, see Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 137–64.

develop a worldview that is biblically sound and theologically correct? And will we translate theology into life, thereby showing ourselves to be disciples of the one we acknowledge as Lord? The following pages are intended to sharpen our theological knowledge so that we may connect Christian belief with Christian living—that is, so that we may love God more completely and serve Christ more effectively.

Songwriter Mark Pendergrass got the order correct. In his poignant musical prayer, “The Greatest Thing,” he articulates the earnest desires of his heart.¹⁰ The three verses of his prayer express the yearning first to know, then to love, and finally to serve God more. Indeed, as we come to know God more—which is the direct task of theology—our love for God ought to deepen. And a deeper love for God ought to flow into greater service. Only then have we truly connected Christian belief with Christian living.

Mastering the Material

Having Read This Chapter, You Should Know:

1. The definition of “theology” and its major divisions.
2. Three ways in which theology assists the church in its mission.
3. Why theology is practical and spiritual, not merely intellectual.
4. Theology’s three main resources and their relative importance and authority.
5. Theology’s unifying focus.

For Connection and Application

1. How would you define “theology”? Why is theology as you defined it important?
2. Do you agree that we are all theologians? How are our real beliefs reflected in the way we live? Indeed, what do our beliefs mean outside of the way we live?
3. Think of a specific situation in which you have consciously connected Christian belief with Christian living. What process did you go through to make the connection? Can you think of other areas of your life where God is calling you to translate your faith into good works (see James 2:14–17)?

10. Mark Pendergrass, “The Greatest Thing,” 1977. Contemporary Christian music as a whole reflects this pattern—to know, to love, and to serve. For example, see the worship music of Darlene Zschech, David Crowder, and Chris Tomlin, among many others.

4. If Christianity is true, then our beliefs as Christians can make a real difference in our lives. Our Christian belief should lead us to a greater commitment to Christ and a deeper love for God. How have your studies of Christian belief strengthened you spiritually? Who can you share this discovery with, in order to encourage them?

1

Knowing the God of the Bible in the Contemporary World

Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and
Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

John 17:3

“We no longer need to *prove* the existence of God to the people living around my church.” The pastor’s remark grabbed my attention. “The people living in this ‘yuppie’ neighborhood in the heart of Toronto,” he explained, “all *assume* the reality of the supernatural.”

The pastor’s observation is confirmed by opinion polls that consistently indicate that the vast majority of people in the United States and Canada claim to believe in God or to acknowledge some divine reality. Yet this does not mean that these people enjoy a personal relationship with the living God. Indeed, many people in the early twenty-first century simply choose to ignore the existence of God. God may exist for this populace, but for a complex variety of reasons, people in Western culture are discounting the practice, and in some instances the possibility, of a living faith.

At the heart of our faith is the testimony that through Jesus Christ we have come to know the only true God. We declare that to know God means more than merely asserting that a vague, generic Supreme Being exists. We likewise

cannot assume that all religious traditions automatically lead their devotees to the God of the Bible.

On the contrary, we assert that biblical faith entails a personal relationship with the God who encounters us in Jesus. Knowing this God, in turn, leads us to see all of life in a special way. Our faith commitment motivates us to live for the glory of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a faith shaped by the Trinity. It is this faith that provides the foundation for knowing how to live for God's glory. Theology assists in this process, for it facilitates us in our quest to know the God of the Bible.

God and the Contemporary World

But how can we continue to proclaim the ancient message about the God of Jesus our Lord in the contemporary context? Does our Christian confession still remain credible in today's world? And can we truly anticipate that people will listen when we declare that God has encountered us in Jesus Christ?

In responding to these questions, we must remind ourselves that our world is populated by people with many differing opinions about, and attitudes toward, religious matters. Therefore, our claim that the Christian faith is true may take several forms.

Is There a God? Our Response to Atheism

Certain people today deny the existence of any God whatsoever. "There is no God," they firmly assert. We may call this denial "atheism," a word that means literally "no God." Atheists argue that the universe is not the creation of a purposeful God. Rather, it is shaped by blind, random natural forces. Or they see in the presence of evil in the world conclusive proof that a benevolent God cannot exist.

An atheistic spirit has filtered into our general cultural ethos. Pressured by a scientific worldview that leaves no room for religion, many people have discarded the concept of God.¹ For them, God has become either the God-of-the-gaps for whom no gaps are left or a debilitating limitation on human freedom.

What can we say to people who do not acknowledge the reality of God?

Intellectual atheism is a relatively new development in the history of humankind. It did not gain a widespread following until long after the church expanded into the world dominated by Greek culture. In fact, it is in one sense

1. See the work of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and others.

a result of the rejection of the Christian gospel by intellectuals standing in the tradition of the Greeks.

Let's look at this historical development, for it provides a window on our world today.

The Greek philosophers loved to engage in intellectual argumentation. Above all, they debated whether or not we could devise philosophical proofs for theological beliefs, including the existence of the one God, understood as the First Cause of the world.

Influenced by the Greeks, Christian philosophers devised arguments that they thought actually proved God's existence. These Christian thinkers intended to provide intellectual confirmation of faith in God. Apologists such as Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) thought that they were simply living out Augustine's famous dictum, "I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand."² Like other thinkers, Anselm was convinced that intellectual proofs for God's existence offered the "understanding"—the logical persuasion—that Christian faith naturally evokes.

Christian philosophers developed three basic types of arguments for God's existence:

- ontological proofs,
- cosmological and teleological proofs, and
- moral proofs.

► **A first type of argument—the ontological approach—claims to demonstrate God's existence by considering the idea of God itself.**

Ontological proofs begin with a commonly held definition of God. They then show that there must be a Being (God) who corresponds to the definition. These arguments claim that by definition God cannot merely be an idea in our minds but must also actually exist.

In his classical ontological proof, Anselm defined God as "that than which no greater can be conceived."³ He then offered two possibilities: either God exists only in human minds or God exists both in human minds and in reality. But if we conceive of God as existing only in our minds and not in reality, Anselm added, this God is not "that than which no greater can be conceived." Indeed, we could conceive of a God that exists both in our minds and in

2. Anselm, *Proslogion*, in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, 2nd ed., trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962), 7.

3. *Ibid.*, 8.

reality. The God whom we conceive of as existing both mentally and actually is obviously greater than the God who we believe exists only in our minds. Therefore, Anselm concluded, by definition God *must* exist.

Several centuries later, the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) argued in a somewhat similar manner. God, he said, is the “supremely perfect Being.”⁴ Now if God does not exist in reality, Descartes reasoned, he lacks one perfection—existence. But the God so conceived—as perfect in every way but not existing in reality—is not the most perfect being.

In the 1800s, Georg Hegel (1770–1831) offered a quite different ontological proof. He defined God as the infinite one, who stands as a contrast to finite beings. The idea of such a God, Hegel argued, is necessary to our human thinking process. The mind, he noted, cannot conceive of finite reality without at the same time thinking of an “infinite” that lies beyond the finite.⁵

More recently Norman Malcolm (1911–90) asserted that God must exist because by his very conception he cannot *not* exist. Malcolm believed that God’s existence is by definition *necessary* existence.⁶ That is, God necessarily exists or exists by necessity.

- The second type of philosophical proof—the cosmological and teleological arguments—seeks to demonstrate the existence of God by drawing on evidence provided by sense experience.

Cosmological and teleological arguments build from our observations of the world. They conclude that God must exist as the explanation for certain aspects of the universe that we readily observe.

Thus, *cosmological* proofs purport to demonstrate that God must exist as the ultimate cause of the universe itself. The world must have come from somewhere. And this somewhere is God.

Already in the thirteenth century, the great Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) developed a series of cosmological and teleological arguments, which are often called “the five ways.”⁷ Among Thomas’s five ways is

4. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur, Library of Liberal Arts ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), 120.

5. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie, Harper Torchbooks/The Academy Library ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 207–13. For a discussion of Hegel’s thinking, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, 3 vols., trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 3:84–86.

6. Norman Malcolm, “Anselm’s Ontological Arguments,” in *Knowledge and Certainty: Essays and Lectures* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), 20–27.

7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.2.3, in *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Modern Library, 1948), 24–27.

an argument often considered the best example of the cosmological proof. According to Thomas, every contingent reality must have a cause that explains its existence. In Thomas's view, something is "contingent" if it could either be or not be, it does not exhaustively explain itself, and its existence and being are not self-evident. In referring to reality as "contingent," Thomas was indicating that the universe is made up entirely of contingent things. Because the universe is contingent, it must have a noncontingent cause. Any such cause would have to be a necessary, infinite being. We call this noncontingent cause of the universe "God."

Teleological arguments, in contrast, look to more specific details of the universe. They claim that God must exist as the cause of some specific characteristic we observe in the natural world. The aspect philosophers most often cite is the apparent design or order in the universe. The design of the universe declares the existence of a cosmic Designer.

Perhaps more widely known is the teleological argument proposed by William Paley (1743–1805). Paley's proof draws an analogy from the common watch, which in his day was an impressive array of springs and wheels, rather than the electronic timepiece we wear today. Paley noted that a precise mechanical instrument such as a watch declares the existence of its designer (the watchmaker). In a similar manner the intricate construction of the natural world bears witness to the existence of its Designer. We call this cosmic Architect "God."⁸

Early in the twentieth century F. R. Tennant (1866–1957) offered an updated version of the teleological argument. Unlike many thinkers for whom Darwin's theories were a stumbling block to faith, Tennant saw the evolutionary development of the universe as a pointer to God's existence. Specifically, he found a "wider teleology" within evolutionary nature. Many strands have worked together in the production of higher and higher levels of creatures, he declared. The evolutionary process climaxed in the appearance of humankind, the moral creature. This grand cosmic cooperation, Tennant claimed, provides ground for reasonable belief that God must exist. God is the one who gave direction to evolution.⁹

The cosmologist Robert Jastrow has offered a restatement of the cosmological proof. He argued that the widely held big bang theory once again makes the postulate of God intellectually respectable.¹⁰ God is the one who set off the big bang that started the universe.

8. William Paley, *Natural Theology* (New York: American Tract Society, n.d.), chaps. 1–6.

9. F. R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928–30), 2:78–104.

10. Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (New York: Norton, 1978).

- A third philosophical proof begins with the human experience of being a moral creature.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) offered a classic formulation of this approach. Each human, he noted, lives out of an unavoidable sense of duty. Kant did not mean that all humans share a specific moral code. Rather, he argued that behind the various and differing codes of conduct humans devise is a common feeling of being morally conditioned, or held responsible by the sense of duty.

Kant concluded that God must exist if this experience of moral obligation is to have any meaning. In a truly moral universe virtuous conduct must be rewarded and wrongdoing must be punished. But for this to occur, there must be a Supreme Lawgiver. This God guarantees that ultimately moral justice will be done.¹¹

Hastings Rashdall (1858–1924) devised a somewhat different formulation of the moral proof. He noted that ideals—standards and goals toward which people strive—exist only in minds. But, he added, certain ideals are absolute. These can exist only in a mind adequate for them—namely, in an absolute or divine Mind. Therefore, he concluded, God must exist.¹²

Perhaps the most well-known contemporary formulation of the moral argument came from the pen of C. S. Lewis in his widely read book *Mere Christianity*.¹³ All human societies reflect a universal code of morality, Lewis claimed. In all cultures certain conduct is praised, while certain other actions are universally condemned. According to Lewis, this phenomenon indicates that behind the universe lies something that is conscious, has purpose, and prefers one type of conduct to another. Hence, this “something” is more like Mind than like anything else we know. Consequently, Lewis concluded, the “something” at the foundation of the world is God.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, British theologian and scientist Alister McGrath has entered into a variety of debates with atheist Richard Dawkins, among others, on the existence of God. In his apologetics, McGrath argues for God’s existence from all of these positions—cosmological, teleological, and moral—yet adds a few more. McGrath also argues for God’s existence from anthropological and aesthetic positions. Anthropologically, McGrath

11. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), 114–15, 126–39.

12. Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 2:189–246.

13. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Macmillan Paperbacks ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 17–39.

notes that as early as Pascal, there has been articulated an intuitive human need for God. From an aesthetic standpoint, McGrath argues that the created order displays a beauty that points beyond itself. In a postmodern context, McGrath's arguments merit further investigation.¹⁴

Each of these proofs for God's existence has elicited criticisms. Nevertheless, many people find them intellectually compelling. For this reason, some Christians continue to use such arguments in the attempt to prove to modern skeptics that belief in God is intellectually credible. These Christian apologists believe that such proofs provide ammunition in the war against atheism. In addition, they add, intellectual arguments assist in evangelism. The classical proofs remove the intellectual misgivings that hinder some people from coming to faith.

*We can seek to demonstrate
that faith is intellectually
credible, but we cannot argue
anyone into the kingdom.*

How should we respond to this? Are such proofs helpful? Yes and no.

The various proofs for God's existence may provide some assistance in speaking to contemporary skeptics. But we ought not be surprised to discover that few people can be "argued into the kingdom."

Nevertheless, the classic proofs remind us that in every age we have an apologetic role to fulfill, a role in explaining and defending the faith. As believers, we are convinced that only when we acknowledge God's existence can we truly understand the universe and ourselves as humans. As John Calvin declared, "It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself."¹⁵

Which God? Christian Faith within the Competition of the Gods

We find ourselves living in a complex situation. Not only does our world include skeptics who deny the existence of God, but many other people retain some semblance of belief in God while living as "practical atheists." Like the "fool" the psalmist mentions (Pss. 14:1; 53:1), they go about the tasks of life with little apparent need for God. For them God has become at best an innocuous postulate or perhaps even totally irrelevant to life.

14. See Alister E. McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012).

15. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.2, in vol. 20 of the *Library of Christian Classics*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 37.

But this does not exhaust our situation. Our society is also rapidly becoming a fertile field for a myriad of old and new religions. For some people, this proliferation of rival beliefs is merely another indication that Christianity cannot be true. For others, however, the spiritual aridness of contemporary life has produced a new thirst for the divine. As a result, we are witnessing a rebirth of interest in the supernatural. Yet people are not necessarily gravitating to the Christian faith. Rather, many are being enticed by the gods proclaimed by the messengers of other religions. In our Western culture, the god of consumerism is just as exacting and manipulative as the traditional gods of other religious expressions, expecting the same homage, devotion, and worship. Jesus called this god Mammon (Luke 16:9–13).

The proliferation of gods in our society suggests that we may be living in a situation similar to that faced by the biblical community. The first-century Christians were steadfastly loyal to Jesus in a society that worshiped a pantheon of pagan gods (1 Cor. 8:5–6). Like the ancient Hebrews, the early believers proclaimed that the God of Abraham and the Father of Jesus Christ is the only true God. Their response to their situation stands as an example of how we can set forth Christian belief today.

In the ancient world, everybody acknowledged one or more deities. As a result, during the biblical era rival gods competed with each other for the loyalties of people. And the crucial religious question of the day was, Which god is worthy of homage and service?¹⁶

But how could this question be answered? The people of the ancient Near East believed that events in the world revealed the relative strength of the various tribal deities. The strong god was the one who could perform mighty acts.

In keeping with the ancient understanding, the book of Exodus presents the plagues as signs indicating that Yahweh was stronger than the Egyptian gods. Israel's God could do wonders that the deities of Egypt could not imitate.¹⁷ The deliverance of the fleeing Hebrews at the Red Sea became a further sign of Yahweh's power (Exod. 15:11–16). Forty years later, Yahweh parted the waters of the Jordan River so that the children of Israel could enter the land of Canaan. This demonstration of power struck terror in the hearts of the Canaanites (Josh. 5:1). And at a subsequent low point in Israel's history, Yahweh once again vindicated himself, together with Elijah the prophet, against the company of Baal worshipers on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18).

16. For a discussion of the development of the Israelite concept of monotheism, see Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1:220–27.

17. Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 43.

For the ancient peoples, one mighty act stood above all others—the provision of victory in battle.¹⁸ They viewed military conflicts not merely as contests of rival armies but also as struggles between rival deities. A military venture succeeded only because the god of the conquering tribe had vanquished the deity worshiped by the defeated people.

For example, when the army of Assyria surrounded Jerusalem, the invading general taunted not only Israel but also Israel's God. The haughty commander reminded his dispirited opponents that the gods of the nations had been unable to protect their devotees from the conquering Assyrian army (2 Kings 18:32–35).

A grave crisis of faith unfolded when foreigners finally devastated the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Could it be that Yahweh had been vanquished by other gods? In response, the prophets declared that the captivity of God's people did not mean that Yahweh was unable to protect his own. Instead, they were signs of his judgment on their sin. God had allowed foreigners to take his people into captivity so that they might return wholeheartedly to him.¹⁹

*There is only one God.
This God is not merely our
personal God. Rather the
God we know in Christ is the
God of the whole world.*

The Old Testament prophets knew that Yahweh alone was the true God. This, however, meant that idolatry—paying homage to any other god—was a grievous sin. There is only one God, they adamantly asserted. And he alone is to be worshiped.²⁰

The prophets posed another far-reaching question as well: Is Yahweh merely Israel's tribal god, or is he also the God of all humankind? Could the Hebrews alone worship Yahweh? Or was their God the only true God, so that all the nations of the earth should join in the worship of the Holy One of Israel?²¹

Prophets such as Zechariah anticipated the answer. He pointed to a day when all nations would worship in Jerusalem (Zech. 14:16). Zechariah's vision of an international congregation of worshipers announced that Yahweh is the God of the whole world. He is to be worshiped by all the peoples of the earth.

At the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) the church ratified Zechariah's conclusion. They declared that gentiles do not need to become Jews in order to join the community of faith. Through Jesus Christ we know that there is only one God, who is God over all (1 Cor. 8:4–6; 10:18–22).

18. Ibid., 41.

19. Ibid., 197.

20. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:226–27.

21. Ibid., 219–21.

The way the biblical community of faith responded to the conflict of the gods offers a model as to how we can declare our faith in a situation in which many gods are increasingly pervading society.

Their example reminds us that we cannot limit our response to intellectual argumentation, especially an argumentation that focuses on the proofs for God's existence. Instead, ours must be a living demonstration. We must embody—live out—our faith commitment in the midst of life.

Our claim to know God gains credibility as we connect belief in God with life as a Christian.

Nor in the context of the many “gods” that vie for the loyalties of people today can we merely proclaim the existence of some generic god. As Christians, we assert that the only true God is the one disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth and who raised Jesus

from the dead. One day this God will publicly demonstrate Jesus's lordship, for our Lord will return in glory and judgment.

Until that great day, we must continue to proclaim the good news about the God of the Bible, who alone can give meaning to life. In so doing, our claim that “God exists” flows into a humble declaration that in Christ we have come to know God. In the end, we believe that “God is” because we have encountered the only true God in Jesus Christ. And ultimately our claim to know the one God only gains credence in the contemporary world as he demonstrates the divine presence through the way we live—through our lives as we connect our Christian belief with true Christian living.

This is our most powerful apologetic in a world of many “gods.”

Knowing God

As Christians, we declare that the only true God has made himself known to us in Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus, we have come to know God. But what does it mean to know God? Can we make such a claim today? And how does this encounter with God occur?

We Know the Incomprehensible God

Many people today respond with skepticism when we claim to know God. As we have seen, some deny God's existence (atheism). Others, however, assert that even if God exists no one can ever come to know the deity. We may call this viewpoint “agnosticism,” a word that means literally “no knowledge.”

We, however, boldly testify that we have come to know the living God. Yet in voicing our claim we dare not miss the valid reminder agnostics offer us. We

must humbly acknowledge with the biblical authors that God is *incomprehensible* (e.g., Job 11:7–8; Pss. 97:2; 145:3; Isa. 40:28; 45:15; 55:8–9; 1 Cor. 2:11).

What does this admission mean?

- ▶ To acknowledge that God is incomprehensible means that no human being can fully comprehend God.

We cannot fathom the depth of the divine reality. Whatever knowledge we have about God is at best only partial. Nor can we ever claim to know everything about him. Rather, God always remains partially hidden, beyond our gaze. God declared through Isaiah: “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9).

- ▶ To acknowledge that God is incomprehensible means that our knowledge of God is limited.

Nevertheless, we also adamantly maintain that God can be known. Although our knowledge of God is always partial, we know God as he actually is. Our Lord himself has declared that through him we truly come to know God (John 17:3).

But how does this “knowing God” come about?

We Know the Self-Revealing God

We know God ultimately only as God comes to us—only as he gives himself to be known—only as God *reveals* himself to us. We know God, therefore, because God takes the initiative. Jesus explains, “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11:27; see also 1 Cor. 2:9–16).²²

- ▶ This means that we can never make God the object of our human scrutiny.

We do not approach God in the way that we engage in the study of things around us. We do not scrutinize God in an objective, scientific manner or at our own whim. Rather, in our knowing God, God gives himself to be known.

22. John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 19–40. See also Grenz, *Social God*. Grenz understands revelation proper ultimately as a trinitarian accomplishment.

- This means as well that there is a great difference between knowing God and possessing knowledge about God.

When we know God, we have gained more than a body of truths. Rather than merely possessing a list of statements about God, we enjoy fellowship with the living, personal God. From this relationship, lofty declarations about God take on new meaning. They describe God's character and greatness as we have experienced the living One.

- This likewise means that ultimately when we know God we are the known object, not the knowing subject.

We do not actively come to know God. Instead, God grasps and knows us. As Paul remarks to the Galatian believers: "But now that you know God—or rather are known by God" (Gal. 4:9). There is an echo of the apostle in J. I. Packer's declaration, "What matters supremely therefore is not in the last analysis the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—the fact that *He knows me*."²³

How does this occur? Where does God come to us with the result that we know him?

Of course, this occurs in conversion, the point at which we encounter God personally. We will explore this more thoroughly in chapter 8. Here we need only note that through conversion the Holy Spirit links us with a larger story that begins in the past and will be completed in the future.²⁴ This story has a purpose or goal, for it is leading to that great day when God will reveal the fullness of the divine glory (1 Cor. 13:12; 1 John 3:2). The revelation of God's glory is not merely future, however. It has already invaded our world in Jesus of Nazareth (1 John 5:20). Consequently, it is in Jesus Christ that God confronts and apprehends us.

And what is the goal of knowing God?

According to the Bible, God's ultimate desire is to create from all nations a reconciled people living within a renewed creation and enjoying the presence of the Triune God. This biblical vision of community is the goal of history. But it is also the present—albeit partial—experience of each person who has come to know God.

23. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 37.

24. For a discussion of history as the focus of divine revelation, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Hermeneutic and Universal History," in *Basic Questions in Theology*, 1:96–136; and Wolfhart Pannenberg, ed., *Revelation as History*, trans. David Granskou (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 3–21, 125–35.

In the final analysis, therefore, we know that we have encountered God in that we have been brought to share in community—that is, as we enjoy fellowship with God and participate in the people of faith.

In subsequent chapters we will explore the implications of our encounter with God and the fellowship or community that it inaugurates. One conclusion, however, is crucial to the present discussion. Our participation in community with God, each other, and creation offers a final answer to not only the question about the possibility of knowing God but also the question of God's existence.

The contemporary world challenges our claim that we have come to know the only true God. We must meet this challenge on many fronts. Our answer includes demonstrating that the Christian faith is intellectually credible. But our response cannot end there. We must also embody our commitment to God by the way we live. We must connect Christian belief with Christian living. This includes living now in fellowship with God, others, and creation. Only Christian living in this way can confirm our testimony that we know the only true God, the “God who is.”

*Our life together with
other believers stands
as the best confirmation
that we know God.*

Mastering the Material

Having Read This Chapter, You Should Know:

1. Three basic types of arguments for God's existence and how they work to prove God's existence against atheistic denial.
2. The author's attitude toward the classical arguments for God's existence and his preferred approach to confronting atheism and justifying belief in the biblical God.
3. The meaning of God as “incomprehensible” and how we may know the incomprehensible God.
4. The goal of knowing God.

For Connection and Application

1. Which—if any—of the classical proofs for God's existence do you find intellectually compelling? What about it do you find appealing?
2. Although it is true that “few people can be argued into the kingdom,” what role did intellectual arguments play in your experience of coming to faith?

3. How did you come to know God personally? Looking back on your experience, how was this event actually God's own initiative in coming to know you?
4. What attracted you to the Christian faith? Did the consistency of life you observed in other Christians play a role? If so, how?
5. Do our lives as Christians really affect how others respond to our public testimony? Cite an example that you have experienced where your witness made a difference.
6. Why are both intellectual credibility and consistent living important dimensions of the Christian faith?