

G O D

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L O V E

A BIBLICAL AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

GERALD BRAY

God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology

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PREFACE

The book you hold in your hands is the fruit of many years of teaching theology to students in different parts of the world. It was a basic premise of the fathers of the early church and of the Protestant Reformers that the church's doctrine should be drawn exclusively from the Bible, as the revealed Word of God. *Sola Scriptura* was their watchword, and the present volume tries to be as faithful to that precept as possible. Subjects not fully covered by the sacred text, like church government for example, are treated only briefly, and the position taken here is that such matters belong to the category of "things indifferent."

The main purpose of this book is to set out what God has revealed to us. That revelation is sufficient for our needs but it is not exhaustive and we must not press things beyond what he has chosen to tell us. At the heart of Christian theology there lies a personal relationship with God. Like all personal relationships, it is based on a degree of knowledge undergirded by trust. What we do not know we leave to God's judgment, because we believe that we can trust him to act in ways consistent with what he has told us. In human relationships we trust people all the time, even though we are fallible creatures and liable to disappoint others and be disappointed ourselves. How much more should we be prepared to trust God, who is infallible and will never let us down?

The Bible is the record of a relationship between God and man. It explains how God loves what he has made and wants us to enjoy the fruits of his creative acts in fellowship with him. But it also tells us how some of the highest creatures rebelled against him and rejected his love, and that the leader of that rebellion seduced the human race into following him. Out of this tragedy has come the message that God has not abandoned us but instead has revealed an even deeper love by sending his only Son to live our life, to die in our place, and to rise again from the dead so that we might dwell with him in eternity.

Centuries of experience and reflection have produced an enormous body of commentary that seeks to probe the meaning of the mystery of God's love, giving rise to many controversies in the course of time. A companion volume to this one will address these things and show how one debate led to another.

For the present, however, our aim is to show how Christian belief is firmly grounded in God's Word, so that we may have a sure and comprehensive foundation for what we preach and proclaim. It is beyond the scope of this book to investigate the claims made for particular books to be included in Holy Scripture or the doubts raised against some of the canonical texts. What the ancients called the *Hebraica veritas* (the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament) and the *Christiana veritas* (the New Testament) remain the foundation of our theology and have been treated as such here. Passages whose authenticity is open to doubt, such as Mark 16:9–20 or John 7:52–8:11, have not been used to support any doctrine, but this should not be understood as a denial of their canonical status. The attribution of particular books to named authors (such as Isaiah or Peter) is likewise respected, even when (as in the case of Matthew) there is no internal evidence to support it.

No author can predict who will read his book, but the aim of this one is to reach those who would not normally find systematic theology appealing or even comprehensible. Technical terminology has been avoided and the concepts underlying it have been explained as simply and directly as possible. Profound simplicity is the hallmark of classical literature and can be seen at its best in the Gospel according to John. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."¹ Nothing could be more straightforward than that, yet the depths of what it means have never been fully sounded by the human mind. Only when we grasp its simple profundity can we begin to understand the Bible and appreciate why it remains the inexhaustible source and wellspring of our spiritual life.

Many people who write theology today anchor themselves firmly in a branch of the Christian church, whether it is Catholic, Protestant, or (Eastern) Orthodox. These people may be conservative, wanting to support and explain the meaning of their tradition, or they may be liberal, intending to question that tradition's received wisdom and reconstruct it on new and untried foundations. This book does neither of these things. Perceptive readers may notice that its author is an ordained clergyman of the Church of England from what is nowadays called the "Evangelical" wing of that church. Although it is firmly Protestant, classical Anglicanism does not promote devotion to a particular founder or doctrines and practices that distinguish it from other churches. It is best understood in terms of what John Stott called *Basic Christianity* or what C. S. Lewis called *Mere Christianity*, the titles of two influential books that have been read far beyond the bounds of the church that produced them.

Basic or mere Christianity is not a shallow faith but draws deeply on the

¹John 1:1.

revelation of God's Word and seeks to embrace all who submit to its authority in sincerity and truth. It is fully Catholic, fully Orthodox, and fully Protestant because it is firmly grounded on the Bible and on its teaching alone. It is also clearly shaped by the teaching of Jesus Christ, who told us that we must be "born again" if we are to enter the kingdom of God. There is no substitute for that spiritual transformation, and the author of this book is one with members of every church or confession who bear witness to the "one thing needful."

The ancient traditions of Christianity on which we draw were formulated at a time when our faith was largely confined to the Mediterranean and European world. We cannot deny that inheritance and ought to be grateful for it, but we must also recognize that in the past two centuries the church has spread far beyond those historical limits and now reaches the ends of the earth. Today the majority of believers is to be found in the "global south," in places where Christianity has either not been present until quite recently or where it was once strong but has since declined and been revived in modern times. The needs of Christians there are often different from those of believers in the Western world, and this volume seeks to address them as far as it can. The author's aim is to speak with equal clarity to believers in China, Indonesia, and Africa as to those in Europe, America, or Australasia. Whether it will succeed in this only time will tell. No one can predict the future, but it is safe to say that we can no longer confine ourselves to the cultural and geographical limits of the past as we go forward to meet our Lord on his return.

In pursuit of this aim, this volume recognizes that certain issues have shaped and divided the church, and has tried to see those issues in their scriptural context. It avoids detailed discussions of current theological questions where these reflect trends unlikely to have a major, long-term impact, and it avoids giving particular weight to the views of modern theologians who will be forgotten in the next generation. Those who are looking for a guide to current debates or for the kind of theological ping-pong that sets one man's views against another's will have to look elsewhere. So too will those who are impressed by the number of theologians and books an author quotes to support his statements. Eternal truths have a staying power that transient ideas and arguments generally lack, and it is on those that we have sought to concentrate. Each generation seeks to deepen its spiritual experience and make its own contribution to the deposit of faith that was once delivered to the saints, but that faith remains what has been believed everywhere, at all times, by everyone who calls on the name of Christ in sincerity and truth. It is

that truth which this book seeks to explain and anchor ever more profoundly in the hearts and minds of God's people.

It remains for me to thank the many people and institutions that have allowed me to write this book and to whom I owe an immense debt of gratitude. The Latimer Trust has been kind enough to sponsor the project from the beginning, and Crossway has made its publication possible. Tyndale House in Cambridge has provided an agreeable atmosphere in which to work, and the book would not have seen the light of day without the support I have received from Beeson Divinity School, where much of the text was written. I am especially grateful to Jonathan Bailes, Joel Busby, Elizabeth Childs, Christopher Culver, Stephen Greene, Jonathan Hicks, Jonathon Lookadoo, Chase Porter, David Tew, and Dominic Zappia who gave generously of their time and energy to help make this volume more accessible to those for whom it is intended. Their encouragement and fellowship in the gospel have done much toward making the whole effort worthwhile.

Gerald Bray
Cambridge
March 14, 2011

PART ONE

THE
LANGUAGE
OF LOVE

THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE OF GOD

KNOWING GOD

God is love.¹ Everything we know about him teaches us that, and every encounter we have with him expresses it. God's love for us is deep and all-embracing, but it is not the warmhearted sentimentality that often goes by the name of love today. The love God has for us is like the love of a shepherd for his sheep, as the Bible often reminds us. Sometimes the shepherd can guide his sheep simply by speaking to them and, ideally, that is all that should be needed. But sheep are often slow to respond, and then the shepherd has to nudge them along with his staff. Sometimes he has to grapple with them forcibly and insist that they follow him when they would rather go their own erratic way. But however hard it is for the shepherd to keep his flocks in order, he never abandons them. As the psalmist put it, "You are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."² The rod and the staff are the shepherd's instruments of discipline. The sheep may resent them and try to resist their force, but they know that in the end they must go where their shepherd is leading them. As Jesus said, "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."³ He is the Good Shepherd, who loved his sheep so much that he gave his life for them. However many have gone astray, we have his assurance that not one of them will be lost.⁴

We know God because we are the sheep who have responded to our

¹John 4:15.

²Ps. 23:4.

³John 10:3b.

⁴John 10:11; Matt. 18:12–13; Luke 15:4–7; John 18:9.

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Shepherd's voice and have experienced his love at work in us. He has rescued us from our folly and reintegrated us into the world that he made for our enjoyment. People who are not Christians also benefit from God's great love for the human race, but they are not his sheep, and so they do not understand God's love or appreciate it as they should. Even if they have a belief in God, they do not know him as a loving Father who has made them, preserved them, saved them from the consequences of their rebellion against him, and given them a new and eternal life. They may follow a religious tradition out of habit or a sense of duty, or because it is part of their cultural inheritance, but they have never met the God they claim to worship. This phenomenon is very common in most parts of the world, where other religions vie with Christianity as an explanation of life's meaning. But it can also be found in and on the fringes of the church, where there are people who think of themselves as Christians but who lack any clear form of belief that would give that claim some meaning. These are the goats, whom we must distinguish from the sheep, however similar they may appear on the surface.

Among the goats, there are many who attend church at certain times in their lives (for baptisms, weddings, and funerals) or for important festivals (such as Christmas or Easter) but that is as far as it goes. Some of them may pray or read the Bible occasionally, especially when they have a particular need, but they treat these spiritual resources like medicines in the cabinet—something to be used when required but otherwise kept safely tucked away in storage. A few actually become members of a church and may get quite involved in it, even to the point of becoming ordained pastors and teachers. They may be idealistic and well-meaning, and believe that the church is an important vehicle for doing good in the world. Some of them may be quite spiritual in their own way, and use prayer as a means of expanding their horizons or getting in touch with their inner selves. They may accept Christian teaching as a help to them in this, but they do not submit to it as their supreme and unquestioned authority. They often welcome insights from other religions or belief systems, and if there are elements of traditional Christianity that they find inconvenient, they either jettison them or reinterpret them to the point where they are no longer offensive—or even recognizable. These people embrace the traditions of the church but their beliefs and behavior are a simulation of true Christian faith and not the real thing. This becomes clear when they come up against the sheep. When that happens, the goats often react by mocking the sheep and deriding what they see as the sheep's naivete. In extreme cases the goats may even try to drive the sheep out of the church

because the presence of people who listen to the voice of the Shepherd and follow his teaching is a standing rebuke to their inadequate and superficial piety.

There are other goats who have no faith at all and seldom give the subject much thought, but when the question comes up, they are reluctant to admit their unbelief. Instead, they claim that it is impossible to know whether any religion is true and so they refuse to commit themselves to a decision one way or the other. This is a popular option nowadays, and is the stance most commonly taken by people in the media and public life of what were once (and sometimes still are) officially “Christian” countries. As they see it, getting along with others is possible only if we put religious convictions to one side, which can be done only if those convictions are not essential to the way we think and live. A few people go further than this and openly deny the existence of God. Some of them even attack Christians for what they see as their ignorance, their bigotry, and their immorality. This may seem like an odd accusation, but to them it is justified because Christians believe in a gospel which teaches that those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are eternally damned. To atheists like these, the notion that a good God could tolerate evil and condemn people to suffer is so outrageous that the existence of suffering and evil in the world is accepted as proof that such a being cannot exist. The strange thing is that, although they have no alternative explanation for suffering and evil, they do not hesitate to attack those who do and sometimes even blame them for causing the problem in the first place.

As Christians, we do not invite this kind of opposition, but when we are dealing with people who think differently from us we cannot put the gospel of Christ to one side. Our faith in God is not just a philosophical belief in a supreme being; it is a life-changing experience of the one who has made us what we are. Everything we think, say, and do bears witness to this, and there is no aspect of our lives that is not affected by it. Other people need to understand the all-embracing depth of our convictions, even if they do not share them. Because we love them as we believe God loves them, we have a duty to tell them that what has happened to us can and ought to happen to them too. The treasure we have received is not for hoarding but for sharing, and it is our duty to go out and find those whom God has called to be his sheep.

Having said that, we cannot force our knowledge of God onto others, however much we want them to share it. No one has ever been argued into faith in Christ. Some people have been scared into a kind of belief, perhaps by unexpectedly escaping death in an accident, but such “conversions” usually turn out to be temporary. On a more intellectual plane, Christian faith cannot be found by scientific exploration or discovered by scholarly inquiry.

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There have been philosophers who have tried to demonstrate the existence of a supreme being, but even if they conclude that God's existence is probable and easier to accept than any alternative, such an intellectual deduction is not enough to make them Christians. Humbler men and women have joined the church in the hope of finding God, but that is not enough to make them Christians either. Both types of people are wide of the mark because a true Christian is not a sheep who has gone looking for the Good Shepherd and found a man who seems to fit the bill, but someone who has *been looked for and found* by God.

This is made clear in the earliest records of the Christian church. There was no one in the ancient world more dedicated to the service of God or more eager to do his will than the young Saul of Tarsus.⁵ He had gone from his home in what is now Turkey to Jerusalem in order to study the wisdom of his ancestors, and by his own account he swallowed every word of it, hook, line, and sinker.⁶ His determination to put it into practice was unparalleled. In all probability he was prepared to die for his beliefs, and he was certainly willing to travel far and wide in order to propagate and defend them. But although he believed in God, he had never met him, and did not know who he really was. There were people who told him the truth about Christ, including Stephen, a deacon in the newly emerging Christian church, but Saul refused to listen.⁷ Instead, his zeal for what he already believed was inflamed by such provocation, and he was determined to stamp out the Christian church if he could. It was while he was on his way to Damascus to do just that, that Jesus came to him and revealed himself. Saul fell down like a dead man, blinded by the light that shone from heaven. He had no idea what had hit him until a voice came from that light and told him that he was Jesus, the God whom Saul was persecuting. Saul got up from the ground—the word in the original text is the same as the one that means “resurrection from the dead”—and his life would never be the same again.

What had happened to Saul? He did not know what Jesus had taught his disciples because he had not been with them, and there was no way he could have found out otherwise. Whatever he thought about the man who spoke to him from heaven, Saul did not believe that he was a gifted rabbi or religious teacher who had a new or deeper understanding of Judaism than the one he had learned in Jerusalem. The modern notion of “Jesus the great religious teacher” meant nothing to Saul. In no sense could he be described as a “seeker

⁵See Acts 9:1–19 for the full story.

⁶See Phil. 3:4–6.

⁷See Acts 7:58.

after truth” who had finally found what he was looking for; he was fully convinced that he knew the truth already, and he did not want any further enlightenment. Even the force of his vision was not enough to give him the understanding he needed. Saul got up from the ground shaken and confused, and it was only when he was taken to Ananias, a Christian elder in Damascus, who explained what had happened to him, that he understood the meaning of his experience and believed. Saul had not found God; God had found him. Ananias did not persuade Saul to believe, nor did he argue about whether God exists. What he did was to clarify for Saul something that he already knew to be true from his experience but was unable to articulate.

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus remains a model for Christians, because although most of us have not had an experience of God as dramatic as his, we can see in it a pattern of knowing God that is as true for us as it was for him. It does not matter what we were in the past—whether we were looking for truth, indifferent to it, or confident that we knew it already. What matters is that now we have found the truth, not because we have stumbled across it or worked our way into it, but because the Truth has found us and made us over into new men and women. As Saul (also known as Paul) was to say in his letter to the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, *who loved me and gave himself for me.*”⁸ The words in italics say it all. The man who told his disciples, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,”⁹ had met Saul on the road to Damascus, because he loved him. Jesus had given himself up to death so that Saul could live a new life in union with him. When he fell to the ground, Saul died to his old self, and when he got up again it was as if he had been raised from the dead. Everything that followed was an explanation of that experience, a working out of what it meant for his life and for the life of the world.

COMMUNICATING THIS KNOWLEDGE TO OTHERS

Dying to self and rising again with Christ is the heart of the Christian faith, and the new life we receive is common to all who believe in him. We work out this new life in different ways, but the heart of the matter remains the same, and when we talk about it, what we say resonates with what Paul wrote to the Christians of Galatia. The words we use may be simple and they are often inadequate to express the true dimensions of the reality we have experienced.

⁸Gal. 2:20.

⁹John 14:6.

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Our message may be abbreviated, either because we cannot say everything at once or because those listening to our account cannot take it all in, or because we do not fully understand it ourselves. We may not know how to express it properly and trip over ourselves when we try to explain it. How many of us can put into words the feelings we have for those who are closest to us? But if human love is a powerful force that cannot be pinned down like that, how much more will this be true of the love of God? It takes careful reflection in order to speak comprehensively, accurately, and convincingly about an experience of something that goes beyond what is merely rational. To guide us in understanding and expressing such deep things, God has raised up teachers and guides, so that we may learn, as Saul learned from Ananias, how to communicate what we have experienced.

To do this effectively, we have to find the right terms—words that will not be misunderstood by those who hear them. Our minds have to be given the right conceptual framework, so that we will not get confused or talk at cross-purposes. We cannot argue other people into believing in God, but we can always say what he means to us and how he should be understood, so that those who do not believe in him know whom they are rejecting. We must be able to tell the world how we understand the universe, our place in it, and the purpose of our existence. Others may disagree with us and offer alternative proposals, but we must put our case as clearly and as coherently as possible, so that they know what they are disagreeing with. Christians who are vague about these things or who cannot articulate their beliefs in a comprehensible manner will never communicate their faith to anyone. God has called us to give a reason for the hope that is within us and to proclaim the message of salvation to all mankind, whether or not they listen to what we are saying.¹⁰ We may not always get through to unbelievers, but we should at least do our best to make sure that, if our message is rejected, the fault for that will lie with them and not with us.

Christian teachers and guides come in different shapes and sizes. Some are “evangelists” or proclaimers of the gospel, whose primary task is to explain our faith to outsiders and urge them to consider Christ’s claim on their lives. Others are preachers whose main role is the building up of God’s people, so that they will be more settled in their beliefs and better witnesses to the wider world. Then there are teachers, whose duty it is to develop the deeper implications of our faith and provide resources to preachers and evangelists so that they can fulfill their own callings more effectively. Admittedly, this analysis is an abstraction, and each person who is called to bear witness to

¹⁰1 Pet. 3:15; Matt. 28:19–20.

Christ will to some extent be all three of these things. But just as some will be called to devote their lives to itinerant evangelism and others will be called to minister to settled congregations, so there will be those who are set apart for the study of the faith itself. These are the theologians, teachers whose primary responsibility is to examine our experience of God and express it in a coherent way. The result of their labors is the body of knowledge that we call theology.

THE SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THEOLOGY

Some people think of theology in terms of a “system” while others shy away from that word because it seems to reduce the complexities of a living relationship to an abstract formula that can be logically dissected and pieced together in the classroom. The systematizer is often tempted to provide solutions to questions that demand an answer if the system is to be complete, but that are unanswerable in the current state of our knowledge. There is no doubt that attempts to claim more than the evidence warrants have brought the discipline of theology into disrepute. To give only a couple of examples, we do not know what God was doing before he created the world, nor can we say why he chose Israel to be his special people.¹¹ We do not know when the world will end and cannot say why there are so many people who have not had the message of salvation preached to them, through no fault of their own.

No one knows why God permits evil to exist in spite of his own goodness, or why believers who are destined for happiness in the next life have to suffer in this one. Of course, we can suggest possible reasons for some of these things, and occasionally we can make logical deductions about what must be the case. For example, we can surmise that if only a limited number of people have been saved, those who are not included among them have not been chosen by God, but we do not know why they have been passed over, nor can we identify who they are. What we know is that God has told us enough for us to be assured of our own standing before him, and he gives us the hope that he will use our preaching and witness to bring others into the same experience of salvation that we enjoy. Beyond that, we can only speak in generalities and have to admit that there are gaps in our understanding that will not be filled until we are seated with him in his eternal glory.

Frustrating though it may be to our impatient human minds, God has not revealed everything to us. He has given us what we need for the tasks he has assigned to us, and has assured us that what we do for him will be rewarded, but he has not burdened us with knowledge that is too much for us to bear or

¹¹See Job 38:3–7; Deut. 7:6–8.

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irrelevant to what we are called to do. The good theologian must know how to recognize the boundaries of our understanding, and must remind curious souls not to stray beyond the limits that God has imposed on our learning. Knowing more than we are meant to know, or are capable of absorbing, would unsettle us in much the same way that children are upset when they are told things too hard for them to comprehend. We restrict what we tell our children because we love them and want them to grow in wisdom and understanding without being forced into adulthood before they are ready for it. In the same way, God reveals only a part of his being and plan for us until we are ready to enter into the fullness of eternal life. When that happens, we shall see him face-to-face and be able to understand it all.¹²

THEOLOGICAL DISAGREEMENTS

If theology is the analysis of Christian experience, and Christian experience is essentially the same for everyone, why is it that theologians often disagree with one another? There are several possible reasons for this. One is that we are all finite beings with a limited understanding. No one person can see everything with equal clarity, and we must all have the humility to learn from the perspectives of others. The reality we are studying is the same, but if we approach it from different angles or with different ends in view, we must not be surprised if we come up with different interpretations of it. For example, one person may want to know how Jesus Christ relates to the prophets who lived before his time, while another may be more concerned about whether we still have to obey the ancient Jewish law. The former will naturally give a high value to the Old Testament, while the latter will tend to focus on its inadequacies. There is no necessary contradiction here, but if these different approaches are pushed too far or wrongly applied, perspectives that are equally valid and useful in their own context will eventually come into conflict with each other.

The solution to this problem is not to be found in an “either/or” dichotomy but in a “both/and” combination, with each aspect of the question being given its due weight within the framework of the whole. In the case just mentioned, the underlying question is whether the Old Testament has been abolished or fulfilled in Christ. The answer is that both are true, but in different ways. To put it simply, Christ fulfilled the law in a way that has made some parts of it redundant, and so they have been abolished. Problems arise only when “abolish” and “fulfill” are treated as incompatible opposites, and

¹²1 Cor. 13:11–12.

people are asked to choose one or the other. If that happens, legitimate differences become irreconcilable, and theologians end up disagreeing with one another as a result.

Another problem is that not every theologian starts from the same fundamental principles. Some think that Christianity is a kind of philosophy and analyze it like that, with the result that they try to make it fit an alien frame of reference and end up distorting it. Others persuade themselves that they have found the essence of the truth in one particular idea, and then ignore or suppress evidence that goes against their theory. For instance, it is easy (and correct) to say that God is love, but if we then go on to argue that a God of love cannot tolerate the existence of evil, we have allowed our understanding of the principle of God's love to take us beyond the evidence and have come to an unwarranted conclusion. In recent times, some theologians have been so concerned to express their faith in the language and concepts of the secular world that they have lost sight of the uniqueness of Christianity. It is never easy to discern when an idea borrowed from an external source can help our understanding of the gospel and when it can only hinder it, and here theologians are as prone to misjudgment as anyone else.

Taking this tendency one step further, some theologians think that it is legitimate (and even necessary) to base their conclusions on data not drawn from God's revelation of himself in Holy Scripture. They may appeal to what they call "nature" as a way of explaining certain things, or rely on popular traditions that have been handed down through the ages. It is relatively easy to detect such errors when they occur in contexts far removed from our own, but harder to see them when they are familiar to us. The faults of earlier generations have often been revealed with the passage of time, and the mistakes we make will probably be clear to our grandchildren, although we cannot see them now. For instance, it used to be thought that Jerusalem was the center of the universe, that God speaks Hebrew as his native language, and that Genesis lists every human tribe and nation that exists in the world. Today we know that these beliefs were false and have abandoned them, despite the fact that they were sincerely held by many godly people for centuries. Before passing judgment on their ignorance, though, we have to remember that we probably have equally odd ideas about some things but do not recognize what they are because our horizons are too limited. These ideas seem obvious to us, but future generations will see things differently and may criticize us for being blind to matters that will seem perfectly clear to them.

When dealing with matters pertaining to God, humility is essential. If our attempts to discover his ways are dissociated from a spirit of reverent wor-

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ship, what we are seeking will remain hidden from us and the task to which we have been assigned will be left for others to accomplish. In doing theology, we are talking about someone with whom we live in relationship, with all the complexities that any relationship involves. We cannot objectify God and analyze him any more than we can distance ourselves from our parents, spouse, or children and examine them as if our ties to them were purely intellectual. As with our close human relations, our knowledge of God is embedded in a context that we must recognize and respect. Just as we probably would never have known our parents if we were not related to them, so we would not know God if we were not related to him either. The existence of the relationship does not compromise or obscure our knowledge, which would not exist without it, but it does place certain responsibilities on us as to how we express it. A child cannot talk about his parents in the dispassionate way that a biographer would, but a child knows things about his parents that no outsider can fully understand. It is the same in our relationship with God. The Bible never speculates about whether God exists, because it was written by people who knew him and who would have found such a question absurd. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.”¹³ Those who do not know God will never understand who he is or what he is like—you have to meet him first.

Finally, we must remember that the Christian experience of God can never be fully captured in words. Love cannot be reduced to a formula, and there are many ways of expressing it, none of which is exhaustive. The task of the true theologian is to discern which of these ways best reflect the spiritual reality revealed to us in Jesus, and which must be abandoned because they do not express it adequately. It often happens that some aspects of the truth come across better in one system of thought than they do in another, but that the less satisfactory system is also saying things that need to be taken into account. For instance, we know that God is sovereign over his creation and must therefore be in control of everything that happens, but we also know that some of his creatures have rebelled against him of their own free will. How can these apparently incompatible things be reconciled in a logically coherent way? Some have tried to do this by minimizing the extent of divine sovereignty, while others have reacted by regarding human choice as an illusion, but neither of these apparent solutions to the dilemma does justice to the facts. In the end, we may be forced to accept that there is no fully satisfactory way of reconciling these things in our minds, but what to us is an unresolv-

¹³John 3:11.

able paradox is merely another indication that God's thoughts are higher than ours can ever be.

What we call "theology" is a work in progress. It is not a fixed body of knowledge that can never grow or develop; it continues to expand as our relationship with God deepens. At the same time, it does not change, because God does not change. Theologians may have to express themselves in new ways when challenged by fresh discoveries that raise questions our ancestors never dreamed of. We may have to adapt our language to different circumstances and present the age-old message of Christ in ways previously unknown. Many theologians are goats, who relish these opportunities and use them to take the church away from its foundations. This has given theology a bad name in many circles. But these are false teachers who must be exposed and avoided. True theologians are sheep who hear their Shepherd's voice and interpret his words for the benefit of the rest of the flock. In this task, theology will continue until the time comes when it will no longer be needed. When that happens we shall know all things, and be enfolded forever in the unchanging and all-encompassing love of God.¹⁴

¹⁴1 Cor. 13:8–13.

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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

