

Practicing Christian Doctrine

An INTRODUCTION *to*
THINKING *and* LIVING THEOLOGICALLY

BETH FELKER JONES

B
BakerAcademic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine*
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2014 by Beth Felker Jones

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8010-4933-0 (pbk.)

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Text Edition: 2011.

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine*
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

For my students—
“May the mind of Christ our Savior
live in us from day to day”

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: To Practice Doctrine 1

1. Speaking of God: Theology and the Christian Life 11
2. Knowing God: Doctrines of Revelation and Scripture 31
3. The God We Worship: Doctrine of the Trinity 55
4. A Delightful World: Doctrines of Creation and Providence 77
5. Reflecting God's Image: Theological Anthropology 97
6. The Personal Jesus Christ: Christology 117
7. The Work of Jesus Christ: Soteriology 141
8. The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: Pneumatology 167
9. Church in a Diverse World: Ecclesiology 193
10. Resurrection Hope: Eschatology 217

Benediction: A Prayer for the Practice of Christian Doctrine 239

Subject Index 241

Scripture Index 245

Acknowledgments

This project was born of teaching, and I am grateful to my students at Huntington University and Wheaton College, to whom this book is dedicated. It is my privilege to be in conversation with you. Thanks for the good questions, the thoughtful conversations, and the desire to put faith into practice. You have helped make doctrine come alive for me.

I am grateful to many friends and colleagues who helped make this book possible: for the wonderful team at Baker and Brazos; for the support of my dean, Jill Baumgaertner, and associate dean, Jeff Greenman; for the remarkable work of my research assistant, Ella Myer; for my colleague Keith Johnson, with whom I developed some of the early ideas for this text. Thanks to those who gifted me with time and talent, reading and commenting on portions of the text: Aimee Barbeau, Jeff Barbeau, Gary Burge, Lynn Cohick, Holly Taylor Coolman, Michael Graves, Gene Green, George Kalantzis, Tiffany Kriner, Christina Bieber Lake, Tim Larsen, David Lauber, Steve Long, Miho Nonaka, Amy Peeler, Nick Perrin, Noah Toly, and Dan Treier. The book is better because of you all.

Thanks piled on thanks to my husband, Brian, whose support of my work is one of the most tender gifts in my life, and to our children, Gwen, Sam, Tess, and Zeke, for hanging in there with me and enduring my speeches about things like the Trinity.

Chapter 8 and a small portion of chapter 2 appear in slightly different form in my *God the Spirit: Introducing Pneumatology in Wesleyan and Ecumenical Perspective*. Copyright Cascade Books, 2014. Used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Beth Felker Jones
Lent 2013

ix

Introduction

To Practice Doctrine

Times were troubled when Josiah assumed the throne. A brutal invasion and the faithless leadership of several apostate kings had left Israel in chaos. The people of Israel were living desperate and uncertain lives. In the midst of their struggles, they still worshiped the Lord, the God of their ancestors, but they turned to other gods as well, hoping those other gods could help them meet the challenges they faced. God, however, had not forgotten his people or his promises to them. He worked in the heart of the young king, and Josiah began to “seek the God of his ancestor David” (2 Chron. 34:3). The temple in Jerusalem, the center of worship, had suffered years of neglect and misuse, and Josiah funded carpenters, builders, and masons to begin to restore it. In the midst of the dust flying, the high priest made a discovery, a “book of the covenant”—Scripture.

When Josiah heard the ancient words read aloud, he recognized the depth of Israel’s unfaithfulness. Tearing his robes in grief, he repented, and he took action. After consulting with the prophetess Huldah, Josiah gathered together “all the people both great and small” and read the book aloud to them. Then, in front of his people, Josiah “made a covenant before the LORD, to follow the LORD, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant that were written in this book” (2 Chron. 34:30–31). He led his people to join in the same commitment. The entire nation promised to *perform the book*, to return to faithful relationship with God. Josiah spent the following months purifying Israel. He purged the temple of idols,

destroyed altars to idols, and scattered their remains over the graves of false priests. Josiah's reforms culminated in a celebration of Passover, where the people remembered what God had done for them. The discovery of the lost book and the acceptance of its teaching changed the lives of God's people.

This story may seem like an odd beginning to a book meant to introduce theology, but Josiah's story provides a wonderful window into the relationship between Scripture, doctrine, and practice. Christian theology is a conversation about Scripture, about how to read and interpret it better, how to understand the Bible as a whole and imagine a way of life that is faithful to the God whose Word this is. This conversation about Scripture produces distinct Christian teachings, called **doctrine**, but the work of theology does not stop there. Notice the key to Josiah's story. He moved directly from the teaching he found in the rediscovered book to action. He immediately connected belief with practice, the Word of God with reform, and he led the people to follow in his footsteps, bringing his community along with him as he sought faithfulness to the true God.

I open with the story of Josiah's reforms in Israel because it displays the core premise of this book: our beliefs must be put into practice, and faithful practice matters for what we believe. When we, like Josiah and his people, perform the book of Scripture, when we connect truth with action and doctrine with discipleship, God does marvelous things.

This book's title reflects my confidence that Christian doctrine is intimately interconnected with faithful practice in the Christian life. This book will introduce the basics of Christian doctrine, but without our practicing that doctrine, that introduction will be meaningless. Christian doctrine informs Christian identity and action. Certainly, the idea of doctrine implies belief, but doctrine is about so much more than just believing certain things. The word *doctrine* has taken on cold, hard connotations. Many assume that it is about rigidity and control or that it points to an inaccessible arena of knowledge outside the realm of ordinary Christians. I hope that this book does some work to rehabilitate the word *doctrine*, to show ways that good Christian teaching can help us to grow in faith, reach out in love, and look to the future in hope.

The study of doctrine belongs right in the middle of the Christian life. It is part of our worship of God and service to God's people. Jesus commanded us to love God with our mind as well as our heart, soul, and strength (Luke 10:27). All four are connected: the heart's passion, the soul's yearning, the

strength God grants us, and the intellectual task of seeking the truth of God. This means that the study of doctrine is an act of love for God: in studying the things of God, we are formed as worshipers and as God's servants in the world. To practice doctrine is to yearn for a deeper understanding of the Christian faith, to seek the logic and the beauty of that faith, and to live out what we have learned in the everyday realities of the Christian life.

All of that becomes richer as we gain familiarity with Christian teaching. Practicing doctrine is not unlike practicing the piano or going to basketball practice. New pianists begin by becoming familiar with the instrument. Before they can play sonatas, they must spend a lot of time on basic exercises like running scales. New basketball players do not start with shooting three-pointers; first they have to learn how to dribble and how to run a play. Before playing a game, they must master rules and repeat basic drills until these things become second nature. Only after much practice are they ready to play. Newcomers to the study of doctrine are in a similar position and need to spend time becoming familiar with the discipline of theology. It takes time and patience to learn how to practice doctrine well. Learning Christian doctrine is something like learning a new language: it takes time to learn the vocabulary and concepts used in Christian thought in order to understand what other people are saying. Along with this basic study, students of doctrine have to immerse themselves in the teachings of Scripture, listen to the wisdom of other practitioners of doctrine throughout history, and pray for the insight and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

But there is an important difference between a beginning student of doctrine and a new pianist or basketball player. Many students new to the formal or academic study of doctrine will *not* be new to the Christian faith, and many basic habits and skills may be familiar. There is continuity between the faith embraced by the littlest child or the newest believer and the faith embraced by the most competent Bible scholar or articulate theologian. Readers should expect continuity between the living faith they bring to the practice of doctrine and the knowledge and challenges that practice will bring to them. Some doctrines will be easy to learn, and application will be immediately apparent. Some concepts may lead to "aha!" moments when studying doctrine brings clarity to some familiar belief or practice. At other times, the study of doctrine challenges our assumptions and preconceptions. Some of God's greatest gifts can come when we face disconnect between our assumptions and what we learn through study. None of us

has our doctrine exactly right, and as we search eagerly for the truth that comes from God, we must also search for the humility to see where we

Key Scripture

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. (Rom. 12:1–5)

may be wrong. The best practitioners of doctrine are open to correction, and like Josiah we must be willing to change. The practice of doctrine will be more fruitful if we are open to change and reform. Humility and repentance are keys to the faithful practice of doctrine.

John Calvin claimed, “All right knowledge of God is born of obedience.”¹ Doctrine and discipleship always go together. Our job as we study doctrine is not to get all our answers right. The point of our study is to grow in our knowledge of and faithfulness to God. God can use our study of doctrine

to form us. As you read, I encourage you to think of yourself as a doctrinal theologian, a disciple of Jesus Christ who practices doctrine by seeking knowledge of God and of the things of God, reading Scripture faithfully and regularly, rejoicing in the continuity between saving faith as you have already known it and doctrine as you are coming to know it, welcoming the disruption that God may bring into your life in challenging you to more faithful and truthful practice of the Christian faith, and embracing the practice of doctrine as part of Christian identity.

Evangelical *and* Ecumenical

While no two theologians will ever introduce doctrine in precisely the same way, Christians share a great deal in common, and this introduction

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.6.2.

is focused on that common ground as surveyed in evangelical and ecumenical perspective. The word *evangelical* comes from the Greek *euangelion*, meaning “the gospel,” the good news of Jesus Christ. All Christians belong to that good news. The term is also used to indicate a particular context, one in which evangelical Christianity—especially in Great Britain, North America, and global churches with roots in the movement—takes more specific historical form. Still, this evangelicalism is diverse. It includes Christians from several centuries and many cultures, and so it cannot simply be identified with one confession of faith, denomination, institution, or cultural form. Historians have offered different ways of understanding evangelical Christianity.

David Bebbington identifies evangelicalism by pointing to four characteristics shared across denominational or cultural lines: biblicism, conversionism, activism, and crucicentrism.² *Biblicism* is a focus on Scripture as the ultimate authority for faith and practice; *conversionism* is an emphasis on life-altering religious experience; *activism* is a concern for sharing the faith and doing good works; and *crucicentrism* names a focus on Jesus’s saving work on the cross. This description provides an account of evangelicalism that is not limited by culture or denomination. Evangelicals are a varied lot, and you can find them in many groups, including Baptists in the United States, Anglicans in Africa, Presbyterians in Scotland, and Pentecostals in Latin America. Bebbington shows how these diverse Christians have certain beliefs and characteristics in common. His definition also balances doctrinal affirmations (biblicism and crucicentrism) with experiential aspects of evangelicalism (conversionism and activism), indicating a broad spectrum of emphases within evangelical life.

The breadth of Bebbington’s description is also a potential drawback, a lack of specificity. Historian Timothy Larsen points out that St. Francis of Assisi, a medieval monk, could fit within Bebbington’s definition. This is a problem, Larsen reasons, because the term “evangelical” then loses “its utility for identifying a specific Christian community.”³ Larsen adds a particular historical context to the doctrinal and experiential aspects of Bebbington’s definition: “An evangelical is an orthodox Protestant

2. David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2–17.

3. Timothy Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel Treier (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

who stands in the tradition of global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield.”⁴ This definition locates evangelical Christianity within the larger story of the church. Evangelical Christianity is orthodox because it shares the doctrinal commitments of the early church’s creedal tradition, such as a belief in a Triune God. This orthodoxy is a point of connection between evangelicals and the bigger Christian story, beginning with the early church. The evangelical movement is Protestant, which identifies it as belonging to a theological tradition in continuity with the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Larsen’s definition accounts for the distinctive claims of Protestant theology. The definition grows yet more specific: not all Protestants are evangelicals, not least because Protestant Christianity existed for nearly two centuries before evangelicalism became a distinct movement. Larsen recognizes that eighteenth-century revival movements brought about a distinct community within Christian history, and that most evangelical Christians today can trace their spiritual roots back to those movements. Even though evangelicalism shares much in common with other Christian groups, it also has a particular history within the Christian tradition.

A third historian, George Marsden, helps us understand evangelicalism in light of twentieth-century conversations about the relationship between the church and the wider culture.⁵ In the 1920s, liberal theology emerged as a powerful voice in Protestant churches, privileging human experience and feelings as the best authorities for Christian faith and maintaining that Christianity was about ethics and not doctrine. The term “liberal” here does not refer to American politics. Instead, it names a theological tradition that reinterprets much of orthodox doctrine in light of modern life. In opposition to liberalism, a broad coalition of doctrinally conservative Protestants identified themselves as “fundamentalist,” seeing liberal interpretations of doctrine as a rejection of fundamental scriptural teaching. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, a split occurred in this coalition. Billy Graham’s “new evangelicalism” remained doctrinally conservative while cooperating with other Christian traditions and insisting on active engagement in and with the culture. Separatist Christians, rejecting any association with a world

4. *Ibid.*, 1.

5. George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

seen as sinful or with other Christians seen as accommodating that sinful world, kept the “fundamentalist” label. For Marsden, evangelical Christianity takes a self-consciously mediating position between liberalism on the one side and separatist fundamentalism on the other.

The evangelical perspective in this book lives within the complexities of these historical definitions. As the author, I identify with the practical and doctrinal tendencies that Bebbington sees among evangelicals, and as the title of the book makes clear, I do not see those tendencies as opposed to one another. I am part of the particular history that Larsen and Marsden identify with evangelicalism: I am “evangelical” because the evangelical story that began with those eighteenth-century revivals is *my* story. I came to Christ in, and remain committed to, a church descended from the Wesleyan revivals, and I teach in the same evangelical Christian college that sent Billy Graham into the world. My faith is lived in the North American context in which evangelical Christians felt the need to distinguish themselves first from liberal modernism and later from separatist fundamentalism, and I continue to see good reason for both distinctions. I, with all three historians, resonate with the idea that orthodox Protestant doctrine and activism in the world are strengths of evangelical Christianity. All of this gives you, the reader, a better sense of the context and commitments from which I, the author, practice doctrine. Doctrine is indispensable to evangelical Christianity, but most evangelical doctrine is not unique to evangelicalism.

This is where the **ecumenical** perspective of the book is important. The word comes from the Greek *oikoumene*, which means “the entire inhabited earth.” This term reminds Christians that God’s salvific love applies to the whole world—every nation, every tribe, and every person. Ecumenical

Evangelical Theology

- Seeks faithfulness to the *euangelion*, the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ.
- Connects to a historical Christian community that emerged from eighteenth-century revivalism.
- Holds practices in the evangelical tradition—emphasizing conversion and activism—together with key doctrinal claims about the authority of Scripture and the centrality of Christ’s work on the cross.
- Is committed to active cultural engagement “in” the world while maintaining the distinctive commitments that identify Christians as not “of” the world “so that the world may know” the good news (John 17:23).

Christian teaching is the teaching of the whole church, the faith of the whole body of Christ spread across the centuries and around the globe, and Christian efforts at ecumenism are efforts to converse across lines that divide us, to find common ground, to recognize that diverse groups of Christians have a great deal in common, and to work toward unity in the body of Christ. Timothy Tennent notes the importance of ecumenical theology in his acknowledgment that “it would be arrogant to believe that one or more of the theologies our culture has produced have somehow

Ecumenical Theology

- Recognizes that no one part of the church is the whole body of Christ.
- Rejoices in the shared doctrine and practice that belong to the whole of that body.
- Allows difference to flourish, without seeing it as a threat to unity.
- Humbly listens to other parts of the body.
- Looks for God’s active work in the whole world.

managed to raise and systematically answer all questions, for all Christians, for all time. Every culture in every age has blind spots and biases that we are often oblivious to, but which are evident to those outside of our culture or time.”⁶

My perspective in this book is ecumenical in several senses. First, in introducing the various Christian doctrines, my main focus is not on questions that divide the church. Christians hold much doctrine in common, an ecumenical consensus about important truths of the faith. This agreement is often underplayed, and I try to highlight areas of

Christian unity. Second, I want to introduce you to an ecumenical gathering of Christian voices—men and women, North American and European and African and Latin American and Asian, contemporary, medieval, ancient, old, young, black, white, and brown. Space is limited, and this attempt is woefully inadequate, but I try to give you a glimpse of the beautiful diversity of the church as a global reality. Finally, I do all my work as a theologian with a strong sense that the gospel is truly for the whole world. Jesus told his disciples to be “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The gospel is global because it is for everyone, in all times and all places. Athanasius (c. 296–373), an early church leader, appreciates the ecumenical nature of the gospel when he

6. Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 12.

reminds us that God “is working mightily among humans, every day invisibly persuading numbers of people all over the world.”⁷

This takes us back to the word *evangelical*. Most simply, evangelical Christians are people of the gospel, called to be witnesses to Jesus in the world. The gospel has not been entrusted to *any* single group of Christians in history, as if it were their sole possession. The gospel is God’s good news to the world, and God has raised witnesses for the gospel across generations and cultures. Evangelical theology has to be ecumenical theology. We simply cannot tell the story of theology—nor can we practice discipleship faithfully—without accounting for the wide variety of ways that God has used Christians throughout history to spread the gospel to the world. So, while I stand as part of the tradition of evangelicalism—and while I think that this tradition has much to offer the wider Christian tradition—I also believe in the need for conversation between Christians from across centuries and backgrounds whose lives have been shaped by the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. These conversations can be difficult and challenging. New perspectives can expose our assumptions and reveal areas where we have wrongly identified contextual elements of our time and place as essential to the gospel. In engaging with others, we are held accountable for mistakes we might make because of our limited perspectives, and we gain insights about God that we would be unable to see on our own. As we talk with one another, we are forced to do the hard work of articulating what we believe and why we believe it. This hard work becomes a gift to us, because, through it, we are strengthened to be the people God has called us to be and to fulfill the task that God has set out for us in our own time and place. As we live in this way, we stand in a long line of Christians who together make up the great “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) called by God to put doctrine into practice as we share the good news of salvation.

7. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 61.

1

Speaking of God

Theology and the Christian Life

The word *theology* can be a conversation stopper. When people ask what I teach, and I answer “theology,” the most common response is a short “Oh,” followed by uncertain silence. That “Oh” seems to cover several reactions, both from Christians and from those who are not of the faith. First, many people do not know what theology is. The word implies something obscure, even pretentious. Other people, again both Christian and not, have strong negative ideas about theology. Perhaps they have heard stories about the study of theology causing people to lose their faith. Perhaps they associate theology with self-righteousness or, worse, with violence against people who disagree with a certain theology. Still other people simply cannot imagine why anyone would care about such a thing. It sounds far removed from what really matters in life. While I understand these reactions, the ideas about theology they represent could not be further from my own experience in the discipline. It goes against the nature of theology for it to suffer elitism, sanctimoniousness, or uselessness. **Theology**, as the study of the things of God, a God who loves the world, is a discipline for all Christians. It is to be practiced with love, and, by God’s grace, it can make the practitioner more loving.

What Is Theology?

The word *theology* brings the Greek term *logos*—translated “word,” “speech,” or “reason”—together with the term *theos*, the word for “God.” In the Gospel of John, *logos* is identified with Jesus, who was “in the beginning . . . with God” and then “became flesh” (John 1:1, 14). Paul encourages Christians to “let the word [*logos*] of Christ dwell in you” when teaching one another (Col. 3:16). He uses the same root word when he talks about worship of God being “rational” (*logike*), an idea he connects to presenting our “bodies as a living sacrifice” and being “transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom. 12:1–2). Knowledge of the *logos* (Jesus) is reflected in true worship of him, which is manifested in the ways we act and think. It is also reflected in the ways we speak about God to others. When we, as Christians, bear witness to the gospel, we are doing theology. Early Christians called preaching about Jesus the “word [*logos*] of God” (Acts 8:14), and we are called to be ready to make a “defense to anyone who demands from you a reason [*logos*] for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15 ESV). All of these moments in Scripture point to the fact that words about God matter. Those words are right at the heart of Christian faith and life.

Theology begins with God’s revelatory word to us. It continues as we respond with words: words to God and to each other. So prayer, praise, testimony, preaching, and teaching are all parts of the daily theological work of the people of God. We also respond in the academic practice of theology, when theology is taught and written in the context of formal education and publication. Such academic theology can never proceed rightly if it is separated from the Christian life. The early church articulated this connection with the phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi*, “the law of prayer is the law of belief.” Theologian Geoffrey Wainwright points out that this expression contains a double suggestion; it “makes the rule of prayer a norm for belief,” but it also implies that “what must be believed governs what may and should be prayed.”¹ The “law of prayer” suggests the whole of an active life of discipleship, a life in which individuals and churches are in personal relationship with God. That living relationship informs orthodox or correct belief even while belief informs the life of faith. So, the connection between academic theology and theology that happens in the life of the church runs both ways.

1. Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 218.

While shaping our words, theology also shapes our reason, our lives as disciples, our worship as the church, and our mission to the world. As theology affects the way we talk about God, it also affects the way we think. We are to love God with our minds, and so part of our task is to think well about God. This is not easy, because as sinners we are “estranged and hostile in mind” (Col. 1:21). Before we can hope to reason correctly, we need God’s grace to transform our minds. This transformation takes place, in part, through the process of learning how to speak rightly about God. The study of theology affects the way we live. As our thoughts about God draw near the truth of God, our lives reflect this transformation. Paul points to this reality when he talks about Christians as people who “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). The discipline of theology is not first about gaining information or building a system of knowledge. It is about discipleship: we learn to speak and think well about God so that we can be more faithful followers of Jesus. By helping the church think about God, theology helps the church worship rightly. It also helps the church measure its words, so that it can pray, praise, preach, and perform in ways that reflect the truth about God and the gospel. Finally, as theology forms worship, it also provides training for our mission in the world. As we witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, we want to speak truthfully as we talk about God and the gift of salvation. The study of theology gives us words to say—and ways to say them—that we did not have before and helps us better recognize when our words or actions fail to reflect the truth about God. Theology prepares our minds for the challenges we will encounter, helping us to think about

Key Scripture

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. (Eph. 4:17–25)

the questions people have about God. Theology is the discipline of learning from the Word of God and learning to use words faithfully when we speak about God.

Doctrine

If theology is the discipline of speaking faithfully about God, then, in the big picture, theology speaks about almost everything. Everything, all of creation, belongs to God and therefore is subject matter for theology. For this reason, medieval Christians knew theology as the “queen of the sciences.” Theology is a queen, not because it is a trump card over other disciplines, not because other disciplines are unimportant, but because the topics studied in other disciplines—biology, psychology, economics, chemistry, and all the rest—are topics about God’s creation. Theology takes a bird’s-eye view of the other disciplines, seeing them all in light of God’s Word. On a smaller scale, though, theology speaks about an organized set of Christian teachings, doctrines about important themes in Scripture and Christian life. Christian doctrine, viewed as a whole, gives us a picture of the Christian faith.

There is a fairly standard list of doctrines, and this book introduces those major doctrines by giving a chapter to each: revelation and Scripture, God, creation, human beings, Jesus, salvation, the Holy Spirit, the church, and final Christian hope. Beginning with the doctrine of Scripture is a traditional Protestant move, one based on the belief that Scripture has a special status in the practice of theology. After the chapter on Scripture, the other doctrinal chapters in this book are ordered loosely in line with the biblical narrative, which begins with creation and ends with the kingdom of God. This is not the only possible list of doctrines, nor is this the only order in which we could consider them. The doctrines also have possible subcategories. Theologians have interesting conversations about what belongs on the list and what should come first.

Theologians also pay attention to the connections between these doctrines. The teachings of Christian faith are interrelated. For example, if we were to make major revisions to our beliefs about Jesus—Christology—those revisions would have repercussions for the other doctrines. What we believe about Jesus is intertwined with what we believe about salvation, humanity, and the church. Theological training helps us to see

Theologians on Dogma and Doctrine

Theologians describe the concept of doctrine and dogma in different ways.

For Karl Barth, “dogma is the agreement of Church proclamation with the revelation attested in Holy Scripture. Into this agreement, and therefore into dogma, dogmatics inquires.”^a Barth argues that, as sinners, we never get this agreement right, and so our attempts at practicing doctrine are always only proposals for dogma. That is, our theologies are not the Word of God.

George Lindbeck highlights what doctrine does in the Christian life. Like grammatical rules that govern the writing and speaking of a language, doctrines govern the Christian life. He describes doctrines as “communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.”^b

Robert Jenson makes a distinction between doctrine and dogma, a distinction “most clearly marked by the notion of irreversibility. Every theological proposition states a historic choice. ‘To be speaking the gospel, let us henceforward say “F” rather than that other possibility “G.”’ A dogmatic choice is one by which the church so decisively determines her own future that if the choice is wrongly made, the community determined by that choice is no longer in fact the community of the gospel.”^c

Serene Jones describes doctrines “as imaginative lenses through which to view the world. Through them, one learns how to relate to other persons, how to act in community, how to make sense of truth and falsehood, and how to understand and move through the varied terrain of life’s everyday challenges.”^d

Finally, Dorothy Sayers insists on the reality of dogma: “It is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter; it matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling; it is vitally necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe.”^e

a. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 304.

b. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 18.

c. Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1:17.

d. Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 16.

e. Dorothy Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2004), 46.

the interconnectedness of doctrine and to recognize the ways that different theologies are affected by it. Theological training also helps us to see which doctrines are central for particular theologians.

Human attempts to articulate doctrine are always limited by our finitude and brokenness. Within these limits, Christians recognize a spectrum of

authoritativeness in Christian teaching. The term **dogma** is used for Christian teaching at the highest level of authority and trustworthiness. Dogmas are teachings that are shared ecumenically across Christian communities, teachings that we have good reason to trust, teachings most central to the faith. At a less universal level of authority, particular Christian communities treat doctrine within those communities as authoritative. For example, Lutherans grant authority to Lutheran doctrine or a local congregation grants authority to a doctrinal statement. These doctrines might not be recognized or considered authoritative in another church context. Still, the doctrine is recognized as authoritative in its community.

Doctrinal proposals are also made at an individual level. Throughout the history of the church, individual Christians have done theological work, trying to articulate doctrine in their own times and places. Those individual theologies, then, have been subject to the discernment of the wider body. When Martin Luther wrote about justification by faith, he was not writing authoritative Lutheran doctrine. Later, communities of Christians came to recognize Luther's theology as authoritative, and his individual work informed the authoritative doctrine of Protestant Christianity. The ongoing work of individual theologians continues to inform the authoritative doctrine of the people of God.

Resources for Theology

As we learn to speak well about God and attempt to formulate faithful doctrine, we are going to look for resources to help us in the task. One model for thinking about sources and authority for theology is found in the **Wesleyan Quadrilateral**.² This model is named for John Wesley, one of the eighteenth-century revivalists at the roots of evangelicalism. Imagine a shape with four sides, with each side representing a resource that informs the Christian life: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The four sides of this quadrilateral should not be understood as four equal sources for theology. It is better to think of Scripture as the source of Christian doctrine and to think of tradition, reason, and experience as resources for

2. The association of this model with John Wesley can be misleading. Wesley appealed to all four of these resources, but he did not use the term "quadrilateral" to describe his theological method. See William Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

understanding that source. The quadrilateral brings these resources into conversation with each other and with Scripture, which, as the Word of God, stands as the proper authority for theology. Church tradition, human reason, and our own experiences stand under the authority of Scripture and help us understand it better. The quadrilateral functions as a rubric that helps us think about theological questions. By looking at each side of the quadrilateral in turn, we can gain a clearer picture of the unique way that theology functions in the Christian life.

Scripture and Theology

John Wesley was clear that the role of Scripture in doing theology is categorically different from any role that other resources might play. “I allow no other rule,” Wesley wrote, “whether of faith or practice, than the Holy Scriptures.”³ No source for theology can operate independently of Scripture. When the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century spoke about the best way to do theology, they used the phrase *sola scriptura*, “Scripture alone.” Martin Luther wrote that “the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel.”⁴ The reformers were opposing abuses in both belief and practice that plagued the church in their time. The call of *sola scriptura* came from recognition that other authorities—including tradition, reason, and experience—were easy to bend in any direction that sinful human beings desired. Protestant theologians were conscious of our tendency to try to force theology to fit with human desire. The *sola scriptura* principle is a check, a safety net meant to keep us from falling into false thinking about God. As the Word of God, Scripture rectifies all human words—words of tradition, reason, and experience. Church tradition is open to abuse, and it does not always speak with one voice. Christians have different experiences and often do not agree on whether something is reasonable or not. Conclusions drawn from tradition, experience, and reason vary between individuals and locations, but all Christians in all places have access to the same reliable Word of God in Scripture. The best practitioners of doctrine are always ready to be challenged and corrected by God’s Word. Scripture is an external

3. “To James Hervey,” in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 72.

4. “The Smalcald Articles,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 507.

authority that breaks into our world from God to us, and it opens our eyes to help us recognize the truth about God.

These claims demand two sets of questions. The first set of questions is about the risks of doing theology. If Scripture is the norm for Christian thought and life, why would theologians pay any attention to other authorities? If tradition and reason are full of abuses, if experience is so often selfish, should Christians turn away from them? For that matter, why should we try to talk about doctrine at all? Why not simply read the Bible? The problem is that it is not so easy to “simply” read the Bible, and this raises a second set of questions about the difficult task of understanding and being faithful to the Word of God in Scripture. Scripture has been used to validate abuse, and Christians often disagree about the meaning of Scripture. We also misinterpret Scripture, and much of the history of Christian theology involves correcting mistaken readings of the Bible. The interpretations of Scripture found in the writings of the early church heretics, the torturers of the inquisition, or evangelical slaveholders during the Civil War provide examples of such bad readings.⁵ The discipline of theology is about learning to read Scripture more faithfully. It is also about speaking the truth of Scripture in ways that fit new contexts, new times, and new places. It is true that human beings are very talented at using reason, tradition, and experience to support our own sins. It is also true that reading Scripture well is very hard work.

By putting Scripture into conversation with reason, tradition, and experience, we find help in understanding its meaning and guarding against our tendency to misinterpret it. John Wesley illustrates how he held these questions together in the life of faith. Wesley wished to be “a man of one book.” He longed for God’s Word in Scripture, writing, “O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God!”⁶ The more Wesley immersed himself in that “one book” and the more he got to know the Bible, the more he understood the gospel in his own life and strove to share the good news with others. He relied on Scripture as the source of doctrine. This “man of one book,” though, read broadly from many books. He asked the leaders of his movement to read a large library of Christian sources drawn from the earliest centuries of the church to their own time.

5. Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

6. “Preface to *Sermons on Several Occasions*,” in Outler, *John Wesley*, 89.

Describing his own practice, Wesley shows how there is no contradiction between the longing to be a people of “one book” and being willing to learn from other resources as we seek to be more faithful readers of Scripture. Wesley recounts how he loved to sit alone with the Bible, which he describes as sitting in the presence of God. When he did not understand the meaning of Scripture, he would pray for illumination. He also used a rule for reading Scripture that had been used by many Christians before him, the rule that “Scripture interprets Scripture.” He would search other passages of Scripture to help him understand the passage he was reading. He expressed trust that God would make the Word clear to him. Then he would turn to the reason and experience of other Christians: “If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God and then the writings whereby being dead they yet speak.”⁷ He turned to the Christian tradition—to the voices of other faithful Christians. This method demonstrates how Scripture relates to tradition, reason, and experience: Christians are people of the “one book” who become better readers of Scripture by being in conversation with other Christians. We will discuss the doctrine of Scripture in greater depth in the next chapter.

Tradition and Theology

Many Christians undervalue the role of tradition in guiding Christian belief and life, and this is troublesome for the same reason that undue confidence in tradition is: human sin is very real. We need to be aware of the ways that sin may make us resistant to the truth of Christian tradition. The danger of undervaluing tradition is especially real in contemporary North American evangelicalism, where, as theologian Soong-Chan Rah points out, consumerism, individualism, and racism have negative effects on the practice of doctrine.⁸ If we undervalue tradition, we run the risk of mistaking fleeting or sinful human experience as the universal way of following God. We do not have to read Scripture in isolation: we are able to learn from and with our brothers and sisters in Christ who are on the journey of faith with us. Christians are always in conversation with other Christians about the things of God. The discipline of theology can be seen as one long conversation—stretching over centuries and continents—about

7. *Ibid.*, 90.

8. Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).

how to read Scripture well. The best practitioners of doctrine take time to learn about this conversation by studying the Christian tradition.

The tradition is an essential resource for theologians seeking to better understand Scripture, but the word *tradition*, like the word *doctrine*, often does not carry warm connotations. Some people talk about “dead tradition,” and others regard it as something to be overcome and rejected. We do not want to be chained to outdated practices that no longer apply to our situation. Theologians view tradition in a different way, because far from being “dead,” the Christian tradition is very much alive—not least because, as Christians, we know that death is not the end. The authority of tradition does not come from repetition of old phrases or ideas, as if our task is to do things the way they have always been done. Rather, the authority of tradition rests in its consistency with the “living and active” (Heb. 4:12) Word of God. The Christian tradition gives us access to the best efforts of other Christians to think faithfully about Scripture and life. In listening to other Christians—past and present, near and far—we acknowledge that our own wisdom is limited, and we recognize and rejoice in the work of God in the lives of others. As we learn about past Christians, we find guidance and direction for our reflections in the present. Theologian Kathryn Tanner says that knowing Christian tradition is a way “of expanding the range of imaginative possibilities for theological construction in any one time and place. . . . Placing one’s own efforts within this ongoing and wide stream, one grows in appreciation for the two-thousand-year, global history of efforts to say what Christianity is all about.”⁹ Listening to the tradition helps us practice humility. It helps us recognize our limits and lets us learn from others who share the faith.

The most widely shared and authoritative Christian tradition comes from early summaries of Christian doctrine, known as the **rule of faith**, which took mature form in ecumenical **creeds**. The Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds are brief statements of Christian faith that enjoy broad recognition as faithful summaries of key scriptural teachings. Theologian Vincent of Lérins (d. ca. 445) suggested a rule that Christians ought to believe those things that are recognized as true always, everywhere, and for everybody. His point was that Christian truth extends across time and crosses borders. The creeds fit Vincent’s rule; no other summary of Christian teaching has come

9. Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), xviii.

so close to being accepted always, everywhere, and by all Christians. As such, the creeds provide us with standards of **orthodoxy**, or right Christian belief. Orthodox doctrine is contrasted with false doctrine or **heresy**, beliefs that have been rejected by the church as contrary to Scripture. While “heresy” can be a frightening word, a heresy is simply a doctrine that has been found, in the Spirit-guided judgment of God’s people, to be wrong. The fact that someone is wrong does not mean that they are damned. Correct doctrine does not save us. Jesus saves us. This does not mean that heresy is not serious. Because doctrine matters, false doctrine matters. If right doctrine—true, beautiful, and good Christian teaching that is faithful to God’s Word—is connected to faithful practice, if right doctrine can be a means of grace that shapes us as disciples, then false doctrine will also have consequences for practice and formation. Anyone can cite Scripture, and the most damaging heretics are often skilled at quoting verses to support their views. By leading us back to Scripture, the creeds help us discern the truth. They help us avoid making judgments about doctrine based on feelings, emotional responses, or personal reactions.

Reason and Theology

While caricatures may portray faith and reason as opponents, reason is central to the practice of doctrine. The faithful exercise of reason is close to the very heart of theology as a discipline. God *is* reason, and because he has ordered the entire cosmos according to his rational plan (John 1:3),

The Apostles’ Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead and buried.
He descended to hell,
on the third day rose again from the dead,
ascended to heaven,
sits at the right hand of God the Father
almighty,
thence he will come to judge the living
and the dead;

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.^a

a. “Textus receptus (c. 700),” in John H. Leith, ed. *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: John Knox, 1982), 24–25.

Global Theologians Connecting Philosophy and Theology

The work of connecting theology with philosophy is both a global and a local enterprise. All theological work is done in context. The quotations that follow illustrate the ways that two contemporary theologians are thinking about the connections between specific contexts and the practice of doctrine. First, Kenyan theologian James Kombo writes about the doctrine of the Trinity in African and ecumenical thought.

We (in African theology) must seek to understand what the Bible means by emphasizing one God, while at the same time teaching the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We have to search for ourselves how the church fathers understood God when they formulated the creeds that have been inherited by us. . . . We cannot bypass these efforts in our own search for a reinterpretation that is appropriate for the African context. If we are going to engage in informed theological discourses with the wider theological fraternity, we cannot afford to short-circuit the contributions to the Trinitarian debate by individual theologians. . . . To listen to what these theologians say is to function within a universal Christian story. To function within the universal Christian story . . . is not to fall into Eurocentric formation. The African church is part of the universal church; it does not have another story. It is the same universal story that the African theologian must identify, listen to, and clarify for the African audience.^a

Kombo articulates the doctrine of the Trinity in African philosophical forms, but he does not ignore the ecumenical context in doing so. Next, Chinese theologian K. K. Yeo talks about the relationship between Christian doctrine and Confucian thought.

I believe that Christ completes or extends what is merely implicit or absent (theology, transcendence, spirit) in Confucius; without Christ, the Confucian ethic too quickly (even in early Chinese history) degenerates into a system of ritualistic behavior. But the Confucian ethic amplifies various elements of Christian theologies (for example, community, virtues) that are underplayed in Western Christianity. The Christ of God (in the Bible) can bring Chinese classics and cultures (such as Confucian ethics) to their fulfillment while protecting the universal church from aberrations of Chinese history, and while protecting China against the aberration of Christian history and interpretation in the West. CCT [Christian Chinese Theology] has something to say to the universal church that needs to be heard. CCT will discover its *global* mission if it can be allowed to find its own biblical interpretation.^b

Yeo, like Kombo, sees the relationship between contextual and ecumenical theology as one that runs both directions. Both local and ecumenical Christian thought contain aberrations, and both contain riches.

a. James Henry Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 271–72.

b. Khiok-Khng Yeo, “Christian Chinese Theology: Theological Ethics of Becoming Human and Holy,” in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, ed. Jeffrey Greenman and Gene Green (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 97–113.

reason is intrinsic to faith.¹⁰ As creatures made in God's image, we are created to act reasonably in everything we do, especially in the way that we think and speak about God.

We exercise reason when we do such things as analyze facts and ideas, construct arguments, form judgments, and decide what is true or false. These actions assist us in the task of theology when we employ them to discern how Scripture holds together and what this requires of our lives. This often takes the form of drawing out implications from the teachings of Scripture. Reason helps us to better understand the things of God so that we may be more faithful in word and deed. Using reason for this purpose is part of what it means to show integrity in our teaching (Titus 2:7). As people called to love God with our minds, we have to be willing to do the hard work of thinking through the claims of faith so that we can understand what they mean and how they all fit together. The use of our reason is an act of discipleship. It enables us to share the good news more effectively and helps us love God more as we begin to see with increasing clarity the "depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" (Rom. 11:33).

The practice of doctrine thus involves stewardship of the intellectual gifts God has given us. The practice of doctrine also involves Christians in conversation with disciplines besides theology—the arts, sciences, and humanities—as we seek the truth of God. Christians are always in conversation with the intellectual riches of the day. The ancient Augustine found help in Platonic philosophy, and the medieval Thomas Aquinas brought the riches of Christian doctrine together with the best of Aristotelian thought. Both Augustine and Aquinas thought about these philosophical traditions as Christians. Intimates with the Scriptures, both understood that philosophy would not look the same once it encountered Jesus Christ, and both saw places where philosophy must be corrected by doctrine, but neither theologian let this stop him from learning from the philosophers. The contemporary practice of doctrine can find a model in Augustine and Aquinas. Christians have nothing to fear from learning, from knowledge, and Christians know that human learning will need to be challenged by the Word, but the riches of human knowledge are nothing to be despised. As we practice doctrine and learn faithfulness in our own intellectual contexts, we have much to learn from scientists, artists, and philosophers.

10. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948), I.14.4.

We must also be aware that sin is stamped on our reason as it is on every other aspect of life, and reason cannot function rightly apart from God's grace. We cannot take it for granted that we know what is or is not reasonable apart from the revelation of God. Since there is no *logos* (reason) apart from the true *logos*, Jesus Christ, we have no foolproof standards by which we can judge what must be true about God apart from what God has shown us in revelation. Christians embrace reason, but we are not ruled by empiricism. We do not have to assume, for instance, that things must be measurable in order to be true. Christian belief is not restricted to what we can understand. God always remains beyond the limits of our ability to describe him, and God cannot be captured by our ideas. Reason is a vital resource for theology, but we must remember that we "know only in part" (1 Cor. 13:12). Sin often causes us to bend the truth, and the only cure for fallen reason is Jesus Christ. In the incarnation, the Son of God took on a human mind as well as a human body, and he shows us what a human life lived with perfect reason looks like. By connecting his life to ours, therefore, Jesus frees us to reason rightly about God. This is why Paul tells us to "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

Experience and Theology

The idea that experience ought to be a resource for theology is highly contested. One strand in contemporary theology has little patience with appeals to experience, seeing experience as hopelessly subjective, individualistic, and sinful. Another strand of theology seeks to make it clear that experience always and necessarily influences our practice of doctrine and prefers to make that influence clear rather than pretending objectivity. There are clear dangers in relying on experience as a resource for doctrine, but we also cannot discount the importance of experience.

Much of what worries theologians in appeals to experience arose during the Enlightenment. One of the hallmarks of the modern era is suspicion of authorities like tradition and Scripture. Instead of relying on such external authorities, Enlightenment thinkers taught that reason alone should serve as the primary authority for all areas of life. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), a pastor in Berlin, recognized that this view destabilized the Christian faith, and he argued that faith should be

understood in terms of our most basic “experience” of God, a concept he defined as a “feeling.”¹¹ Schleiermacher tried to explain Christian faith without relying on the traditional authorities or limiting it to what we can prove, and the argument was effective. One can reject authoritative sources or argue against rational conclusions, but it is difficult to discount what someone *feels* about God. The problem, however, is that experience-based faith becomes subjective, individualistic, and, ultimately, private and detached from reality. The German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) argued that everything we know about God is nothing more than a reflection of ourselves. “Knowledge of God is self-knowledge,” he insisted. “By his God you know the man, and by the man his God; the two are *identical*.”¹² In other

words, if we know God through experience, then the subject matter of theology is no longer God but *us*. We end up making God in our image instead of the other way around, and this leaves us with an idol.

Schleiermacher’s turn to experience was influential, and no theology is immune to the temptation to use experience in the wrong way. Part of the task of theology is to expose and reject bad appeals to experience. At

God Is Not . . . God Is . . .

Tertullian says, “That which is infinite is known only to itself. This it is which gives some notion of God, while yet beyond all our conceptions—our very incapacity of fully grasping Him affords us the idea of what He really is. He is presented to our minds in His transcendent greatness, as at once known and unknown.”^a

The tradition of apophatic theology is one that tries to do justice to the mystery and majesty of God and to recall that God cannot be pinned down by our doctrines. God is always more than we can express. Apophatic theology, then, uses a method of negation. Instead of trying to say what God is, the apophatic theologian makes statements about what God is not.

A cataphatic approach to theology makes positive statements about God, and cataphatic theology works with the confidence that comes from the fact that God has, in fact, made himself known to us.

a. Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 17, in *The Writings of Quintus Sept. Flor. Tertullianus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, trans. S. Thelwall (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), 1:86.

11. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. and ed. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 22.

12. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), 12; emphasis added.

the same time, experience matters. Who we are and where we come from do influence our theologies, and God cares about our experiences. More, God can use experience in powerful ways, both in individual lives and in churches and communities. The Pietist theologian Philip Jacob Spener (1635–1705) focused on the Holy Spirit’s work in transforming the lives of believers into reflections of God’s grace. “It is not enough that we hear the Word with our outward ear,” he argued, “but we must let it penetrate to our heart, so that we may hear the Holy Spirit speak there, that is, with vibrant emotion and comfort feel the sealing of the Spirit and the power of the Word.”¹³ In short, Christians must reflect what we believe in the way that we live. We cannot do so without the gift of grace as “guided by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25).

This emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit greatly influenced the evangelical movement. We see an example in John Wesley, whose life was changed by experience. Wesley wrote, “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”¹⁴ Later, Wesley would emphasize the power that God works when faith comes alive in personal experience: “May every real Christian say, ‘I now am assured that these things are so; I experienced them in my own breast. What Christianity (considered as a doctrine) promised, is accomplished in my soul.’”¹⁵ In Wesley’s theological context, resources for theology were often thought of as a “three-legged stool”—Scripture, tradition, and reason. The addition of “experience,” turning three legs into four, can be viewed as both Wesley’s genius and his flaw. Experience is powerful, but it is also slippery. It can transform lives, but it can also raise idols. Wesley builds safeguards around authoritative experience by defining it as a certain *kind* of experience: not just any feeling, but the converting, assuring, and transforming experience of the Spirit’s work in our lives.

Many of us know the power of the experience of the Spirit both Spener and Wesley describe but may also recognize a burden that comes when Christians try desperately to *produce* this kind of heartfelt experience.

13. Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 117.

14. Outler, *John Wesley*, 66.

15. *Ibid.*, 191.

Contemporary Experience Theologies

In 1971 Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez became the “father of liberation theology” as he wrote about the experience of the poor. Here, from the introduction to his book, we see a place for experience in theology that had not been acknowledged in quite this way before:

This book is an attempt at reflection, based on the gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America. It is a theological reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human. . . . My purpose is not to elaborate an ideology to justify postures already taken. . . . It is rather to let ourselves be judged by the word of the Lord, to think through our faith, to strengthen our love, and to give reason for hope. . . . It is to reconsider the great themes of the Christian life within this radically changed perspective and with regard to the new questions posed by this commitment.^a

Other theologians began to write from the perspectives of oppressed peoples. Black theology, for example, draws on the experience of black people as an important resource for theological reflection, and feminist theology draws on the experiences of women. It is inappropriate to make a general assessment of these experience theologies, because they are very diverse. It is possible to find examples of theologies that use experience as a warrant for silencing Scripture, but it is also possible to find experience theologies that are consciously orthodox and bound to God’s Word. There is a sense in which every theology is an experience theology because theologians cannot leave their experiences at the door when they come to work.

a. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 15th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xiii.

Note how Wesley places emphasis on *God’s* action, not his own. His heart is warmed, not by his own effort, but “strangely,” by God. Paul’s emphasis is similar when he criticizes the Galatians for relying on the law instead of upon the faith God has given them. He asks them a pointed question: “Did you experience so much for nothing?” (Gal. 3:4). The “experience” Paul points to here is not a “feeling” the Galatians produce but a gift of grace given to them through the work of the Holy Spirit. *This* experience is a fruitful resource for theology. God uses our experience of his grace to shape our understanding of Scripture. God uses our experience to enable us to see, know, and live the truth that “everything old has passed away” and “everything has become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). What we tend to think of as “experience,” Scripture often speaks of in terms of “the heart,” a concept

that concerns the very center of the human self, including our emotions and desires. The heart matters to God in powerful ways. We need only to think of the psalmist's prayer that both his words and his heart "be acceptable" to God (Ps. 19:14), David's "integrity of heart" (1 Kings 9:4), and Jesus's command that we should love God with our "heart" (Luke 10:27).

Practicing Theology

Ephesians 4 displays some ways that the work of theology helps us to mature in the faith as "knowledge of the Son of God" is connected "to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). "Children" are "tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming" (v. 14). As we grow in Christ, we try to make sense of our faith in order to live faithfully. As we speak truth in love, "we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (v. 15). Paul contrasts the way the gentiles live, "in the futility of their minds" (v. 17), "darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart" (v. 18), with those who have "learned Christ" (v. 20), those who "were taught to put away [their] former way of life, [their] old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of [their] minds, and to clothe [themselves] with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (vv. 22–24). Here, the connections between bad doctrine (futile, insensate, alienated, and ignorant) and broken lives mirror the connections between truthful doctrine (learned of Christ) and transformed lives. Theology equips us for faithful living. Because we have "learned Christ" and been taught truth as it is "in Jesus" (vv. 20–21), our lives are forever changed.

Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) described the theological task as one of "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*). These words expressed his desire to appreciate the implications of the faith clearly, logically, and deeply. "For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe," he said, "but I believe so that I may understand."¹⁶ There is postmodern appeal in Anselm's medieval description, an unapologetic honesty about

16. *Proslogion*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 87.

Questions to Ask While Reading Theology

1. What are the key Christian teachings being articulated? What is the author's driving concern or main theme?
2. What counts for the author as authoritative (Scripture, tradition, reason, experience . . .)? Is the author's theological method implicit or explicit?
3. How does the author deal with the witness of Scripture?
 - a. Implicitly? Explicitly?
 - b. Does the witness of the Old Testament matter? The New?
 - c. What biblical themes are privileged?
 - d. What interpretative principles are at work?
4. How do these claims relate to other doctrines?
5. How does context (including gender, race, class, culture, and time) shape the theological voice? Is the theologian conscious of this? How does your context shape your evaluation of the piece?
6. Practice reading charitably. What is the best possible interpretation of how the piece reflects an attempt to be faithful to Jesus Christ?
7. How do these theological claims relate to the life of faith? Do you bring other questions from your experience?
8. If this theological proposal were taken seriously, how would it shape Christian practice? Would it affect our participation in spiritual disciplines? Our understanding of faithful living? Our practice of evangelism? Our life as the church?

the theologian's starting place in faith. Theology begins in God, who is unprovable, transcendent, and unutterable, and through grace and goodness it continues in a quest to understand matters of faith, matters that remain unprovable but nonetheless become visible and practical in lives transformed by the gospel. As we search for understanding, we become more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.