

—Introducing—

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY



DANIEL J. TREIER

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“In making introductions, first impressions count: according to a Harvard study it takes only seven seconds to size up a new acquaintance. *Introducing Evangelical Theology* makes a good impression in the first seven pages, where we meet a movement that is equally concerned with intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation; ecumenically orthodox and rooted in the great creeds; yet distinctly Protestant in its insistence that the gospel retain its glorious freedom to renew and reform. By the end of the book, readers will also have formed a good lasting impression of evangelical theology and an appreciation for Treier’s clear, fair, and winsome exposition of the trinitarian narrative of the gospel and its interpretive traditions. Each chapter includes theses, definitions of key terms, and a set of learning objectives—everything one needs to learn the grammar of evangelical faith. This is not simply an introduction to but an

education in evangelical theology, and one to which I will be enthusiastically introducing students for years to come.”

—Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“In these pages Treier offers a truly remarkable combination of Scripture, tradition, ethics, doctrine, historic debates, and contemporary challenges as he explores one essential topic after another. Trinitarian in both content and structure, the book could not be more thoughtfully ordered and presented. I know this book’s pages will be dog-eared and its binding worn by many a college student, pastor, graduate student, and academic, for whom it will quickly become an invaluable and treasured resource.”

—Kristen Deede Johnson, Western Theological Seminary

“What a great teacher! Treier is a master of summarizing the expansive, explaining the complicated, and highlighting the central. Here we encounter an invitation to experience the breadth of the Christian tradition while standing within the best of the spirit of evangelical theology. Treier is fair, judicious, generous, and wise. Learn to theologize like him not only for the good of your heart but also for the good of God’s church and world. This volume will surely be a great gift to a generation of readers.”

—Kelly M. Kapic, Covenant College

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DANIEL J. TREIER



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To my daughter, Anna.
May you continue to radiate joy
as you grow in the grace and knowledge
of the Triune God (2 Pet. 3:18).

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“One Carries It Around Within”

BRETT FOSTER

Doctrine can never be belief. Doctrine
is one means only to register belief,
like a job interview conducted briefly
or census taker who never sees the tin
of steaming tamales, much less tastes them.
He makes his tallies, door to door without relief.
Sometimes doctrine is most felt as a grief,
hard in the bones or sorrow’s marrow when
prodigious clumps of cells become prolific.
The other part is like a funny gift,
there in your bones as well, but lonelier, late,
sent from a shipping station far in the distance.
Opened but barely known, it still irradiates
your every admiration for existence.

Brett Foster (1973–2015), my friend and colleague in Wheaton’s English department, authored this poem early in his untimely battle with cancer. In his hospital room we discussed the possibility of including it in this book. I am grateful for permission to do so from Brett’s wife, Anise, and from John Wilson of *Books & Culture*, where it was previously published. If nothing else, this poem conveys the mysterious reason for healthy Christian doctrine: staking our entire lives—in all their glory and agony—on a gracious God.

The Nicene Creed

I

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

II

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

III

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.¹

1. This version of the Nicene Creed was adopted at the Council of Constantinople in 381, as explained in chap. 8. The translation here is available at the English Language Liturgical Consultation, <http://englishtexts.org/ELLC-Documents/Survey-of-Use#thenicenecreed>, and reprinted here with permission, with one alteration: the ELLC translation reads “became truly human” instead of “was made man,” which is more precise.

Chapter Theses

1. Christian theology is a communicative practice of faith seeking understanding, in response to the Word of the Triune God accompanied by the Holy Spirit.
2. Christian beliefs are integrated with behavior, extending Israel's moral tradition from the Ten Commandments to root human community in the love of God and neighbor.
3. Christian beliefs are integrated with belonging as well as behavior, reforming Israel's spiritual tradition to inaugurate a community of grace among Jesus's followers, as epitomized in the Sermon on the Mount and especially the Lord's Prayer.
4. Christian orthodoxy teaches that the one true God is triune, existing in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are undivided in the external works that reveal the divine identity.
5. From creation to consummation, providence reveals the Triune God's perfections of power, wisdom, love, and holiness; the drama of redemption is the setting in which the Bible addresses the mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility along with the meaning of evil.
6. Creation out of nothing is an article of Christian faith according to which the Triune God has spoken the world into existence—granting dignified life, dependent freedom, and delightful fellowship to creatures in their materiality, sociality, and temporality.
7. Human beings are uniquely created to commune with God and to communicate what God is like; for this calling God has made them embodied souls and relational selves, with each person and culture having dignity

rooted in God's love and their diversity being an occasion of divine delight.

8. The orthodox identity of Jesus Christ involves the hypostatic union: in the incarnation the fully divine Son of God has assumed a fully human nature, to serve as the one Mediator of revelation and redemption.
9. Jesus Christ's ministry of reconciliation as the Mediator between God and humanity is signaled by his virginal conception; continues throughout his earthly ministry as messianic prophet, priest, and king; climaxes in his atoning passion; and commences a newly exalted phase in his resurrection and ascension.
10. All of Adam and Eve's descendants are born dead in sin, which is rooted in idolatry and inevitably results in injustice. The Spirit's application of Jesus's reconciling work brings salvation from sin's past, present, and future effects; justification removes sin's penalty, regeneration removes sin's power, and glorification removes sin's presence from those who are united with Christ.
11. The gospel takes cultural form in Orthodox Christianity, emphasizing a tradition of *theosis*; in Catholic Christianity, emphasizing the sacramental renewal of creaturely being; and in seven major traditions of Protestant Christianity, emphasizing the gospel's freedom for biblical reform.
12. The Holy Spirit is the divine Giver of creaturely life, pouring out common grace, and the divine Giver of new life, applying Christ's redeeming grace as God's empowering presence—fostering conversion, consecration, assurance and perseverance, and shared ministry.
13. The authority of Holy Scripture emerges from God's final Word having been spoken in Jesus Christ; by the Holy Spirit, the written words and message of the prophets and apostles faithfully proclaim divine truth and powerfully rule over the church—even, with appropriate nuance, through various translations and the process of interpretation.
14. The Bible identifies the church as God's people in Christ; the Spirit graciously uses various practices for shaping the church as a community of worship, nurture, and witness; along with Word and “sacrament,” institutional order marks the church, yet traditional models of polity require wise modern implementation and humble acknowledgment of communal brokenness.
15. The vital Christian hope that God will make all things new has both cosmic and personal dimensions: cosmically, involving the return and

reign of Christ as anticipated in biblical prophecy; personally, involving resurrection of the body and final judgment. This hope is already inaugurated but not yet completely fulfilled, thus serving as an impetus for mission and an incentive for martyrdom in whatever form becomes necessary.

Introduction

Evangelical theology” announces a primary theme: the gospel. This good news of the Triune God’s love for sinners and redemption of the whole creation is the heart of the Bible’s story. This drama has its climax in the self-giving life of Jesus Christ and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Usually we hear this gospel from those who already believe. By whatever means, though, the good news evokes faith in Christ as a person cries out for salvation (Rom. 10:9–17). In this saving announcement—a Word that God literally speaks in person—we encounter the *Logos (note that glossary terms are marked with an asterisk), which holds together all creation (John 1:1–18; Col. 1:15–20). The Spirit prompts us to express our faith by seeking theological understanding, wanting to know more fully the God who first loves us.

Introducing Evangelical *Theology*

Christian theology has a trinitarian and narrative structure. The drama of redemption involves four glorious unions: the Trinity—one God in three persons; the incarnation—the two natures of divinity and humanity in the one Son of God; the atonement—reconciliation between sinners and God; and the covenant—the communion of the saints with God.¹

This trinitarian, narrative structure is reflected in the present book, which follows the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (the *Nicene Creed for short)—the most widely embraced consensus, or *ecumenical, expression of Christian faith. The Nicene Creed’s original form stems from the Council of Nicaea

1. I learned this framework from Scott Swain.

(AD 325), when the church first insisted on the full divinity of Jesus Christ in opposition to the “Arian” heresy. This creed’s present form dates to the Council of Constantinople (AD 381). There, after much intervening struggle, the church reiterated the Son’s full deity and more adequately acknowledged the Holy Spirit. Matching this creed’s three *articles, or sections, the present book has a trinitarian and narrative structure: first, especially in the person of the Father, the Almighty Lord, God creates and rules; second, especially in the person of the Son, the Logos, God is personally present to redeem; and third, especially in the person of the Holy Spirit, the Life Giver, God pours out the love that brings creation toward its consummation.

In sections 2, 3, and 4 the present book explores these three creedal articles. The first section introduces a classic pattern of *catechesis—basic teaching of the faith. Given its first element, the Creed, chapter 1 introduces “theology” as faith seeking understanding. A *creed is an ordered account of fundamental *beliefs* that intersect with personal *behavior* and communal *belonging*.² *Credo* says, “I believe . . . ,” within a chorus of voices joined across time and place. “I” commit to seek shared understanding of these beliefs with others who have heard God’s good news in Jesus Christ. Hence most of the present book explores creedal beliefs in detail.

Belonging to communities identified with these beliefs, we seek to embody them in our behavior. Not only do personal identities and congregational liturgies bear witness to these beliefs; church life also sustains us in confessing them. Mere “knowledge” of God easily withers into practical atheism or warps into hypocrisy and arrogance. When Psalms 14 and 53 depict fools saying in their hearts that there is no God, they do not portray pagans; rather, some among God’s people live as if God were not real. It is possible to have knowledge that only puffs up (1 Cor. 8:1) without acting in love (James 4:17). Therefore, the church catechizes and, as necessary, disciplines believers in order to nurture genuine and growing faith.

Accordingly, chapters 2 and 3 introduce two other elements of classic catechesis. First, the Ten Commandments focus on moral formation, tethering the church to God’s way of addressing all creation through the people of Israel. The Ten Commandments resonate with many cultures, yet they keep Christian moral theology attached to God’s self-revelation within the Old Testament.³

2. This rhetorical triad appears in Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, but previously and more importantly in Kreider, *Change of Conversion*.

3. An informal study (Brannan, “Writing a Systematic Theology”) recently drew attention to how infrequently systematic theologies cite Old Testament texts. Indeed, the dominance of Pauline texts and minimal exposition of biblical foundations for monotheism and ethics can be problematic. Yet Old Testament foundations undergird Christian doctrine just as they do

Second, the Lord’s Prayer focuses on spiritual formation, incorporating us within Jesus’s ultimate renewal of Israel and unique knowledge of God as Father. The Sermon on the Mount, the wider context of the Lord’s Prayer, resonates with the Ten Commandments yet intensifies their Godward focus. The Sermon on the Mount goes beyond outlining moral formation for any and every community to highlight spiritual formation in the church.

The God of Israel, honored in the Ten Commandments, is the same God revealed in Jesus Christ, honored in the Lord’s Prayer. The Creed teaches the identity of that Triune God, revealed in a unified story of creation and redemption. These three elements of catechesis integrate belief, behavior, and belonging by unfolding the unity of the old covenant, the Christ-event, and the new covenant—the anticipation, unveiling, and aftermath of Jesus as the center of creation’s history. The present book introduces these key biblical texts early and extensively, thus integrating theological ethics and spiritual theology with its exposition of Christian doctrine.

Introducing *Evangelical* Theology

The present book is an evangelical introduction, not a creative interpretation. More advanced than some textbooks yet shorter than others, this introduction explains as many important concepts and evangelical debates as possible. Therefore, despite inevitable overlap, this introduction has a different focus than those of other excellent texts. In particular, this book does not focus primarily on the practices embedded in Christian doctrine, on the biblical theology undergirding it, on a particular tradition, or on the most basic and inclusive account. Each of those approaches already has worthy champions. The focus here is on introducing a theological vocabulary and grammar that will help students to embrace an ecumenically orthodox and evangelical heritage.

This theological heritage is “evangelical” in two senses. First, the present book prioritizes *the gospel* as expressed via the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. Obviously, no book should claim too much in this regard. Yet the size and focus of many theologies can diminish the centrality or the scope of the biblical gospel. This introduction presents creation as foundational, and new creation as climactic, for the drama of redemption, which centers on God’s mighty act in Jesus Christ. Ecumenical Christian orthodoxy, as expressed in the Creed, shares faith in the Triune God of that

the New Testament, and recovering classic catechesis helps to make these foundations visible. Furthermore, it is one-sided to evaluate the biblical dimensions of a systematic theology merely by counting citations.

gospel drama. The present book celebrates and communicates this shared faith that is heralded in the Scriptures.

Second, the present book prioritizes *a specific Protestant theological culture*, even if debates about that “evangelical” identity seem interminable. Evangelical “theology” is not much easier to identify than “evangelicalism”; popular practice can be broadly theological even when it is not academically disciplined. Yet although evangelical theology is an essentially contested concept, it remains functionally essential.⁴ Accepting both the promise and pitfalls of evangelicalism—that is, orthodox, pietist Protestant ecumenism—the present book must be selective about what to engage, and willing to generalize. Characterizations of evangelical theology—for instance, regarding quantity (“some”; “many”; “most”), time (“traditionally”; “today”), and membership (characterizing scholarly versus popular differences; including Pentecostals but excluding nontrinitarian groups)—inevitably reflect my background, commitments, interests, and social location, even in ways that I cannot see. Reviewers will debate these judgment calls, and readers must be discerning about them. I sincerely hope that most people will notice my effort to describe others as neutrally or even generously as possible, even where we disagree. In any case, the present book does not speak to evangelicals alone, nor does it speak for all “evangelicals,” as if anyone could!

David Bebbington influentially characterizes *evangelicalism as activist, biblicist, conversionist, and crucicentrist Christianity. This fourfold characterization remains helpful, once the ensuing network is located historically in the Anglo-American revivals of the 1730s.⁵ Further characterizing evangelicalism is emphasis upon the Holy Spirit, along with the breadth of contemporary networks associated with those earlier revivals.⁶ How to label precursors among post-Reformation, Continental European pietists remains debatable.⁷ The crucial issue involves whether evangelicalism requires intentionally transdenominational activity (in which case the earlier pietists might not qualify) or merely renewal efforts (such as the pietists opposing dead orthodoxy or heresy within existing churches).⁸ Solving that historical debate

4. Abraham, “Church and Churches,” 303.

5. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 2–17.

6. Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism.”

7. See the profile of W. R. Ward by Noll and Hindmarsh, “Rewriting the History of Evangelicalism,” 8.

8. John G. Stackhouse Jr. emphasizes transdenominational cooperation (see “Generic Evangelicalism”). Bebbington responds that this additional factor fails to account for contradictory historical evidence such as Church-of-England-only evangelicals (“About the Definition of Evangelicalism,” 5). Part of the difference apparently lies in speaking of “evangelical” as a primary identity (attachment to an institutional or cultural network) versus a secondary theological

is beyond the purposes of this introduction; so are contemporary sociological and theological debates about precise evangelical boundaries. Moreover, some Catholic and Orthodox Christians, not to mention still others, share “evangelical” characteristics without claiming a “Protestant” identity. Despite such complications, it remains possible to characterize an “evangelical” theological subculture.⁹

In that light, the present book introduces both shared commitments and perennial debates within evangelical theology.¹⁰ Evangelicals tend to do theology using primarily the language of the Bible, which can be both helpful and harmful. The obvious help lies in making theology accessible for all of God’s people who read the Scriptures. Hence this introduction frequently references biblical texts and periodically discusses them at length. The potential harm of evangelical biblicism lies in tempting us with false expectations of theological clarity or naive understandings of the Bible’s sufficiency. Excessive biblicism falls into *proof-texting—appealing to Scripture passages in support of a theological claim without adequately addressing their contexts. Hence this introduction tries to avoid that pitfall by citing fewer biblical references in parentheses, focusing instead on key texts with awareness of their context. Still, the need to represent how evangelicals have supported theological claims from Scripture requires periodically providing parenthetical references.

The present book presents longer-standing evangelical consensus and debates rather than referencing every current issue or trend. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (*EDT*), for which I spent several years producing a new edition, provides a helpful companion to supplement the glossary included here.¹¹ The *EDT* offers short, readable overviews on numerous subjects, as well as recommendations for further reading. Resources like the *EDT* remind us to keep current evangelical flaws and fragmentation in perspective. For several decades, faithful teachers have provided basic, biblical, evangelical theology to help pastors and laypersons bear gospel witness in the modern world. Similarly, the Lausanne movement has called

descriptor (an approach taken within a denominational framework). For instance, some in the Church of England may be evangelical in the latter sense without attaching themselves to the evangelical subculture in the former sense.

9. Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of traditions (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 186–87)—as socially embodied arguments, extended over time, about the meaning of foundational texts—is useful here. Even if disagreement itself characterizes evangelical theology, such disagreements may have a coherent shape, stemming from an underlying “imagination” or set of commitments and concerns. On that score, see Worthen, *Apostles of Reason*.

10. For my own accounts, see briefly Treier, “Evangelical Theology”; more fully Vanhoozer and Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture*.

11. Treier and Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*.

evangelicals to global awareness and holistic mission rooted in the love of the Triune God.¹² Although ongoing reform is necessary in practice, I continue to embrace in principle the “evangelical” project: orthodox, pietist, Protestant ecumenism.

At this point the present book may be controversial for introducing evangelical theology in terms of classic catechesis and especially the Creed. Yet the creedal structure does not privilege orthodoxy over pietism. First, whether or not they are noncreedal, pietist evangelicals generally embrace trinitarian faith. Second, the Creed does not compete with Scripture’s final authority but rather helps to communicate its teaching. Third, some pietist theologians have been leaders in calling evangelicals to recover their trinitarian heritage.¹³ Fourth, some forms of Protestant orthodoxy do not prioritize the ecumenical creeds any more than pietism. Fifth, the present book’s catechetical approach both champions a heritage and calls for reform—as evangelical theologies naturally do. The heritage championed here integrates ecumenical orthodoxy and evangelical piety. The reform called for integrates a trinitarian presentation of the gospel and a biblical foundation for piety—rooted in teaching the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer alongside the Creed.

To draw these reflections together, I offer ten summary theses and brief representative readings that attempt to put evangelical theology in historical perspective.

1. *Introduction.* Evangelical theology faces increasing perceptions of fragmentation. In what sense are these perceptions an opportunity for reform and renewal, and in what sense are they a dangerous form of self-fulfilling prophecy?¹⁴
2. *Pietism.* Evangelical theology arises from, and seeks to guide, Protestant movements of personal renewal. These renewal movements pursue spiritual affinities across various churchly boundaries.¹⁵
3. *Puritanism.* Evangelical theology arises from, and seeks to guide, Protestant movements of ecclesial renewal. These renewal movements pur-

12. Most recently, see *Cape Town Commitment*. Its theme is Love. Part 1 is “For the Lord We Love: The Cape Town Confession of Faith” while part 2 is “For the World We Serve: The Cape Town Call to Action.”

13. E.g., Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*.

14. In the summer of 2015 I taught a ten-day course on evangelical theology at Regent College in Vancouver, for which I prepared these thesis statements and selected these readings. I learned much from the interaction. The issues raised by this introductory question are addressed further in Vanhoozer and Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture*.

15. E.g., Wesley, “Christian Perfection.”

sue corrective actions that generate and perpetuate various churchly boundaries.¹⁶

4. *Protestant orthodoxy.* Some strands of evangelical theology focus on Protestant doctrinal renewal. These theological strands find it most important for evangelicals to perpetuate the material commitments of the Reformation regarding justification by faith alone and the formal commitments of the Reformation regarding Scripture alone as the final authority over faith and practice. In the process, these theological strands have been most successful at fostering academic biblical interpretation and formal doctrinal systems.¹⁷
5. *Revivalism.* Other strands of evangelical theology focus on promoting evangelism and Protestant spiritual revival. These revivalist strands find it most important for evangelicals to pursue the salvation of the lost and the holiness of the saved. In the process, these revivalist strands have been most successful at fostering practical mission and ministries of social justice, as well as leadership opportunities for women and other marginalized groups.¹⁸
6. *Fundamentalism and “neo”-evangelicalism.* Modern American evangelical theology emerges from “fundamentalist” institutional retrenchment. These “neo”-evangelicals generally retained the doctrinal commitments of *The Fundamentals* but slowly shed cultural isolation in favor of societal reengagement.¹⁹
7. *“Postconservative” evangelical theology?* Later modern Anglo-American evangelical theology, having generally and slowly shed cultural isolation in favor of societal reengagement, has become increasingly divided over which “culture” to prioritize—“modern” or “postmodern”—and how such philosophical strands helpfully reform or dangerously put at risk evangelical identity.²⁰
8. *Evangelicalism goes “glocal”?* Contemporary evangelical theology is more diverse than ever, due to globalization and immigration along with awareness of particularity. Though still slow to acknowledge and celebrate this diversity, evangelicals are beginning to recognize and wrestle with the opportunities and challenges that it presents. Some of today’s

16. E.g., Edwards, “Treatise Concerning Religious Affections.”

17. E.g., Warfield, “Idea of Systematic Theology.”

18. E.g., Finney, “Lectures on Revivals”; Palmer, “Way of Holiness.”

19. E.g., Henry, “Evaporation of Fundamentalist Humanitarianism”; Henry, “Method and Criteria of Theology.”

20. E.g., Grenz, “Evangelical Theological Method”; in contrast with Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel.”

leading evangelical theologians themselves embody this increasing variety of backgrounds and perspectives.²¹

9. *Evangelicalism and the “Great Tradition”?* At the same time that contemporary evangelical theology diversifies with respect to place and background, it is also increasingly diverse with respect to time. Many evangelicals have increasing interest in the liturgical and spiritual practices of the “Great Christian Tradition”; among these evangelicals, some are increasingly committed to this classic tradition’s surrounding theological heritage—the creeds and possible dogmatic consensus surrounding them. Yet still other evangelicals are critical of particular doctrines or practices from the classic tradition, making “*sola scriptura*” and “the church is always reforming” their rallying cries.²²
10. *Conclusion.* As complex and essentially contested as evangelical theology is, the adjective “evangelical” and the noun “evangelicalism” still do cognitive work. The noun designates an ongoing movement or network of institutions, and the adjective can be used not only to describe what that movement’s theology is but also to propose what it should aspire to be—theology that accords with and focuses on the biblical gospel of Jesus Christ.²³

Through evangelical sisters and brothers—often through our differences—I have learned more living and active, locally diverse, globally connected, ecumenically creedal, deeply biblical, and therefore dramatically trinitarian, theology. May God use this book to edify the church with such teaching (Eph. 4:11–16).

21. E.g., Chan, “Preface,” “Methodological Questions,” and “Epilogue,” in *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 7–46, 203–4; also Yong, “Preface,” “Prologue,” “Evangelicalism and Global Theology,” “Legacy of Evangelical Theology,” “Toward a Global Evangelical Theology,” and “Epilogue,” in *Future of Evangelical Theology*, 11–13, 17–66, 98–124, 217–49.

22. E.g., McDermott, “Emerging Divide in Evangelical Theology”; in contrast with Roger E. Olson’s response in Olson, “My Response.”

23. E.g., Noll, “What Is ‘Evangelical?’”; Vanhoozer, “Scripture and Hermeneutics”; Abraham, “Church and Churches.”



1

PART

Knowing THE TRIUNE GOD

— 1 —

The Creed

Faith Seeking Understanding

THESIS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
Christian theology is a communicative practice of faith seeking understanding, in response to the Word of the Triune God accompanied by the Holy Spirit.	After learning the material in the introduction and this chapter, you should be able to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Define briefly the key terms introduced here (marked with an asterisk and included in the glossary).2. List and recognize the following: (a) David Bebbington's four characteristics of evangelicism; (b) two elements of Christian faith; (c) four theological contexts.3. Describe and compare the following: (a) four basic views of general revelation; (b) four periods' approaches to special revelation.4. Identify and illustrate the relationships and distinctions between the following: (a) four sources for theology; (b) five theological disciplines.5. Explain the following: (a) the contrast between Christian and modern views of faith and reason; (b) the complexity of selecting relevant biblical texts and synthesizing their theological implications for contemporary questions; (c) the holistic nature of theology as faith seeking understanding.

The Letter to the Romans offers Exhibit A of this chapter's theme: Christian theology is faith seeking understanding. Romans provides the Bible's most orderly account of the gospel. Yet the letter remains pastoral, not a modern "systematic" theology. Paul presents his gospel in

an effort to reconcile Jewish and gentile Christians while gaining support for missionary travels to Spain. The “Romans Road” of chapters 1–8 heads toward chapters 9–11 as the gateway to its practical destination in chapters 12–16. Prompted by faith, pursuing pastoral encouragement (Rom. 1:12), Paul provides theological understanding.

Paul’s Romans road is paved by Isaiah, which, along with Deuteronomy and Psalms, preoccupies New Testament citations of the Old Testament. Isaiah advances the biblical gospel: looking back to the grandeur of creation and the tragedy of the fall, as embodied in Israel; looking forward to a new creation, another redeeming exodus. Through God’s ultimate Servant the redemption of Israel, God’s unfaithful servant, would fully reveal the identity of *YHWH—the Sovereign Creator who formed a saving covenant with Israel, and before whom every knee will finally bow.¹ Romans echoes Isaiah when Paul says he is not “ashamed” of the gospel (Rom. 1:16; e.g., Isa. 54:3–5), which reveals God’s righteousness promoting faith (Rom. 1:17).

In the background is the story of Ahaz, an unfaithful descendant of King David who refused to believe that God would defend Judah. Instead, Ahaz made a disobedient foreign alliance. As a sign of God’s judgment over Ahaz and Israel’s eventual deliverance, Isaiah 7:14 announced a special child: “Immanuel,” God with us. Prior to that announcement, God told Ahaz, “If you will not believe, surely you will not be established,” or, as Augustine (354–430) read in Latin, “Unless you believe, you shall not understand” (Isa. 7:9).² Christian theology as “faith seeking understanding” echoes the story of Ahaz’s downfall and the Christ-centered hope that followed. Ahaz was not established in God’s blessing because he did not trust God’s promise. Refusing to hear God, he was misled by apparent signs of his time. By contrast, faith is the impetus behind all Christian theology: trusting God’s Word enough to seek fuller understanding of its perennial meaning and present significance. Without exercising faith, we cannot rightly hear the

1. YHWH, often translated as “the LORD” and pronounced as “Yahweh,” is the personal name with which the covenant people were invited to address God (as narrated beginning in Exod. 3:14). Gradually, out of reverence, Israel began to leave this name unspoken or else to pronounce it with different vowels. Here, with a Christian understanding of divine self-revelation on the one hand, and respect for the Jewish people on the other, the word appears without the vowels being printed.

Another introductory note about speaking of God: The present book uses “masculine” English pronouns for God when necessary. The divine essence is spiritual, with no body and therefore no biological sex. The divine essence also transcends human, culturally constructed, gender. Nevertheless, given “Father” and “Son” proper naming in the Trinity, the use of grammatically masculine pronouns seems to be the most biblical approach, even if we must remember not to project cultural notions of masculinity onto God.

2. Augustine, “Tractate 29.6,” 184.

Word by which to know God; without seeking understanding, like Ahaz we twist Scripture to line up with whatever delusional “faith” we have in the world or ourselves.

The present chapter examines more carefully the shape of Christian belief—what it means for faith to seek theological understanding. This chapter addresses *prolegomena: the first words with which theology indicates how it will proceed from faith toward understanding. In *faith* we hear God’s speech; in *seeking* we prayerfully contemplate the sources of this divine revelation; in pursuit of *understanding* we practice theological disciplines.

Faith: Hearing God’s Speech

Faith comes by hearing (Rom. 10:17)—hearing divine revelation, its “theological counterpart.”³ In Scripture, hearing and obeying overlap enough that hearing is a metaphor for obedience. Beyond bare listening, biblical hearing begins the journey of trusting and obeying God. By modern times, however, “revelation” became a source of knowledge in the philosophical sense—one alternative among others, such as reason or observation. Soon revelation seemed like a doubtful source when compared to what people could see and what science could produce. God, humans, and the natural world became competitors in a winner-take-all contest: rather than hearing God speak through creaturely realities, many “Western” people came to think that revelation threatens their integrity, reducing them to puppets. Revelation appeared rational only if it lost its specifically Christian God and pointed to generic “religious” experience.⁴ Reason became a universal human project, claiming to be as neutral as possible. By proclaiming divine intervention in history, today Christian faith may seem irrational.

Personal Knowledge

Yet Christian *faith is “firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us.”⁵ Faith is a personal form of knowledge: knowledge, because God’s

3. Webster, “Criticism,” 2.

4. “Modern” and “Western” are complex terms. “Western” frequently means “Northern” in contrast to the “Majority World” (previously the “Two-Thirds” or “developing” world) and the “Global South” Christianity rapidly growing today. As those regions “modernize”—both by choice and by “globalization”—*modernity and *Western culture do not overlap completely. Yet in its early history, modernity involved Western figures and nations thinking that they reached a fundamentally new stage of civilization (“modern” means “new”), which they would spread throughout the world.

5. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.2.7 (1:551).

benevolence has a meaningful history; personal, because we apprehend God's benevolence toward us.⁶ Hence Christian faith involves both the public truth of God's speech—"the faith"—and the personal response of trust and loyalty.⁷ Faith as *trust* relates the future to the past: biblical faith anticipates, based on a history of faithfulness, the fulfillment of God's gracious promises (Heb. 11:1, 6). Faith as *loyalty* relates the past and future to the present: biblical faith responds to God's self-communication over time, expressing itself in obedient love (Rom. 1:5; Gal. 5:6; James 2).

Accordingly, faith involves the whole person—intellect (belief), affections (confidence), and will (trusting loyalty). Its characteristic posture is prayer, calling on the Lord's name (Rom. 10:9–13). Such prayer is trinitarian: the Spirit prompts believers to call on God as Father with confidence that in Jesus Christ they are beloved children (Rom. 8:14–17). Genuine prayer includes being broken over sin and seeking the **shalom*—peaceful flourishing—of all creation. In calling for repentance, the Old Testament prophets establish the proper connection between faith and love: good works are an expression of faith, not a condition of God's favor, yet genuine faith includes grief over sin. Persisting in idolatry and injustice eventually raises this question: Are such "believers" really calling on the Lord with trust and loyalty?

Faith seeks understanding because believers await the unseen fulfillment of God's promises. Tensions inevitably arise between faith and modern reasoning, which operates by sight. Believers cannot avoid dealing with the way the world currently runs, since divine revelation addresses all the relationships defining our lives—not only communion with God but also harmony with other humans and the rest of creation. Thus, Christian theology cannot give up the connection between divine revelation and human reason, as if God communicates only inner experiences or ideas with no implications for the rest of life. Yet God's self-communication involves particular actions in creation and salvation, beyond what human reason could figure out on its own.

6. Eric Springsted, in his preface to *The Act of Faith*, tells of surveying students and discovering that "the vast majority thought faith was 'believing something without proof'" (ix). They remained unable to grasp the concept of trust: instead, "Faith was a 'personal' choice (albeit in a shallow sense of 'personal').... The idea of faith as knowledge gained by interpersonal dealings, or as a matter of being linked to a tradition, a history, or a community, didn't make sense because traditions, history, and communities didn't make sense at any deep level" (x). Springsted notes that "in the modern world Mark Twain could get a laugh by claiming in the mouth of a schoolboy that 'faith is believing what you know ain't true'" (6). While a medieval person "would not have gotten the joke" (6), modern philosophy of religion implied that faith could be rational only if we provide grounds for God's existence and evidence for revelation (11).

7. The technical terms are *fides qua*, the "subjective" faith we exercise, and *fides quae*, the "objective" faith we embrace. See further Treier, "Faith."

Because seeing is not yet fully believing, to know the True Way of Life we must listen to God’s Word, led by God’s Spirit.

Tensions between faith and modern reason tempt theologians to treat “prolegomena” as nontheological words spoken *before* beginning to do theology. Sometimes “apologetics” among Protestants and “fundamental theology” among Catholics become nontheological prolegomena. These approaches try to demonstrate theology’s intellectual credibility according to external methods and standards. Instead, truly Christian theology begins by faith and seeks to understand the gospel’s distinctive logic and divine mystery. Prolegomena must be the first theological words *in* doing theology. *Theological* prolegomena seek initial clarity about the proper response of rational creatures to divine revelation. Prolegomena articulate what conditions enable, and which criteria settle, Christian teaching. These prolegomena already introduce the Triune God’s perfect character and gracious action. God’s actions in creation and redemption speak volumes; God’s words are living and active.

Divine Self-Disclosure

*Revelation is God’s self-disclosure—communication to establish communion with us. Revelation is “the eloquence of divine action.”⁸ This eloquence echoes at various times and places from creation until the completion of redemption. God has spoken to everyone in some ways, and to particular people in special ways, which Scripture records to share with others. Hence divine revelation goes beyond the eloquence of all divine activity; as the Creed claims in its third article, God the Holy Spirit has spoken specifically “through the prophets.” This book does not fully address the revelatory authority of Scripture until a later chapter, when it returns to the Holy Spirit’s work in detail. For now, *communicative action offers a helpful concept for integrating revelation with the rest of God’s activity: God’s speech actively establishes covenant relationship with us, while this saving activity communicates what God is like. Hearing the good news of God’s mighty grace is at the heart of understanding divine self-revelation.

This revelation addresses two barriers to knowing God: finitude and fallenness. *Finitude means that human beings have inherent limits that render us incapable of knowing the Infinite God on our own. The Creator graciously condescends to speak with us. God condescended initially by creating us with capacities for fellowship, as bearers of the divine image. Now, having fallen, humans have rendered themselves incapable of truly knowing and

8. Webster, “Criticism,” 3.

representing the Creator. Although God eloquently condescends, we refuse to listen and fail to understand. Hence the fullness of God's self-disclosure involves our salvation. The Holy Spirit helps us to hear God's Word in Jesus Christ, interrupting our self-destruction and interpreting God's work on our behalf.

Seeking: Contemplating God's Revelation

Human finitude and fallenness partially correspond to the widespread distinction between "general" and "special" divine revelation. So-called *general revelation focuses on God's self-disclosure in the gracious activity of creating and providentially sustaining the cosmos. Created to bear God's image, humans have a calling to represent God in the world. This calling opens us to divine self-communication and obligates us to obey divine commands. *Special revelation addresses our need to know God as Redeemer, not just Creator, through the Spirit's ministry of the Word at particular times and places. For humans have failed to hear God's speech in faith and to represent God in loving obedience. After the fall, God must not only unveil the divine character but also remove the veil covering our eyes. Sinful humans often seek to fill a God-shaped void in their hearts, but they stumble around blindly until the Light of the world shines upon them.

"General" Revelation in Creation

The physical world, the cycles and flow of history, personal conscience, cultural expression, social orders—traditionally understood, these may somehow be vehicles of general revelation. But modern debates emerged about how the Christian understanding of God should specifically relate to broader theism. Thus, current approaches to general revelation reflect four basic tendencies.

FOUR BASIC VIEWS

A first, *Catholic*, view broadly characterizes the church's pre-Reformation history. Fundamentally, this Catholic approach affirms that general revelation provides some nonsaving, natural knowledge of God. Humans may attain knowledge of God from creation, even developing a modest yet public *natural theology—not just experiential but conceptual knowledge of God. This modest knowledge is not enough for salvation, but it can prepare someone to seek salvation. In the "Thomistic" version from Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), this knowledge involves the existence of an all-powerful, perfect, First

Cause; human immortality; our resulting moral obligation; and the like. We can know and speak of this First Cause because of the **analogia entis* or “analogy of being.” The gift of existence includes participation, as creatures, in the Creator’s perfections. Such participation enables human language to communicate about God by analogy—with modest similarities and greater dissimilarities—between ourselves and the One whose image we bear. Strictly speaking, Thomas’s so-called five ways of proving God’s existence were not philosophical proofs, since they built upon some theistic assumptions of the time. Nevertheless, the Catholic tendency is to connect theology with philosophical commitments based on the doctrine of creation.

A second, *classic Protestant*, view stems from the Reformers. Fundamentally, this classic Protestant approach affirms that general revelation establishes accountability before God and encourages study of creation. Unbelievers suppress the knowledge of God that general revelation makes available, while believers may encounter truth about God in creation that is confirmed by Scripture. This modest knowledge is not enough for salvation or even for natural theology, at least publicly in the Catholic sense, because of human idolatry; general revelation does not even prepare anyone for salvation apart from special divine grace. Reformer John Calvin (1509–64) made the knowledge of God as Creator and Redeemer his starting point for Christian instruction.⁹ Calvin interpreted Romans 1:18–31 as teaching the revelation of God as Creator; objectively, creation with its resulting history is the theater of God’s glory. Subjectively, every human has a **sensus divinitatis*, a seed planted in the heart that should grow into faith. In Augustine’s famous words, “Our heart is restless until it rests in you [God].”¹⁰ Yet Calvin quickly emphasized that fallen humans suppress any general knowledge of God (Rom. 1:18–20). The classic Protestant tendency is to emphasize that humans distort what God has made plain.

A third, *Deist*, view emerged from early modern rationalism. Fundamentally, this Deist approach affirms that human **religion*—devotion to something sacred beyond oneself, typically involving shared rituals—is accountable to natural reason. Knowledge of God from creation is possible, but such “revelation” does not involve particular divine self-communication; the Creator does not intervene in history. In one sense, this natural knowledge of God is not modest but as exhaustive as possible. In another sense, though, natural theology must be fairly minimal to be universally accessible. Rationally governed experience provides whatever religion is necessary, if

9. Note the structure of Calvin’s *Institutes*: book 1 follows Rom. 1 at key points.

10. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.1 (p. 3).

any, for moral living; “salvation” in the traditional Christian sense is not at stake, because promoting the social good lies at the heart of God’s kingdom. Even if Jesus is special, as deistic “liberal” theologies have taught, he basically manifests a general truth about God’s love or a human example to follow. Religious experience is privately suitable within public norms for what is reasonable. A Deist approach might seem implausible today, since early modern rationalism lies in the rearview mirror and globalization surrounds us with cultural relativism. Yet this tendency lingers in the “moralistic therapeutic deism” of some Western cultures, and in aspects of theological liberalism.¹¹

A fourth, *Barthian*, view is the opposite of Deism. Fundamentally, this Barthian approach denies the category of general revelation. Creation offers no actual knowledge of God apart from salvation; any natural theology would simply be idolatry. Believing exploration of creation does not depend on its potential to reveal God, and human “religion” is a declaration of independence from God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Germany’s liberal “cultural Protestantism” supported World War I and later the Nazi regime in World War II. In that context, Karl Barth (1886–1968) radicalized Calvin’s approach to Romans 1. Because human religion is idolatrous (here Barth follows Calvin), it can only mislead, to such an extent that “revelation” is only special (here Barth goes farther than Calvin). Barth famously responded “Nein!” (No!) when Emil Brunner (1889–1966) attempted to maintain a cultural “point of contact” for the gospel, rooted in humans being created as God’s image-bearers. Although Barth insisted on the uniqueness of divine revelation, eventually he acknowledged the possibility of learning from non-Christian beliefs and practices. But these secular “parables”¹² offer only indirect parallels to God’s Word in Jesus Christ; they do not count as revelation.

EVANGELICAL QUESTIONS

Obviously, evangelical theology rejects the deistic tendency to separate the knowledge of God from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Generally, despite growing diversity, evangelical theology follows the classic Protestant tendency to maintain the category of general revelation. Some—especially those who emphasize human freedom—take this category in a Catholic direction, while others now lean in a Barthian direction. For philosophical or missional reasons, many affirm that God uses elements of every culture as preparation

11. As chronicled by C. Smith and Denton in *Soul Searching*.

12. An aspect of Barth’s approach to public engagement in CD IV.3.1, esp. 112–13.

for the gospel. A classic Protestant perspective, however, distinguishes such cultural presence from religious preparation for personal salvation. Several key questions further shape evangelical approaches.

Of course, the first question concerns *the teaching of Scripture* itself. Romans 1:18–32 is a crucial text, but theology must address its larger biblical context. What does it mean to say that the heavens declare God’s glory (Ps. 19), that God sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:16–18), that pagans somehow connect in their ignorant worship with the true God (Acts 17:22–31)? On whose hearts is God’s law written: just believers’ or also pagans’ (Rom. 2:12–16)?

A second question concerns *the nature of revelation*. The more “personal” revelation is, emphasizing the event of God’s self-disclosure (as in Barth’s definition), the less general revelation will be affirmed. The more “propositional” revelation is, emphasizing the content of God’s self-disclosure (as in classic Catholic and Protestant definitions), the more general revelation will be affirmed. The personal definition emphasizes the successful reception of revelation; divine self-communication establishes *communion* if “revelation” happens at all. The propositional definition emphasizes the presentation of *propositions, namely, truth claims; divine self-communication establishes *cognitive contact*, which counts as “revelation” whether humans receive or resist the truth.

A third question concerns *the implications for *apologetics*, the defense of Christian faith. Early “apologists” like Justin Martyr (c. 100–165) appealed to the Logos as theological justification for engaging Greco-Roman culture, in particular philosophy. Naysayers like Tertullian (160–220)—employing the rhetoric of his day—offered this pungent rejoinder: “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” Later Thomas Aquinas attempted to reconcile Augustine’s cautious appropriation of Greco-Roman culture with an emerging renaissance of Aristotle’s thought. While that medieval synthesis shaped the dominant Catholic tendency, the Deist tendency triumphed once modern plausibility structures—especially science—became dominant. Nowadays the Western intellectual drift toward atheism, combined with religious variety across global cultures, challenges the enterprise of natural theology.

Protestant approaches to apologetics vary despite affirming general revelation. “Liberal” theologies have frequently reflected Deist sympathies. They have even defined themselves by apologetically correlating core doctrines with modern emphases such as human freedom. Among non-Calvinist evangelicals, some “rationalists” have promoted Christian faith based on technical philosophical arguments, while “evidentialists” have appealed to an even wider

array of evidence. Some Calvinist evangelicals have also pursued those rational strategies. Others, “presuppositionalists,” have emphasized that all non-Christian starting points reflect holistic opposition toward God. In that case, apologetic activity focuses defensively on answering objections to Christian faith and highlighting the problems with unbelieving alternatives. Somewhat like Barth, who denied general revelation, a presuppositional approach champions proclaiming God’s authoritative Word rather than responding to human reason. Now that postmodernity complicates appeals to reason, these three evangelical categories of apologetics are increasingly giving way to more person- and situation-specific approaches.

A fourth question concerns the relation between general revelation and *nontheological realms of study*. Evangelical support for liberal arts education often appeals to the maxim “All truth is God’s truth.” However, general revelation may not be the best way to authorize “integration” of faith and learning. One potential problem is defining “revelation” too broadly: not all truths come from God in the same way or speak about God as directly. If studying biology or sociology depends primarily on general revelation, then several spheres of human knowledge reduce to theological claims in trivial ways. As the ultimate source of all knowledge, the Creator is not one source among others or a gap-filler standing behind other knowledge. A broad definition of revelation may not only foster rivalry with other sources of knowledge but also lose its focus—God. A second potential problem with using general revelation to authorize wider learning is related: narrowing the motivation for nontheological learning. If studying biology or sociology depends primarily on general revelation, then several spheres of human knowledge reduce to the means for serving “spiritual” ends. Truths about physical life or human society seem interesting only for what they indirectly reveal about God’s character. God becomes not just a rival source of knowledge but even rival subject matter. Theology then creates the impression that God does not care very much about the created world or its cultural histories. By contrast, special revelation teaches that learning about the creation honors its loving Creator.

The limitations of general revelation signal the final authority of special revelation. In principle, the physical world, providence in history, conscience, and culture say something about our Creator. In practice, however, finite and fallen humans need “special” forms of God’s self-disclosure. We need forgiveness in Jesus Christ to restore communion with the Triune God; we need the Holy Spirit’s help to embrace the cross as true wisdom rather than clinging to foolish idols (1 Cor. 1:18–2:16). God addresses these needs in special revelation by Word and Spirit.