

MICHAEL HORTON

Pilgrim Theology

CORE DOCTRINES FOR CHRISTIAN DISCIPLES



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To James, Olivia, Adam, and Matthew
For challenging and encouraging me to keep on
growing up into Christ even as you are, by his grace

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Abbreviations

- ANF* *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1976)
- Church Dogmatics* Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; trans. G. W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1975)
- ESV English Standard Version
- HCSB Holman Christian Standard Bible
- Institutes* John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960)
- KJV King James Version
- NIV New International Version, 2011
- NPNF2* *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (ed. Philip Schaff et al.; 2nd series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1982)
- NRSV New Revised Standard Version
- PG *Patrologia graeca* (ed. J.-P Migne; 162 vols.; Paris, 1857–1886)

Why Study Theology?

Whether you realize it or not, you are a theologian. You come to a book like this with a working theology, an existing understanding of God. Whether you are an agnostic or a fundamentalist—or something in between—you have a working theology that shapes and informs the way you think and live. However, I suspect that you are reading this book because you're interested in *examining* your theology more closely. You are open to having it challenged and strengthened. You know that theology—the study of God—is more than an intellectual hobby. It's a matter of life and death, something that affects the way you think, the decisions you make each day, the way you relate to God and other people, and the way you see yourself and the world around you.

I. Pilgrims on the Way

I have written this book on the heels of another theology book entitled *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*.¹ As I explained in the introduction to that book, the old Reformed theologians would sometimes refer to their summaries of the faith as “*our* theology.” They referred to it this way for two reasons. First, to indicate that what they were writing was distinct from God’s own self-understanding. This is why they would sometimes use the term *ectypal* when talking about their theology. Though it sounds somewhat technical, an ectype is simply a copy, with the archetype as the original. Talking about theology as “ectypal,” then, is a humble admission that only God’s own self-knowledge is original (archetypal). All that we say about God is a copy, subject to error. We will never know anything exactly as God knows it. Instead, we know things as he has revealed them to us, accommodating his knowledge to our feeble capacity to understand.

Second, the older theologians referred to their summary of faith as “*our* theology” to make it clear that it was not just “*my* theology” — their own

1. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

individualistic understanding of God. To study theology involves entering into a long, ongoing conversation, one that we did not begin. Others have been talking about God long before you or I entered this discussion. We do not read the Bible somewhere off by ourselves in a corner; we read it as a community of faith, together with the whole church in all times and places.

Because our theological understanding is necessarily limited and finite, subject to our sinful biases, affections, and errors, I follow a venerable Christian tradition by referring to this volume as a “pilgrim theology” for those on the way—Christians who humbly seek to understand God but who are aware of their own biases and sinful tendencies to distort the truth. Older theologians used this term to distinguish our theological understanding from that of the glorified saints. A day will yet come when we are glorified and the effects of sin fully conquered, and our understanding of God will be fuller, more complete. Even in this condition, however, we will still be finite and our theology will remain ectypal—creaturely. Yet it will no longer be a theology for pilgrims. It will no longer be subject to sinful error. Then, we shall know, even as we are fully known.

So consider this book a map for pilgrims—people “on the way,” those on a journey seeking theological understanding for life in this world and the world to come. This book is more than simply an abridgment of *The Christian Faith*. Instead, I have sought to write for an entirely new and wider audience. I’ve intentionally tried to make it useful for both group and individual study, and have included key terms, distinctions, and questions at the end of each chapter that are linked to words in bold font within the text. Though this book is less detailed than my longer systematic theology, it is written to serve as something of a travel guide to help you on your own journey of theological understanding, showing you the proper coordinates and important landmarks you’ll need to recognize along the way.

II. Drama to Discipleship

Although it is “the study of God,” theology has a reputation for being dry, abstract, and irrelevant for daily living. Many Christians assume that we can just experience God in a personal relationship apart from doctrine, but that’s impossible. You cannot experience God without knowing who he is, what he has done, and who you are in relation to him. Even our most basic Christian experiences and commitments are theological. “I just love Jesus,” some say. But who is Jesus? And why do you love him? “I just try to live for the Lord.” Is this Lord *Yahweh*, the Creator and Redeemer who

reveals himself in Scripture, or an idol? What is this Lord like, what does he approve? What are his attributes? And is there any good news to report concerning this God's actions in our history, or are you just trying to be a "good person"? What happens when you die? What's the future of this world? These are not abstract questions, but questions that haunt our hearts and minds from childhood to old age. We can suppress these questions, but we cannot make them go away. Reality forces us to bump into them. The burden of this book is to elaborate the claim that God has revealed answers, though we will not like all of them.

In this regard, Christianity is a unique religion. The starting point and endgame of the Christian faith are distinct from every other way people tend to approach religion and spirituality. Today, especially in the West, most people tend to associate religion with the inner realm of the individual soul (mysticism) or with principles for individual or social behavior (morality), or perhaps—though less often these days—with intellectual curiosity and speculation (philosophy). Mix elements of these three—mysticism, morality, and philosophy—together and stir in a generous dose of Yankee pragmatism, and the result is an eclectic soup that is easy to swallow. The goal of life is often viewed as some form of personal or collective happiness. If a person can mix in a bit of wisdom from various other perspectives to spice things up, all the better!

The faith that springs from the Bible's story of God is entirely different. We could even say that it has a different horizon. The triune God is the sun on this horizon, and we orient ourselves to this sun, not the other way around. Instead of starting with ourselves—our plans, purposes, dreams, and accomplishments—and seeking to learn how God can serve our goals and desires, we begin with God, who *is* life, and who freely created, sustains, and directs history to his ends. In this strange new world of the Bible, religion is not something that I can use for my own fulfillment. I do not come to Christianity to find truths that confirm me and strengthen my resolve to live better, try harder, or make more of myself. Rather, when I encounter the God of the Bible I come to see that my very questions are skewed, badly ranked, and disordered—even before I try to give my answers. In other words, the Bible is not primarily concerned with me and my quest for personal meaning and fulfillment. It's a story about God, who is good enough to tell us about himself, about ourselves, and about this world, and to give us the true meaning of history. Yes, in the process of being swept away into this story, we do indeed find personal meaning and fulfillment for ourselves in ways that we could never

have imagined, much less arranged. But we don't get those things by starting with them. Instead, we need a compass to guide us.

A compass orients us. It helps us on our journey by helping us to grasp that the Bible is not chiefly about me and my personal experience or morality. Rather, it is the revelation of God and God's history with us. Its relevance lies not in helping the pious individual to attain spiritual well-being, but in the way it actually introduces us to reality. It is not a flight *away* from the world into the inner recesses of the soul, but a completely new existence *within* the world that God has made, sustains, has redeemed, and will one day transform fully and forever into his everlasting home. As we shall see, the theology of the Bible leads us away from the high places of the religious, the moral, and the spiritual specialists. It keeps our boots firmly on the ground. Instead of ascending to spiritual heights, we meet God in his gracious descent to us.

Like the directions on a compass, there are four coordinates that guide us in our journey to know God:

- Drama
- Doctrine
- Doxology
- Discipleship

All of our faith and practice arise out of the *drama* of Scripture, the “big story” that traces the plot of history from creation to consummation, with Christ as its Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. And out of the throbbing verbs of this unfolding drama God reveals stable nouns—*doctrines*. From what God does in history we are taught certain things about who he is and what it means to be created in his image, fallen, and redeemed, renewed, and glorified in union with Christ. As the Father creates his church, in his Son and by his Spirit, we come to realize what this covenant community is and what it means to belong to it; what kind of future is promised to us in Christ, and how we are to live here and now in the light of it all. The drama and the doctrine provoke us to praise and worship—*doxology*—and together these three coordinates give us a new way of living in the world as *disciples*.

Unlike the directions on a common compass, all of these coordinates are engaged simultaneously. We do not begin our journey in the direction of the drama, then move on to the doctrine and doxology and finally arrive at discipleship. Often, as we will see later, doctrinal gold is discovered in Scripture's rich veins of prayer and praise. Doctrines like the Trinity did not emerge out of ivory-tower theorizing, but out of the worship of Jewish

Christians who acknowledge one God yet were baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and gave praise to each of them as a distinct person of the one God. At no point was doctrine conceived merely as an intellectual enterprise. In Scripture and in the best of church history, doctrinal reflection has maintained a deeply integrated connection with the biblical narrative, the desire of the heart, and the engagement of the will and the body in worship and life.

The Bible knows nothing of any contrast between truth and experience, head and heart, theology and practical living. On the contrary, Israel lived out of its unfolding story. Every year when Passover was celebrated, each participant was to think of himself or herself as one who had escaped God's judgment and slavery in Egypt, along with the ancient fathers and mothers whom God led through the sea. The children asked, "What does this mean?" and the parents explained the meaning of the story, not only as the narrative of a mighty act of God in the past, but as a living reality that continued to shape their identity. Attentive to the doctrines that arose from this drama, and with an entire hymnal that expressed and structured the people's appropriate response, each generation rediscovered itself in this covenantal drama, somewhere between promise and fulfillment. The story of God and his history with Israel became their story as well. How did the people know that God was all-powerful and full of mercy (i.e., the doctrine)? Without hesitation, they would have spoken of how God had redeemed his people from the heavy hand of Pharaoh and promised an even greater exodus in the future (i.e., the drama). An outsider might have learned this story by overhearing believers in prayer and in praise:

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. . . . Give thanks . . . to him who alone does great wonders, for his steadfast love endures forever . . . to him who spread out the earth above the waters, for his steadfast love endures forever; to him who made the great lights [sun, moon, and stars], for his steadfast love endures forever . . . to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt . . . and brought Israel out from among them . . . with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, for his steadfast love endures forever. (Ps 136:1–12)

God's mighty acts, which happened apart from them (in the drama), were done for them (identified as doctrine) and were now enveloping them (in doxology) and shaping their way of living in the world (discipleship).

The New Testament also begins with a dramatic story of God's mighty deeds, recounted in the Gospels and Acts. In the Epistles, doctrinal explanations explore the significance of these deeds for us here and now, as do

early liturgical elements (hymns, confessions of sin and faith, and prayers) and commands that specify the sort of life in the world that this paradigm shift entails. Paul’s famous Letter to the Romans is densely packed with depth charges that explode in our minds and hearts. Even in the first verse, Paul announces that his central focus is “the gospel of God,” and this good news is first of all a dramatic story: “the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (vv. 1–4).

Paul unpacks the glories of this gospel—its doctrines. We find our place in the story of God’s gracious covenant. From the drama we learn that Christ died and was raised on the third day. And then from the doctrine we discover that he “was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Ro 4:25). Like a hiker reaching alpine vistas, Paul is provoked by each of these doctrinal arguments to rest a spell and take in the view, yielding to exclamations of wonder and praise (8:31–39; 11:33–36). Along the way, the apostle relates doctrine and practice: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!” To explain his answer, Paul returns to the drama and doctrine: “How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Ro 6:1–4). Discipleship—through “the renewing of [the] mind” by the word and Spirit—now becomes, in the language of the old King James Version, the “reasonable service” offered not to attain God’s favor, but in view of the mercies of God (12:1–2).

Drama, doctrine, doxology, and discipleship—the four coordinates of our compass—integrate our faith and practice. We will keep our eyes on these four coordinates throughout this volume, as we endeavor not to separate what God has united in his infinite wisdom.

III. The Gospel of God’s Son

Especially in the modern era, summaries of Christian doctrine often begin with the least controversial premises: things that all reasonable people can agree upon. First, you prove God’s existence, then you unpack the essence of who God is, and this gives you the building blocks for a doctrine of Scripture. Only after all of this preparatory work can you begin “doing theology.”

This is a problem for several reasons.

First, nobody comes to any serious discussion without already believing something—lots of things, in fact. There is no “view from nowhere,” an unbiased perspective of neutrality. Our starting point already presupposes many things that we already believe, explicitly or implicitly. People change their minds, especially when God graciously opens them, but all of us come to the big questions of life with a host of assumptions that we already hold.

In addition, becoming a Christian is more than simply signing on to a belief that God exists or that the case for Christ’s resurrection is better than alternative explanations of the data. I have never met anyone who became a Christian simply because of good arguments. Those arguments are important and necessary; in fact, I will lay out a case for the central Christian claims in short order. They can play a critical role in exploding our assumptions about the sort of claims that Christianity makes. However, as in any science, a paradigm shift in our theology requires more than a single piece of data; it is the result of feeling the total inadequacy of one paradigm to account for the broadest available evidence. As the new paradigm proves its greater explanatory power, conversion occurs. We repent of the old scheme and embrace another.

Consider the case of Copernicus. At first, Copernicus was mocked by his peers for insisting that the earth orbits the sun instead of the other way around. It ran against common sense. Everyone knew that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west; clearly, the sun was the body that moved, not the earth! Eventually, experiments confirmed that Copernicus was correct, and the older scientific models were seen as inadequate. They simply *could not* account for the data that the Copernican theory explained. Revolutions in any field are difficult to come by—as they should be, or we would never have stable sciences. Paradigms remain resilient against particular challenges, but they can be overthrown.

Of course, the paradigm shift of conversion to Christ is complicated by our spiritual condition. It requires something more than being convinced, rationally, that Christianity is true. The Bible reveals that we intentionally and systematically suppress and distort the evidence that would lead us to the God to whom we must give an account. Yet the truth still has revelatory power. Even many who do not yet believe the Christian story are haunted by its explanatory power over against rival paradigms. Because the world is more radically grand and more tragically disfigured than our reigning set of working assumptions, we will sense our need of a different paradigm.

To have a “pilgrim” theology, you must begin with reality. Christian faith

requires commitment to a relentless pursuit of reality, come what may. What finally turns the switch of conversion is not an argument here or there, but the emergence of a new interpretation of reality, disclosed by God's revelation. More than just a few religious beliefs, Christianity is a whole web of beliefs and assumptions.

This is why I want to begin our journey of understanding—the pilgrim way—with the central claim to which all of Scripture leads and from which it all flows. In other words, we begin by turning to the climax of the novel and then going back to read the pages leading up to it. We begin with the most scandalous of all claims made by the Christian faith: the gospel—the good news concerning Jesus Christ. The gospel is not something you can just tack on to another worldview. On the contrary, it makes you rethink everything from the ground up, from the center out. Only when we start with the gospel—the *most* controversial point of Christian faith—are we ready to talk about who God is and how we know him.

I do not believe the gospel because I believe in God; rather, I believe in God because of the gospel. There are great arguments for the existence of a supreme being, but unless the gospel is true, the claim that a god exists is either personally meaningless or a horrible threat. God's existence and moral attributes are revealed in nature, but it's only after we embrace the gospel that we see the truth about God and ourselves in full color. There is more for us to know in the Bible than the gospel, but apart from it there is nothing worth knowing. Some Christians think it's better to move people to theism (belief in a deity) and then introduce them to the gospel, but I would argue that it is the gospel that makes it even *possible* for me to believe in God—not only to believe that someone or something exists beyond us all, but to trust in this particular God who is known in Jesus Christ.

In the end, it all comes down to a simple question: what kind of "God" are we talking about? If we're just talking about a higher power, a vague God defined by beliefs that we all share in common, then theology seems like a pretty trivial affair. Nor am I suggesting that we should begin with great arguments for the reliability and authority of the Bible. I'll be offering some of those in the next chapter. Yet my confidence in Scripture, too, is first established by the gospel. As Herman Bavinck observed, faith in Scripture rises and falls with faith in Christ.²

In a sense, this entire volume is an exploration of the message richly summarized in Romans 1:1–6 as

2. Quoted in G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 44.

the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

First, the gospel I am talking about is “the gospel of *God*.” Every field of study requires an *object*. Astronomy is the study of stars (and other celestial bodies), botany is the study of plants, sociology studies society, and so forth. The object is evident in the name of the discipline. Similarly, theology (*theologia*) is the study of God. The object of theology is not the church’s teaching or the experience of pious souls. It is not a subset of ethics, religious studies, cultural anthropology, or psychology. *God* is the object of this discipline.

And the gospel is the good news *of* God, *from* God: the announcement of God’s purposes, promises, and achievements — not ours. God can be the object of our knowledge only because he has freely and actively revealed himself. Whenever God is revealed, he is also the revealer. If God doesn’t reveal himself, we’re just talking to ourselves in a godlike voice, spiritual ventriloquists who make our wooden partner speak the lines we have written for it. Saying that God is the object of theology entails a pretty strong claim: namely, that God can be *known*. Yet that is precisely Paul’s claim here: “the gospel of God, *which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures*.” God can be known because he has revealed himself. We will be exploring this point — as well as the God who is known — in the first two chapters.

Second, the main message of Scripture is “the gospel of God . . . *concerning his Son*.” There is, of course, more in the Bible than just the gospel. In Scripture God reveals himself as creator, sustainer, and judge as well as savior and shepherd of his people. God’s moral as well as saving will is clearly taught in the Bible. However, as Paul argues elsewhere, all people know *by nature* that God exists — they even know his invisible attributes of power and justice — and they know that they are obligated to this God. “So they are without excuse” (Ro 1:20). Even if the Bible had never been written, there would be a certain degree of law and order, morality and religion, in the world. However, we twist and distort even this truth, so that our morality becomes a path to self-justification and pride rather than thanksgiving and our religion becomes superstition and idolatry. What we need — what all of us need — is another word, something other than the general revelation of

God's existence, power, glory, justice, and law. We need a saving revelation if we are to be reconciled to this Creator. For those who stand in a broken covenantal relationship, the only safe encounter with God is as he has revealed himself in Christ through the gospel. In addition, this gospel—the heart and soul of special revelation—is not just about something that happens in our hearts. It is not an inner experience or subjective moral impulse, but rather a revelation of particular historical events. This gospel of God concerns his Son, “who was *descended from David* according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by *his resurrection from the dead*.”

Finally, although the gospel itself is an announcement about God's mighty deeds in Christ, apart from us, in history, the Spirit applies the benefits to us here and now through preaching and sacrament. Even those who were formerly not part of Israel, strangers to the covenants and promises, are now included as coheirs with Christ. Effectually calling us through this gospel, the Spirit unites us to Christ for justification, sanctification, and future glorification. Paul's sentence concludes by identifying “Jesus Christ our Lord” as the one “through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, *including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ*” (emphasis added). The latter half of this volume (chs. 8–18) unpacks this rich treasure, from the Spirit's application of redemption to the nature of the church and the return of Christ to judge and reign as the Alpha and Omega of a restored creation.

“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through *the word of Christ*” (Ro 10:17). We “have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God . . . And this word is *the good news* that was preached to you” (1Pe 1:23, 25). Every word that comes from the mouth of God is essential. God's moral will has not changed, and his law remains its perfect expression. However, Peter marvels at the fact that by his preaching “the Gentiles should hear the *word of the gospel* and believe” (Ac 15:7, emphasis added in all quotes).³

Sound theology, then, does not start with something else, something more basic and universal, and then add the gospel later on. Even when evaluating a wider horizon, the Christian is wearing “gospel” glasses. C. S. Lewis put the matter well: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.”⁴ In his preface to the first Bible translated into French from the Hebrew and

3. In this and the other quotations in this paragraph, the emphasis is added.

4. “Is Theology Poetry,” 1944, in *They Asked for a Paper* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), [154–65.]

Greek, John Calvin expresses the conviction that will guide our course in this volume:

Without the gospel everything is useless and vain; without the gospel we are not Christians; without the gospel all riches is poverty, all wisdom, folly before God; strength is weakness, and all the justice of man is under the condemnation of God.

But by the knowledge of the gospel we are made children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, fellow townsmen with the saints, citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, heirs of God with Jesus Christ, by whom the poor are made rich, the weak strong, the fools wise, the sinners justified, the desolate comforted, the doubting sure, and slaves free. It is the power of salvation of all those who believe. . . .

It follows that every good thing we could think or desire is to be found in this same Jesus Christ alone. For, he was sold, to buy us back; captive, to deliver us; condemned, to absolve us; he was made a curse for our blessing, sin offering for our righteousness; marred that we may be made fair; he died for our life; so that by him fury is made gentle, wrath appeased, darkness turned into light, fear reassured, despisal despised, debt cancelled, labor lightened, sadness made merry, misfortune made fortunate, difficulty easy, disorder ordered, division united, ignominy ennobled, rebellion subject, intimidation intimidated, ambush uncovered, assaults assailed, force forced back, combat combated, war warred against, vengeance avenged, torment tormented, damnation damned, the abyss sunk into the abyss, hell transfixed, death dead, mortality made immortal.

In short, mercy has swallowed up all misery, and goodness all misfortune. For all these things which were to be the weapons of the devil in his battle against us, and the sting of death to pierce us, are turned for us into exercises which we can turn to our profit. . . . And we are comforted in tribulation, joyful in sorrow, glorying under vituperation [verbal abuse], abounding in poverty, warmed in our nakedness, patient amongst evils, living in death.

This is what we should in short seek in the whole of Scripture: truly to know Jesus Christ, and the infinite riches that are comprised in him and are offered to us by him from God the Father.⁵

5. John Calvin, "Preface to Pierre Olivetan's 1534 Translation of the New Testament," in *Calvin: Commentaries* (ed. and trans. Joseph Haroutunian; Library of Christian Classics 23; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 66, 69–70.



Chapter One

Knowing God

Can we know God, and if so, how? No one comes to that question from a neutral, unbiased perspective. Right out of the gate, we all have some assumptions that predispose us to accept some beliefs and discount others. Our beliefs are part of a web or paradigm. Some of these convictions are explicit. We're conscious of them, particularly when someone asks us to weigh in on them. Many others are implicit or tacit. Habitually using the same route to get to work each day, we are not always vividly aware of the road we travel upon or the various subway stops along the way. But if we're first-time visitors, the various roads, signs, turnoffs, or stations become objects of our focal awareness. The same is true with respect to our religious convictions.

According to “New Atheists” like Richard Dawkins, “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.”¹ Unfortunately, many Christians reinforce the impression that faith and reason are like an old-fashioned pair of scales: as one goes up, the other goes down. However, this misunderstands both faith and reason. Reason is no less biased than faith, and faith—genuine faith—is no less intelligent than reason. In both cases, everything turns on the object and the justification: in other words, what we believe and why we believe it. Faith in God as he has

1. Richard Dawkins, untitled lecture, Edinburgh International Science Festival, April 15, 1992.

revealed himself in his Word, consummately in Jesus Christ, is not a subjective leap. Nor is it merely an act of will. It involves a personal commitment, to be sure, but a commitment to a truth claim about something that has happened in history, which is available for public inspection. Some people trust in Christ with minimal arguments and evidence, just as most of us believe that the earth orbits the sun without investigating the science behind it. Yet in both cases, the arguments and evidences are there for anyone who is interested in pursuing the claim further. Whatever one concludes concerning the claims of Christianity, they cannot be dismissed as belonging to an irrational sphere called “faith” that is sealed off from reason.

“After being dead for three days, Jesus rose from the dead, bodily.” This is the heart of the gospel, the central truth claim of Christian proclamation. It is not an eternal truth of reason, since there was a time when Jesus was not incarnate, much less raised. Nor is it a logical truth, like “All unmarried men are bachelors” or “a triangle has three sides.” Yet it cannot be reduced to a subjective personal commitment, as if to say, “We should all live as if Jesus rose from the dead.”

Acts 17 records the apostle Paul’s famous speech in Athens. The seedbed of Western thought, Athens had been home to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—and to any school vying for the minds and hearts of civilization. After discussing and debating the resurrection in the synagogues and the marketplace, Paul received the invitation to address the Areopagus, where the leading philosophers “would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new” (Ac 17:21). Luke tells us that the two major schools represented were the Epicureans and the Stoics (v. 18). In the view of Epicureans old and new, god or the gods—if they exist—are conveniently tucked away in their heaven, quite unconcerned with and largely oblivious to worldly happenings. Nature and fate rule the world. At the other end of the spectrum, the Stoics believed that nature itself was divine and every living thing had a spark of divinity in it. Imagine a daytime talk show with New Atheists and New Agers on the panel and you have a serviceable idea of Paul’s audience.

Paul began his speech, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god’” (vv. 22–23a). “Religious” here is a double entendre in Greek; it could as easily be translated “superstitious.” In any case, the compliment turns out to be offered tongue in cheek. Trying to cover all of their bases, the Athenians were so religious—or superstitious—that they had the equivalent of a man-

ger scene, Hanukkah lights, a winter solstice flag, and a statue of the Buddha or storm god Thor on the lawn at city hall. Paul does not say, “Whoever bet his money on Apollo is closest to the winning number.” He does not pick out one of the idols to tweak in the direction of the biblical God. Rather, he says, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (v. 23b).

Paul tells them that this unknown God is the Creator and Lord of everything—visible and invisible—who gives everything and doesn’t need anything, least of all from us. Thus, God is completely independent from the world (vv. 24–27). Paul is declaring that God is clearly distinct from the created order. So much for the Stoics. On the other hand, the Epicureans don’t have it right either. This God, though distinct, freely relates the world to himself and enters it as he pleases, so near to us in his self-revelation that we have no excuse for ignoring him (vv. 27–28). If God is our Creator, then we have no business worshipping golden images fashioned by human art (v. 29).

What Paul says about God’s relationship to the world would have sparked a lively debate by itself, but the apostle hurries on to his central point: “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (vv. 30–31). While those in his illustrious audience thought of themselves as the trustees of the world’s wisdom, Paul included the golden age of Greek philosophy in “the times of ignorance.” But Paul isn’t talking philosophy anymore. He moves on to focus his audience’s attention on a historical event that has happened just a little more than seven hundred miles away, a little more than two decades ago. Suddenly, the subject has shifted from philosophy to history—and not just any history, but the very particular (and peculiarly Jewish) expectation of a final resurrection of the dead. Why would this shift have been so jarring?

Epicureans believed that dead people stay dead. Reality consists of atoms and is therefore material. Thinking is simply the random swerving of atoms. Given the fact of evil and suffering in the world, the gods are (or god is) either evil or impotent—or, more likely, they just do not care about the world. From these doctrines, the Epicureans developed a particular way of living and discipleship: the chief end of human beings is to maximize happiness, and this can be best attained by avoiding extremes. You had best make this life count, because it is the only one you have. From Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud to Richard Dawkins, modern atheism is largely neo-Epicureanism.

The Stoics, on the other hand, believed that nature is divine. God is the world and the world is God, consisting of passive matter and active energy (Logos or reason, also identified with fate). If you believe that you are suffering, you will suffer; if you dedicate yourself through meditation to inner calm, then you will avoid suffering. Stoicism was revived in the Enlightenment, especially by Baruch Spinoza, and its chief patterns of thought and life may be seen in German idealism (especially Friedrich Schelling and G. W. F. Hegel) as well as in Romanticism, American Transcendentalism and a host of theosophical movements (such as Christian Science and New Thought) that feed into what is often identified popularly as the New Age movement. Many similarities have been drawn also to Eastern religions and philosophies.

The following table explains some common terms that are helpful for our theological journey:

| Worldview Paradigms | |
|---------------------|---|
| Polytheism | Belief in many gods. |
| Pantheism | All is divine. |
| Panentheism | All is within divinity; the divine and worldly principles are mutually dependent. |
| Deism | God created the world but does not intervene miraculously within it. |
| Atheism | God does not exist. |

The deities of ancient polytheism were consigned by most Greek philosophers to the myths and cults of popular piety. Based on the definitions in this table, Epicureanism fits most closely with deism and atheism, while Stoicism is basically pantheistic or at least panentheistic.

A revived Platonism was also important in the first century. At first, Platonism might seem to be closer to the biblical view of reality, since Plato held that there was one god (though not personal) who transcended the world. However, Plato's worldview divided reality into the "upper world" (perfect, spiritual, unchanging, divine, and eternal forms) and a "lower world" (imperfect, material, ever-changing, temporal). Out of a cosmological drama, doctrines emerged, provoking distinct ways of experiencing and living in the world. Platonists believed that the transcendent One could not have created the material world since it represents a "falling away" from divine perfection, so the world was instead created by a semidivine workman (or "demiurge"). They believed that the soul is immortal (eternally existing

in the upper world), but that it has been imprisoned in a material body. Our lives should therefore be dedicated to contemplation of the eternal forms, by transcending our bodies and fastening our souls' gaze on their divine origin in the upper world. The good life is that of the philosopher, who can give his or her life to the soul's ascent. "Salvation," therefore, is death—the liberation of the divine soul from its bodily prison.

None of these ancient schools—indeed, none of the religions of the East or West—had a map for understanding God and the world that even came close to resembling the gospel that Paul proclaimed in Athens that day. By pursuing either happiness or virtue, Epicureans and Stoics (then as now) were trying to find the best path for personal and social improvement by their own effort. The drama of creation, the fall, and redemption within history and of the consummation at the end of this age was incomprehensible to those who presupposed an entirely different story. The notion of God's coming cataclysmic judgment of the world, already rendered certain by the resurrection of the incarnate Son, was a *stumbling block* to Jews. Understanding what Jesus and his apostles were claiming, many of their fellow Jews charged Christianity not with being incomprehensible or irrational but with being blasphemous and false. However, for Greeks and those unfamiliar with the Jewish story (the Gentiles), the gospel was simply *folly* (1Co 1:23).

So what happened in the theater of the philosophers that day? "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (vv. 32–34).

I. Knowledge of God

How you know something depends on what it is that you are studying. Knowing your spouse is different from knowing atomic energy or the history of Renaissance art. We cannot come up with a universal method and criteria for knowing God before identifying the sort of God we have in mind.

In his speech before the Greek philosophers, Paul affirms the biblical teaching that God is neither separated from the world (pagan transcendence) nor one with it (pagan immanence). Though independent of the world, God is free to act in it as he pleases. God is qualitatively distinct from the world—that is, transcendent. And yet this same God created the world, pronouncing it good. In this, we see that God is immanent, present in the world, entering

into a covenantal relationship with human beings and sustaining all of his creatures. God judges and saves human beings, even to the point of actually assuming their humanity, bearing their curse in his body on the cross, and raising their humanity to the Father's right hand in his resurrection and ascension. The prophets and the apostles believe more deeply in God's **transcendence** of and independence from the world than the most ardent deists and more deeply in God's **immanence** than the most ardent pantheists. No religion faces, welcomes, and proclaims this paradox as does the Christian faith. No religion is more convinced simultaneously of God's radical difference from creatures and God's radical identification with them.

God's radical difference from creatures is sometimes referred to by theologians as God's **incomprehensibility**. The difference between God and creation is not merely *quantitative* ("more than"), but *qualitative* ("different from"). This marks the chasm separating biblical faith from **polytheism**, **pantheism**, and **panentheism** (see page 28). In its attempt to conquer heaven, the fallen heart climbs ladders of rational speculation, mystical experience, and moral effort. However, the vision of God in his majestic glory is deadly, according to Scripture. No one can see God's face and live (Ex 33:20); the immortal, invisible and eternal God "dwells in inapproachable light" (1Ti 6:15–16). No mortal "has known the mind of the Lord" (Ro 11:34). "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my

Key Distinction:
transcendence/immanence (God's relationship to the world)

God not only is higher or greater than all creatures (a quantitative distinction), but transcends the world infinitely (qualitatively). Incomprehensible in his majesty, God eludes our direct knowledge or experience. At the same time, in his condescending goodness and love, God has chosen freely to relate us to himself and engage us as covenant partners. He freely speaks and acts in our history, dwells in the midst of his people, and even became human in the incarnation of the Son.

Like all great truths of revelation, God's transcendence and immanence are a paradox, intended to be adored rather than resolved. The God of love who does not need the world nevertheless chooses freely to bind creaturely reality (including us) to himself. In order to keep these from becoming abstract categories, we need to allow the biblical story to identify what is meant by the transcendent-immanent God.

ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8–9). At the end of our zealous ascent we discover God as blinding glory, terrifying justice, and a love that destroys unlovely and unwelcome intruders. Any union we achieve with divinity in this enterprise will be like that of a dry branch within “a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). If this were all we were told, then we might throw up our hands, concluding with radical mystics and skeptics throughout the ages that we cannot know God—at least in a rational way that can be put into words. However, Scripture tells us more.

Together with the absolute incomprehensibility of God (transcendence), Scripture affirms just as clearly the free decision of God to condescend beneath his majesty and reveal himself to us as he sees fit. Although we cannot ascend to God’s incomprehensible majesty, God stoops to our capacity, descending and **accommodating** his speech to our understanding. We know God *not according to his essence, but according to his works*.² This formula, found frequently in the ancient fathers (especially in the East), was repeated often by Martin Luther, John Calvin, and their theological successors. We know that God is merciful, for example, because he has acted mercifully in history and revealed these actions as well as their interpretation through prophets and apostles.

A. How We Know God

So we can know God truly precisely because he makes himself known to us. We do not rise up to God; he descends to us. As God assured Moses, we cannot behold God in a beatific vision, because we are mere creatures—and sinners to boot (Ex 33:20). And yet God condescends to reveal himself by hiding himself in a gracious display of accommodated speech—even as he hid Moses and allowed his “back” (33:23) to pass by as he proclaimed himself as the one who freely shows mercy on whom he will.

Staring into the sun will blind us, yet we can find contentment simply being warmed by its rays. In the same way, trying to ascend to heaven to capture God’s essence with our speculative, moral, or mystical gaze would not just blind us; it would destroy us. “They are mad who seek to discover what God is,” Calvin says.³ “What is God? Men who pose this question are merely toying with idle speculations. What help is it, in short, to know a

2. Gregory of Nyssa, *On ‘Not Three Gods,’ to Ablabius* (NPNF², 5:333); Basil, “Epistle 234” (NPNF², 8:274); John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* (NPNF², 9:1).

3. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (ed. and trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 69.

God with whom we have nothing to do? . . . The essence of God is rather to be adored than inquired into.”⁴ God shows himself “not as he is in himself,” Calvin cautioned (invoking the ancient fathers), “but as he is toward us” — in his energies (works), not in his essence.⁵ God clothes himself in frail human language — and, ultimately, with the incarnation, in our human nature.

Furthermore, we dare not approach this God apart from the Mediator, his own Son who became flesh. A God who eludes our comprehending gaze — who masters but is never mastered — is a terrifying prospect for the sinful heart until Christ steps forward as our mediator. Calvin reminds us,

In this ruin of mankind no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation, or favorable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us. . . . It is one thing to feel that God as our Maker supports us by his power, governs us by his providence, nourishes us by his goodness, and attends us with all sorts of blessings — and another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation offered to us in Christ.⁶

Apart from the gospel we flee from God’s self-revelation, dressing folly in the robe of wisdom and ungodliness in the garments of virtue. It is ultimately an ethical revolt against the God who made us. There is no other “God” who exists, much less who is worth talking about, than the Father who is known in his Son and by his Spirit according to his Word, Calvin adds. In other words, we cannot just talk about a divine being, with certain ideal attributes, and then somehow add the Trinity and Jesus Christ to this understanding of the divine being. No, we must come to the Father in the Son by the Spirit through his Word.

Through revelation, the incomprehensible and utterly transcendent God places himself within our reach. The sovereign God, who eludes our attempts at mastery, by speculation, good works, or mystical experience, places himself in our hands as a free gift. Instead of being consumed, we are reconciled, redeemed, and made adopted heirs of his kingdom in the Son and by his Spirit, through his Word. Just as we are created in God’s image and likeness, yet intersecting with divinity at no point, our knowledge is a creaturely version of truth, which God accommodates to our capacity and

4. John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.2.2. Early Reformed writers such as Musculus repeated this approach, launching their discussion of God with the question of *who* God is rather than *what* God is. See Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: Divine Essence and Attributes* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 228.

5. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.10.2.

6. *Ibid.*, 1.2.1.

reveals through ordinary speech and speakers. As the infinite Creator, God alone possesses absolute knowledge. Every fact is interpreted, and we need God's interpretation if we are to know reality properly.

There are obvious differences between human beings: height, age, skin color, gender, ethnicity, and so forth. Some people are stronger, while others are wiser; some are more attractive, while others are more skillful, and so on. Yet all of these are *finite-quantitative* differences—that is, differences in degree rather than kind. Even when comparing different classes we see some points of complete overlap. As different as they are, humans and whales have enough in common to belong to the same class (mammal). There are even shared characteristics across classes—for example, between mammals and reptiles. As vast as differences may be between humans, sparrows, and oak trees, they share at least one thing in common: creaturely existence.

However, there is an *infinite-qualitative* distinction between God and creatures. This applies at the level of reality (ontology). At no point do God's essence and existence overlap or intersect with ours. Even when we use a predicate like “good” to describe God and our neighbor, God is not only greater or better, but is in a class of his own. It also applies at the level of how we know things (epistemology). As in our being, so in our knowing, we are always creatures and God is the creator. We are incapable of knowing anything as God knows it. Another way of putting this is to say that God is infinitely transcendent.

Does this mean that we cannot know God at all? Are comparisons meaningless? Not at all, because God has revealed himself through everyday language. Like “baby talk,” God speaks in ways that we can understand. His communication is effective, though he infinitely transcends his own revelation. When he tells us that he is good, speaks of himself as a loving parent or king, and responds to our prayers, we can be confident that he is telling us the truth as far as we can know it—even though it is not the Truth as he knows it. God's knowledge is **archetypal** (original), while ours is **ectypal** (a finite copy). God is not only infinitely transcendent, but freely immanent as well—that is, coming to us, getting involved in our lives. Because our God does not remain aloof in blissful detachment but enters into our history by speaking his Word and then sending his incarnate Word to us for our redemption, we can know God truthfully as finite creatures.

This traditional Christian view avoids the extremes of rationalism and irrationalism that continue to dominate modern and postmodern thinking. On the one hand, *rationalism* assumes that whatever we know truthfully, we know exactly as God knows it. In fact, as the ancient philosophers

Key Distinction:
archetypal/ectypal

Coined by an early Reformed theologian (Franciscus Junius), this distinction affirms that God is just as different from us in his knowledge as in his being. Since he is the Creator and we are his creatures, God's being and knowledge are not just greater quantitatively, but also differ qualitatively from ours.

understood it, our reason itself is a spark of infinite and eternal divinity. So “good” means exactly the same thing when we are talking about God as it does when we are referring to our neighbor. The predicate “good” here is used **univocally** (the same meaning). On the other hand, *irrationalism* assumes that just because we cannot know anything perfectly, we cannot know anything truly; “truth” is just a subjective opinion that we imagine to be anchored somehow in a world outside of our own thoughts and feelings. In this view, we have no idea what “good” means applied to God, since God is nothing like my neighbor (“good” is used here **equivocally**).

However, Christian theology maintains that even though we do not have absolute truth, God does, and he has communicated all of the truth he deems sufficient in ways that we can understand and respond to accordingly. We are not divine at any point, but we are created in God's image—as his analogy. Similarly, while our finite and creaturely knowledge is never exactly the same as God's (univocal), it is also not irrational (equivocal). Rather, we know God **analogically**. Our knowledge (like our being) is analogical of God's, since we receive both as his gift.

By exclaiming, “Your mother roared,” one is suggesting neither that Mom is a lion (using “roared” univocally) nor that there is no similarity between the mother's manner of speaking and a lion's native tongue (understanding “roared” equivocally—bearing no relation). Rather, one is drawing an analogy, a similarity without exact correspondence. A time-honored axiom in theology is that in every analogy between God and human beings, there is always more dissimilarity than similarity. Nevertheless, because God is the creator who made us in his image and left traces of his own character through the whole fabric of the whole world, there is sufficient basis for analogies that make their point.

Even to predicate “existence” of God and creatures, one cannot assume a univocal correspondence without falling into pantheism (divine and human

beings differing in degree but not in kind). Strictly speaking, God does not “exist”; rather, he has life in himself. Existence is inherently dependent, while God is the source of our being. Nevertheless, the Living God does certainly exist in the way that an average person intends by asking whether God exists.

The point is that we do not have to possess absolute life or absolute knowledge in order to receive from God our creaturely existence and truth. Because this God is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, and because this God has related the world to himself from creation to consummation—even entering history by becoming flesh—his immanent nearness is just as great as his infinite transcendence. We can know God because he has revealed himself.

B. Meeting a Stranger

Coming to “know” God is like meeting a stranger. God is a stranger to us in three senses. First, God is a stranger in the *ontological* sense. That is, in his very being, God is not like any person you’ve ever met. A popular poster said it best: “Two Basic Truths: There is a God and You Are Not He.” Far from being seen as something negative, this truth is something to be celebrated. It explains why it is right to worship God rather than ourselves or other creatures. If you are not God, there is no crime in being finite, dependent, embodied creatures who belong to the register of space and time. Contrary to Plato, Hegel, and a host of contemporary philosophers, being a stranger

Key Distinction: *univocal/equivocal/analogical*

God infinitely transcends us in knowledge as well as being. Therefore, for example, the word “good” cannot be univocal (= means exactly the same thing) in relation to God and creatures alike. At the same time, it’s not as if there is no basis for using “good” to describe God and creatures, as an equivocal (= no relation) view assumes. Created in God’s image, we are his analogies, and God reveals himself in familiar terms so that we can understand what he is like, though not exactly what he is in himself. Our knowledge is therefore *analogical* of God’s. A univocal view tends toward rationalism, while an equivocal view tends toward irrationalism or skepticism. An analogical view affirms that we can know reality truly as creatures who attend to God’s Word, even though we do not know reality absolutely, as does God.

to God, ontologically, is not negative—a falling away from pure being. It is the gift of a distinct creaturely existence.

Second, God is a stranger in the *ethical* sense. Unlike our ontological difference from God, this “strangeness” in our relationship to God is negative. Because we are strangers to God in the ethical sense, we are estranged from him, marked by the tragic condition of human beings “in Adam,” under the reign of sin and death. It is in this sense that the Bible speaks about us as enemies of God, hostile, separated, and condemned. Our ethical rebellion corrupts not only our will and action, but also our reasoning. We still will, act, and reason, but we do all of this as covenant breakers. We still encounter reality, but our interpretations are out of whack. We are not neutral, autonomous, independent, and unbiased investigators, but those “who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Ro 1:18).

Finally, God is a stranger in a third sense, *redemptively*, as he issues the surprisingly wonderful announcement that in spite of human rebellion he will redeem us by grace alone in Christ alone. For reasons we will explore later, this gospel is counterintuitive—strange to us in our fallen state of death and estrangement from God. It does not resonate with us in our natural condition because we are hostile to the God who commands and saves us. Because it entails the surrender of our autonomy—our “right” to determine good and evil for ourselves—it sounds foreign and unusual to us. When we meet God in the gospel, we first encounter him as a stranger, come to rescue us from a danger we did not even realize we were in.

II. God Reveals Himself

Contrary to what many assume, revelation is not something that wells up within pious souls who seek it. As we have just discussed, God is a stranger and we meet him when and where he chooses to introduce himself. Strictly speaking, we do not come to know God; God *reveals* himself. In our fallen condition, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God” (Ro 3:10–11). Yet God does not wait for the impossible move on our part. “I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me” (Isa 65:1 NIV). Like a parent playing hide-and-seek with a child, the ungraspable God allows himself to be “caught,” as it were. In creation as well as redemption, God is always the initiator. He is never revealed passively, like someone who is caught changing clothes without the blinds being drawn. Rather, God makes himself known on his own terms, when, where, and how he chooses. God can be an object of our

knowledge only if he has revealed himself to us. Consequently, *theology can exist as a legitimate enterprise only when it begins with God's self-revelation.*

A. General and Special Revelation

I know my wife because she communicates with me. Likewise, I know that there is a purpose for my life and for the world and history because God has communicated his acts, intentions, and promises. We know God as the sovereign maker and judge from his works in creation and providence. This is what is commonly referred to as **general revelation**. The Psalmist exclaims, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1). Even the testimony yielded by the inanimate creation is described poetically in terms of living speech (vv. 2–4). Besides the Psalms (especially Pss. 8:1–9; 19:1–6; 102:25), the wisdom literature appeals to God’s design in nature as revealing the love, justice, righteousness, sovereignty, and wisdom of God in everyday life. Jesus also teaches us to trust in God’s providential care by appealing to the obvious order in nature (Lk 12:24, 27).

Here we encounter the important distinction between **law** and **gospel**. Taken in the broadest senses, law refers to the revelation of God as our loving yet just Creator, Lawgiver, and Judge. As Paul argues, it is the righteousness *of* God that is revealed in the law, and this condemns us all (Ro 1:18–3:20), while the gospel reveals the righteousness *from* God, namely, that we “are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Ro 3:24). The great Roman writer Seneca gave eloquent testimony to many truths that, according to Romans 1 and 2, God has inscribed on the human conscience in creation. Paul sometimes calls this natural law the “elementary principles of the world” (*stoicheia tou kosmou*), as in Galatians 4:3, 8–9 and Colossians 2:8, 20.

No one, Jew or Gentile, can claim ignorance on the day of judgment, since they have suppressed the knowledge that they do in fact have of their Creator and Judge. Paul can even call pagan poets to witness in his speech in Athens (Ac 17:28). Predating the Mosaic law by at least five centuries, the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi issues remarkably similar commands, even appealing to divine sanction.⁷ In our own day, Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and others have every reason to reflect together on the universal moral imperatives that they affirm together. Jordan’s Prince

7. C. H. W. Johns, trans., *Babylonian and Assyrian Laws, Contracts and Letters* (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger, 2004), 390.

Key Distinction:
law/gospel

God's Word has two parts—the law and the gospel—and there is a danger in either confusing or separating them. The law commands and the gospel gives. The law says, “Do,” and the gospel says, “Done!” Equally God's Word, both are good, but God does different things through them.

In the widest sense, the law is everything in Scripture that commands, and the gospel is everything in Scripture that makes promises based solely on God's grace to us in Christ. But in a narrower sense, the gospel is 1 Corinthians 15:3–4: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” The content of the gospel is the announcement that Christ was crucified and raised for our salvation in fulfillment of the Scriptures. At the same time, the gospel includes God's gracious fulfillment in Christ of *all* of the promises related to the new creation. That's why Paul can answer his question, “Shall we then sin that grace may abound?” with *more* gospel: union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection, so that we're no longer under sin's dominion. The gospel isn't just enough to justify the ungodly; it's enough to regenerate and sanctify the ungodly. However, only because (in the narrower sense) the good news announces our justification are we for the first time free to embrace God as our Father rather than our Judge. We have been saved from the condemnation *and* tyranny of sin. Both are essential to the “glad tidings” that we proclaim.

We can also speak of the law and the gospel in the redemptive-historical sense, as the covenantal principle of inheritance. The history of salvation moves from promise to fulfillment, from shadows to reality. In this sense, the law is not opposed to the gospel.

Yet when it comes to how we receive this gift—how redemption is applied to us by the Spirit—we are saved apart from the law. Law and gospel are completely opposed in this sense, since they are two different bases or principles of inheritance. We are saved by Christ or by our own obedience, but we cannot be saved by both. Interestingly, Paul includes both senses in Romans 3:21: “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law [justification in the order of salvation], although the Law and the Prophets [i.e., the Old Testament writings] bear witness to it.”

Finally, Lutheran and Reformed traditions distinguish (without separating) *three uses of the law*: the first (pedagogical), to expose our guilt and corruption, driving us to Christ; the second, a civil use to restrain public vice; and the third, to guide Christian obedience. Believers are not “under the law” in the first sense. They are justified. However, they are still obligated to the law, both as it is stipulated and enforced by the state (second use) and as it frames Christian discipleship (third use). We never ground our status before God in our obedience to imperatives, but in Christ’s righteousness; yet we are also bound to Christ, who continues to lead and direct us by his holy will.

Hassan bin Talal, a Muslim, has remarked, “I keep saying that if we all observed the Ten Commandments, we would not have succumbed to so much grief in the first place. Whether it is the Golden Law, the Straight Path, or the Ten Commandments, we recognize that we do not need to reinvent the code of conduct.”⁸

There is a lot of consensus on the law. The Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” [see Mt 7:12; Lk 6:31]) is not a precept unique to Christianity, and it is arrogant for Christians to assume that they have a corner on personal and civic virtue. Even well-known atheist Sam Harris once wrote that “there is clearly a sacred dimension to our existence, and coming to terms with it could well be the highest purpose of human life.”⁹ Harris added that he is “interested in spiritual experience.” “There is such a thing as profoundly transformative, meaningful experience that can be very hard won. You might have to go into a cave for a month or a year to have certain experiences. The whole contemplative literature is something I read and I take very seriously. The problem is it is also riddled with religious superstition and dogma, [so] that you have to be a selective consumer of this literature.”¹⁰ Harris repeats a familiar refrain of the Enlightenment philosophers: universal moral intuitions that can be known without special revelation are fine; where religions go off the rails is in their miraculous claims. The law is familiar, innate, and written on everyone’s conscience; the gospel is strange, astonishing — even offensive — and can be

8. Prince Hassan, interview by Cornelis Hulsmann, “The Peacebuilding Prince,” *Christianity Today*, February 2008, 64.

9. Quoted in Steve Padilla, “Rabbi, Atheist Debate with Passion, Humor,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 2007, B2.

10. *Ibid.*

announced only by a herald. The law is in our conscience by creation, part of what it means to be created in God's image. Philosophers like Kant can speak of the sufficiency of this "moral law within," however, only because they have denied that they are in a precarious situation that requires special revelation and redemption.

Creation reveals God's law—"his eternal power and divine nature," as well as his commands that render us "without excuse" (Ro 1:19–20). However, the "gift of righteousness" by which God justifies the guilty in Christ is known only in the gospel (Ro 3:21–26). In its grandeur, the Grand Canyon displays the majesty of its Artist, but it speaks not a word of forgiveness for sinners. For this, we need another word that comes after the fall, after the "No!" that our race has issued to its kind Creator. Because the law is natural to us, the average person is inclined to think that religion is primarily about inner experience and moral improvement. However, the gospel is alien to us, even counterintuitive. As a surprising announcement of God's free mercy, it requires a lot of words—many sermons—for God to preach Christ into our hearts. When people call for "deeds, not creeds," asking, "What Would Jesus Do?" without much interest in the query, "What has Jesus done?" identifying themselves as "spiritual but not religious," they are asking for the law without the gospel.

Special revelation, the particular knowledge of God that we attain through the illumination of the Spirit in the written Word of God, corrects our systematic distortion of **general revelation**. Not only do we need special revelation to correct our interpretation of creation and "the good, the true, and the beautiful," but we would have absolutely no knowledge of God's saving work for us in Christ apart from it. In our sinful condition, we need not only a clearer revelation of God's moral will, but an entirely different message, a word of rescue, an announcement of what God has done to forgive, justify, and liberate us from our treason against that moral will and the law's just sentence. It is just that new word that God speaks to Adam and Eve after the fall, in the promise of a redeemer. The rest of the Bible, after Genesis 3:15, traces the unfolding promise of redemption in Christ. All of the laws, wisdom, narratives, poetry, and prophecies coalesce around this thickening plot. The gospel is the heartbeat of the triune God and his revelation in Scripture. It is an announcement that we never could know—or can know—apart from someone bringing the good news to us. The law keeps stopping history in its tracks—not because it is defective, but because we are depraved. Whenever history moves forward, human rebellion provokes God's judgment. It is the gospel that keeps covenantal history rushing forward, in spite of the dams erected by the unfaithfulness

Key Distinction:
general/special revelation

God has revealed himself to us in general revelation by what he has created, although we actively suppress and distort this truth as sinners. Creation (general revelation) displays the existence, wisdom, power, goodness, and righteousness of God “so that everyone is without excuse” (Ro 1:20). However, in special revelation God more clearly discloses these attributes, correcting our sinful distortions, and also reveals the gospel of his Son, which is not known apart from this source. The normative canon of special revelation is Holy Scripture.

of the covenant partner. This promise begins in Genesis 3:15 and concludes with the vision of that day when the elect are given the right to eat freely from the Tree of Life in the true garden of which Eden was merely a type (Rev 2:7; 22:1–5).

B. The Death of Reason

Whether by collapsing the creation into the Creator (as in Stoicism) or by sweeping from our horizon any transcendent and self-revealing God (as in Epicureanism), the modern age has been characterized by radical swings between rationalism and irrationalism. In this regard, though, modern thought is hardly unique; there are not many options once one jettisons God’s own self-revelation. “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images. . . . They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!” (Ro 1:22, 25). The story of modern thought begins with the enthronement of autonomous reason.

Since the Enlightenment (1650–1800), the modern individual was called to a thorough house-cleaning, rejecting all outside authorities and sweeping beneath his feet all inherited beliefs, institutions, and practices. Everything, we were told, would rest now on the sure foundation of reason. The assumption here was that reason, unlike authority, was unbiased. Aware that the fire they had started might burn down the house of morality upon which civilization depended, many of these thinkers tried to rescue some indispensable remnants for the palace they would erect on the ashes of Christendom. We cannot know anything objectively about God, Immanuel Kant argued; God is not an object of our reason or our sense experience. Universal reason is implanted in all of us,

and there is much in the Bible as well as other sacred texts to support “the moral law within,” but we do not base our convictions on any external authority.

Furthermore, the enthronement of reason meant that there was now no special revelation—that is, no miraculous word from God revealed to a particular people, in particular times and places. Because natural reason is sufficient, we do not need such a revelation. In addition, any true knowledge must be *universal* and absolutely *certain*, grounded in the rational ideas of our mind. Even if its reports are accurate, historical knowledge is not capable of yielding rational certainty, and a particular revelation to a particular people cannot command universal assent. At most, Jesus can be a model for us, but even that is unnecessary, Kant said, because we already have “the idea of a life well-pleasing to God” in our own minds and are capable of doing our duty ourselves. Still, we cannot eliminate all theistic belief. We must continue to presuppose God’s existence as a necessary prerequisite for the moral principles that we know according to our practical reason. Without “God,” the immortality of the soul, and rewards and punishments in the hereafter, we will descend into anarchy. But “God” was no longer regarded as knowable in terms of public reason or historical evidence delivered through special envoys. If he were, then Kant’s entire system would be threatened. Basically, this reflects a *deistic* worldview.

At the other extreme, G. W. F. Hegel argued that God actually comes to realize his own existence in and through the world, especially through human spiritual consciousness. Hegel represents a panentheistic paradigm. We can know God as he is in himself, even as God comes to know himself through the unfolding of history. Hegel believed that it was possible for us to have absolute (archetypal) knowledge by *immediate intuition*, not through a finite (ectypal) revelation like the Bible. As Enlightenment rationalism turned to Romantic sentiment, Friedrich Schleiermacher—the father of modern theology—argued that although we cannot know God, we can experience him in the universal *feeling* of absolute dependence. The scriptures of various religions are expressions of that universal experience, but they issue from the work of God in the soul, not as an external word from heaven. It was out of these presuppositions that liberal scholars went to work, critiquing and redacting the biblical text with an assumed, naturalistic bias they identified as “unprejudiced” reason.

The net effect of this modern criticism has been the denial that God speaks and acts within history. Either we know God in the same way as he knows himself, or we cannot know God at all—even as finite creatures, through his self-revelation. Many modern theologians not only accepted the

critical terms of surrender, but help to write them. No longer the study of God, theology became a subjective discourse about human feelings, cultures, values, and religious practices.

In recent decades this Tower of Babel has come crashing down all around us, collapsing under its own weight. However, we should bear in mind that the assault on rationalism is nothing new. Rationalism and irrationalism have always formed a secret alliance against God's authoritative Word.¹¹ The question of whether modernity is really over and we have now truly entered a "postmodern" era is beside the point. The swinging pendulum remains—and will remain—a constant in all forms of pagan thinking.

As the pretensions of modernity are unmasked today, it is a good time for us to recover our nerve, "always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks [us] for a reason for the hope that is in [us]" (1Pe 3:15). By breaking into our history, sharing our history, and transforming that history from the inside out, God has indeed made himself the object of our knowledge. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us" (1Jn 1:1–2).

There is much that the Stoics had right, as Paul himself acknowledged. There is a general revelation of God's existence, power, wisdom, and justice that permeates the whole creation. There is indeed "the moral law within," as Kant insisted. This revelation is universal, whereas the Bible and other sacred texts are particular revelations, made to particular peoples, in particular times and places. However, these philosophers rejected not only the possibility, but also the need of special revelation/redemption by assuming that human beings are good people who could become better rather than sinners who need to be saved. Modernity had an allergic reaction to "the scandal of the particular," and today, when many people identify themselves as "spiritual, not religious," they show themselves to be heirs of this modern, Enlightenment way of thinking. In the modern and postmodern understanding, spirituality is something general, with no particular object of worship, no specific story (external to "my story"), and no specific doctrines, worship, or discipleship that flow out of it. It leaves us free to worship ourselves. We have everything we need within ourselves. Universal reason and morality—the nucleus of general revelation—will create a better world, whereas the claims

11. So Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 143.

concerning particular revelations create creeds, rituals, and dead institutions. It is the specificity and the particularity of Christian truth claims that are a scandal to today's Stoics and Epicureans alike.

However, this general revelation—universal reason and morality—is sufficient to convict us of our crimes against our Creator and just Judge. What we need now is more than this general revelation. We need an external revelation, a particular revelation, of God's saving mercy toward us in his Son. In other words, our attention must turn from ascending to eternal truths above and within, from the script we are writing for ourselves, to the grand drama that God is unfolding before us—and with us—in history. And even though the resurrection of Jesus, by itself, is meaningless apart from the unfolding biblical drama that begins with creation and leads to the consummation, nevertheless, by beginning with this unique event in history, we are led to a particular claim that can unsettle our settled assumptions. So that is where we must begin: with the particular and unique claim that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead.

III. Revelation within the Realm of History Alone: The Resurrection

The heart of special revelation is “good news,” what we commonly call *the gospel*. The New Testament word translated “gospel” (*euangelion*) refers to a report brought by an official herald from the frontlines of the battlefield, announcing that victory has been achieved and the war is over. As we discussed earlier, the gospel is “folly to Gentiles” (1Co 1:23) not only because of its message (namely, a crucified Messiah crowned King of kings in his bodily resurrection as the beginning of the new creation) but because of its very form. Jesus does not found a new school of philosophy with its own version of “the good life.” Though the gospel does generate a new worldview, a new way of ethical living, these are the fruit of the gospel, not its source. The gospel is not something you come to understand from reflection, a truth based on a new metaphysical worldview taught by Jesus. It is a message, declared to us from God.

Uniquely, Christianity is a message much closer to the grammar of politics than to that of religion, though the military conquest of its King is nothing that the rulers of this age could even imagine. It is a conquest of grace, not oppression; of the will to forgiveness rather than to brute power. In the first song of the New Testament, Mary testifies to this gospel in the Magnificat: Israel's God has acted in history, fulfilling his promise of salvation, bringing the powerful to nothing and raising up the poor and lowly.

So everything turns on whether the reported events actually happened. *No other religion bases its entire edifice on datable facts.* The events it reports either happened or they didn't, but the result is that the gospel creates heralds, not speculative pundits, mystics, and moralists. Jesus Christ does not create a school or a pious community for the spiritually and morally gifted. Rather, he brings a kingdom—the kingdom of God—which casts down the proud and lifts up the downcast.

We must not miss this striking truth—that the Christian creed turns on *historical events* rather than eternal truths or principles. Just as we were trying to ascend away from historical particulars to universal and eternal truths—the Word became flesh. The universal God became a zygote in the womb of a Jewish virgin. Confirmed by extrabiblical sources, Luke places Jesus' birth in the days when Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census, “when Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Lk 2:1–2). An otherwise obscure Roman bureaucrat became one of history's most recognizable names because Jesus was “crucified under Pontius Pilate.” The eternal God dates himself, so to speak.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). Notice the physical senses included in John's reference elsewhere:

That which was from the beginning, which we have *heard*, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have *seen* it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1Jn 1:1–3, emphasis added)

Here, speculation is useless. It does not matter what we thought reality was like, whether we believed in thirty gods or none. Something has happened in history, and we cannot wish it away. Now that the apostles have entered Jesus' existence and message in the rolls alongside other public, historical claims, that existence and message can no longer be treated as purely subjective beliefs.

Those who argue that God cannot be the object of our empirical knowledge ignore the heart of the Christian message: namely, that God became flesh and lived, died, rose again, ascended to his throne, and will return again in datable history. These claims are now open to countertestimony in the public square. This either happened or it didn't happen, but the claim itself is hardly meaningless or beyond investigation. The apostolic testimony was not about

what happened to the apostles; it was about what happened to Jesus—and through him, to the whole world. And in the summary that follows, we examine the central elements of the testimony they gave. Even though this summary includes extrabiblical references, the New Testament itself represents the most reliable basis for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Compared with other ancient texts, the New Testament texts enjoy an unrivaled transmission history.¹²

The earliest Christians testified to the following elements of the resurrection claim, even to the point of martyrdom:

A. Jesus Christ Lived, Died, and was Buried

Only those in the popular media still ask the question whether Jesus was a historical person. As the liberal Jewish scholar Rabbi Samuel Sandmel observes, “The ‘Christ-myth’ theories are not accepted or even discussed by scholars today.”¹³ Even Marcus Borg, cofounder of the radical “Jesus Seminar,” concedes that Christ’s death by Roman crucifixion is “the most certain fact about the historical Jesus.”¹⁴ There are numerous attestations to these facts from ancient Jewish and Roman sources. According to the Babylonian Talmud, “Yeshua” was a false prophet hanged on Passover eve for sorcery and blasphemy. Joseph Klausner, an eminent Jewish scholar, identifies the following references to Jesus in the Talmud: Jesus was a rabbi whose mother, Mary (Miriam), was married to a carpenter who was nevertheless not the natural father of Jesus. Jesus went with his family to Egypt, returned to Judea and made disciples, performed miraculous signs by sorcery, led Israel astray, and was deserted at his trial without any defenders. On Passover eve he was crucified.¹⁵ Late in the first century, the great Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals*

12. Historians today rely on classics like Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Caesar’s *Gallic War*, and Tacitus’s *Histories*. The earliest copies we have for these date from 1,300, 900, and 700 years after the original writing, respectively, and there are eight extant copies of the first, ten of the second, and two of the third. In contrast, the earliest copy of Mark’s gospel is dated at AD 130 (a century after the original writing), and there are 5,000 ancient Greek copies, along with nearly 20,000 Latin and other ancient manuscripts. The sheer volume of ancient manuscripts provides sufficient comparison between copies to provide an accurate reproduction of the original text. Ironically, a number of fashionable scholars attracted to the so-called gnostic gospels as an “alternative Christianity” have far fewer manuscripts, and the original writings cannot be dated any earlier than a century after the canonical Gospels.

13. Rabbi Samuel Sandmel, *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament* (3rd ed.; Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publications, 2010), 197.

14. Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1987), 179.

15. Joseph Klausner, *Yeshu ha-Notzri* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Shtible, 1922; trans. and repr. as *Jesus of Nazareth*; New York: Bloch, 1989), 18–46. Collected over the several centuries following Christ, the Talmud is of course further removed from the events than the New Testament. However, it contains a number of older fragments. Even the liberal Sandmel observes, “Certain bare facts are historically not to be doubted. Jesus, who emerged into public notice in Galilee when Herod Antipas was its Tetrarch, was a real person, the leader of a movement. He had followers, called disciples. The claim was made,

15.44) referred to the crucifixion of Jesus under Pontius Pilate. In AD 52, the Samaritan historian Thalloos recounts the earthquake and strange darkness during Christ's crucifixion (reported in Luke 23:44–45), although he attributes the darkness to a solar eclipse.¹⁶

Of course, alternative explanations to Christ's death have been offered. The so-called swoon theory speculates that Jesus did not really die, but was nursed back to health to live out his days and to die a natural death. In Surah 4:157, Islam's Qur'an teaches that the Romans "never killed him," but "were made to think that they did." However, we know also from ancient sources how successful the Romans were at crucifixions. The description in the Gospels of the spear thrust into Christ's side and the ensuing flow of blood and water fit with routine accounts of crucifixion from Roman military historians as well as with modern medical examinations of the report.¹⁷ As for the Islamic conjecture, no supporting argument is offered, and the obvious question arises: are we really to believe that the Roman government and military officers as well as the Jewish leaders and the people of Jerusalem "were made to think that" they had crucified Jesus when in fact they did not do so? Furthermore, why should a document written six centuries after the events in question be given any credence when we have first-century Christian, Jewish, and Roman documents that attest to Christ's death and burial? Roman officers in charge of crucifixions knew when their victims were dead. Another liberal New Testament scholar, John A. T. Robinson, concluded that the burial of Jesus in the tomb is "one of the earliest and best-attested facts about Jesus."¹⁸

The burial of Jesus in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in all four Gospels (Mt 27:57–60; Mk 15:43–46; Lk 23:50–53; Jn 19:38–42). This is a specific detail that lends credibility to the account. Furthermore, it's an embarrassing detail that the disciples would not likely have forged. After

either by him or for him, that he was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. He journeyed from Galilee to Jerusalem, possibly in 29 or 30, and there he was executed, crucified by the Romans as a political rebel. After his death, his disciples believed that he was resurrected, and had gone to heaven, but would return to earth at the appointed time for the final divine judgment of mankind" (Sandmel, *Jewish Understanding*, 33). The basic historical claims of the Apostles' Creed are present in this description of the earliest belief of the Jewish Christians.

16. Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 19–20.

17. See, e.g., William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255 (1986): 1455–63. See also the extensive bibliography on this point in Gary R. Habermas, "The Core Resurrection Data," in *Tough-Minded Christianity* (ed. William Dembski and Thomas Schirrmacher; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 401 nn10–11.

18. John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 131. I refer to these sources merely to underscore the implausibility of popular dismissals of the evidence among nonspecialists, especially in the media.

all, according to the Gospels, the disciples fled and Peter even denied knowing Jesus. Yet here is a wealthy and powerful member of the ruling Jewish Council (Sanhedrin), coming to Pilate to ask for permission to bury Jesus in his own tomb. Adding to the embarrassment, according to John 19:38–42, Joseph was assisted in the burial by another leader of the Pharisees, Nicodemus (who met with Jesus secretly in John 3). Joseph was of such a stature that Pilate agreed to deliver the body over to him, but only after confirming with the centurion that Jesus was in fact dead (Mk 15:44–45).

B. Jesus Christ's Tomb was Empty after Three Days

Not even this claim should be controversial today, since it was acknowledged by Romans and Jews as well as by the first Christians. Of course, there were widely divergent explanations, but there was a remarkable consensus on this point—three days after his burial, the tomb of Jesus was empty. According to Matthew 28:11–15, the Jewish leaders maintained that the body was stolen by the disciples, and this is confirmed by the polemic that endured all the way to *Toledoth Yeshu*, a fourth- or fifth-century anti-Christian polemic.¹⁹

Romans, too, were concerned about the disruption caused by Jesus' empty tomb. A marble plaque was discovered with an "Edict of Caesar" commanding capital punishment for anyone who dares to "break a tomb." Called the *Nazareth Inscription*, the decree was provoked by disturbances in Jerusalem, and the plaque has been dated to somewhere near AD 41. Giving specific references to distinctively Jewish burials (tombs and other cemeteries), the edict targets the Jewish community.²⁰ Suetonius (AD 75–130), a Roman official and historian, recorded the expulsion of Jews from Rome in 48 because of controversy erupting over "a certain Chrestus" (*Claudius* 25.4). In a letter to the Emperor Trajan around the year 110, Pliny the Younger, imperial governor of what is now Turkey, reported that Christians gathered on Sunday to pray to Jesus "as to a god," to hear the letters of his appointed officers read and expounded, and to receive a meal at which they believed Christ himself presided (*Epistle* 10.96). The very fact that Jewish and Roman leaders, though unable to locate Jesus, dead or alive, sought alternative expla-

19. This widespread belief among early Jewish critics of Christianity is evident also in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*. See Sara Parvis and Paul Foster, eds., *Justin Martyr and His Worlds* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 83, 163.

20. Bruce M. Metzger, "The Nazareth Inscription Once Again," in *New Testament Studies: Philological, Versional, and Patristic* (New Testament Tools and Studies 10; Leiden: Brill, 1980), 76–90; cf. Clyde E. Billington, "The Nazareth Inscription: Proof of the Resurrection of Christ? Parts I and II," accessed at www.biblearchaeology.org (July 9, 2012).

nations for the resurrection demonstrates that the empty tomb is a historical fact. For the gospel story to have come to an easy and abrupt end, the authorities would only have had to produce a body.

In 1982, noted Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide surprised many (especially liberal Protestants) with his book, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective*. Although Lapide does not believe that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, after careful evaluation he concludes that Jesus was indeed raised by God from the dead after three days. Unsatisfied by alternative explanations (mass hallucination, a mere vision of a spiritually risen Christ, the disciples' theft of the body from the tomb, etc.), Lapide concludes that "some modern Christian theologians are ashamed of the material facticity of the resurrection." Their "varying attempts at dehistoricizing" the event reveal their own anti-supernatural prejudices more than they offer serious historical evaluation. "However, for the first Christians who thought, believed, and hoped in a Jewish manner, the immediate historicity was not only a part of that happening but the indispensable precondition for the recognition of its significance for salvation."²¹

Today, like every day since the first Easter, some mock, others express openness to further discussion, while still others embrace the risen Christ, exclaiming with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28). If faith involves knowledge that Christ is the risen Lord, faith is also more than mere knowledge—it is trust. Faith is not merely believing *that* Jesus of Nazareth is the risen Christ; it is embracing him as *our* Lord and Savior. "My Lord and my God!"

True faith calls on the name of Jesus for salvation from death, hell, sin, and Satan. Therefore, sound theology has its source in a founding *drama* with its revealed *doctrines*. Through the drama and the doctrine together the Spirit produces *doxology*—repentance and trust—and brings us into the unfolding story of God, no longer as spectators, but as *disciples* on pilgrimage to the everlasting city.

Key Terms

- polytheism, pantheism, panentheism, deism, atheism
- incomprehensibility
- accommodation
- doctrine of analogy (or analogical)

21. Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (trans. Wilhelm C. Linss; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1982), 130.

Key Distinctions

- transcendence/immanence
- archetypal/ectypal
- univocal/equivocal/analogical
- law/gospel
- general/special revelation

Key Questions

1. What is the doctrine of analogy, and how does it differ from other views?
2. In what senses can we call God a “stranger” — in other words, qualitatively different from us?
3. Why do we need special revelation?
4. What are some of the principal alternatives to the resurrection of Jesus as the explanation for the empty tomb? Are they plausible? Why, or why not?
5. How much rests on the claim that God reveals himself?