

Evangelical theology is a matter of thinking about and speaking to and for the God of the Bible, in his relation to all reality and all that we ourselves are and do. It is needed for doxology, for devotion, for discipling, and for directing our lives, and we cannot get on without it. Assuming this, philosopher-theologian David Clark sets forth a wide-ranging, constantly centrist, moderately technical, analytically alert demonstration of the what, why, and how of the evangelical theological task, interacting at each stage with rival positions. No comparable across-the-board vindication of evangelical mental method exists; this is a landmark book. Clark's ten-year trudge composing it was emphatically time well spent.

—J. I. PACKER
Professor of Theology
Regent College

David Clark's *To Know and Love God* is the best antidote yet to the poison of anti-intellectualism that has sapped contemporary evangelicalism of much of its theological mettle. Clark deftly works his way through the traditional issues pertaining to theological method, yet he does so with an eye to our postmodern, multicultural, and spiritually starved situation. He makes a compelling case that cultivating and embodying the wisdom of God for daily living really is the most important thing Christians should be doing; he makes an equally compelling case that pursuing excellence in theology—the spiritual science by which we come to know God—is the best way to embark on the project. Clark has written the perfect introductory theological textbook for “evangelicalism: the next generation.”

—KEVIN J. VANHOOZER
Research Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Christian theology must be biblically sound. However, if it intends to speak to people today, it also needs to be informed on the many issues providing a context for theology in contemporary culture. How does theology find its place in the context of pluralism, relativism, scientism, and its many other challengers? David Clark provides a thorough discussion of the issues that enables theologians to ply their trade with greater awareness and commitment. This book can serve as textbook as well as reference work.

—WINFRIED CORDUAN
Professor of Philosophy and Religion
Taylor University

David Clark's book is an important statement of where evangelicals should stand on the major issues of the day.

—RONALD NASH
Professor of Philosophy
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Increased fragmentation within the Christian community, specialization of the disciplines, skepticism about religious truth, and the implications of cultural and religious diversity all suggest that the time for evangelical systematic theology is past. Undaunted, David Clark has produced a carefully nuanced and extraordinarily rich discussion of the nature of theology and a sensible, constructive model for doing theology in today's world. Essential reading for evangelical theologians, philosophers, and missiologists.

—HAROLD NETLAND
Associate Professor of Philosophy of Religion
and Intercultural Studies
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Astonishingly well-researched and persuasively argued, David Clark's *To Know and Love God* is one of a kind. This book is the product of a mature theological mind that has found a balanced and articulate wisdom, and that refuses to settle for false dilemmas, overstatements, equivocation, or fuzzy half-truths. It is a prized example of the contribution that clear, analytic thinking can have for a robust, twenty-first-century evangelical theology. If you can read only one book on theological method, read this one.

—JAY RICHARDS
Senior Fellow
Discovery Institute

Good texts on theological methodology are rare. David Clark has produced a first-rate treatment of this often ignored and misunderstood subject. This volume provides a substantial underpinning for the remainder of this excellent theological series published by Crossway.

—GARY HABERMAS
Chairman, Department of Philosophy
and Theological Studies
Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary

Competence and sensitivity! Those two words always characterize Clark's work. Once again he has penetrated the rhetoric to offer a solid case for Christian faith in the real world.

—L. RUSS BUSH, III
Senior Professor of Philosophy of Religion
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

TO KNOW AND LOVE GOD

FOUNDATIONS OF
EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

METHOD FOR THEOLOGY

DAVID K. CLARK

JOHN S. FEINBERG, GENERAL EDITOR

CROSSWAY BOOKS

A DIVISION OF
GOOD NEWS PUBLISHERS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

To Know and Love God

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Published by Crossway Books
A division of Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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First printing 2003

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Clark, David K.

To know and love God : method for theology / David K. Clark.

p. cm. — (Foundations of evangelical theology)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 1-58134-484-8 (TPB. : alk. paper)

1. Theology—Methodology. 2. Evangelicalism. I. Title. II. Series.

BR118.C47 2003

230'.01—dc21

2002156480

ML	13	12	11	10	09	08	07	06	05	04	03			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

I N T R O D U C T I O N

B Y G E N E R A L E D I T O R

Why another series of works on evangelical systematic theology? This is an especially appropriate question in light of the fact that evangelicals are fully committed to an inspired and inerrant Bible as their final authority for faith and practice. But since neither God nor the Bible changes, why is there a need to redo evangelical systematic theology?

Systematic theology is not divine revelation. Theologizing of any sort is a human conceptual enterprise. Thinking that it is equal to biblical revelation misunderstands the nature of both Scripture and theology! Insofar as our theology contains propositions that accurately reflect Scripture or match the world and are consistent with the Bible (in cases where the propositions do not come *per se* from Scripture), our theology is biblically based and correct. But even if all the propositions of a systematic theology are true, that theology would still not be equivalent to biblical revelation! It is still a human conceptualization of God and his relation to the world.

Although this may disturb some who see theology as nothing more than doing careful exegesis over a series of passages, and others who see it as nothing more than biblical theology, those methods of doing theology do not somehow produce a theology that is equivalent to biblical revelation either. Exegesis is a human conceptual enterprise, and so is biblical theology. All the theological disciplines involve human intellectual participation. But human intellect is finite, and hence there is always room for revision of systematic theology as knowledge increases. Though God and his Word do not change, human understanding of his revelation can grow, and our theologies should be reworked to reflect those advances in understanding.

Another reason for evangelicals to rework their theology is the nature of systematic theology as opposed to other theological disciplines. For example, whereas the task of biblical theology is more to describe biblical teaching on whatever topics Scripture addresses, systematics should make a special point to relate its conclusions to the issues of one's day. This does not mean that the systematician ignores the topics biblical writers address. Nor does it mean that the-

ologians should warp Scripture to address issues it never intended to address. Rather, it suggests that in addition to expounding what biblical writers teach, the theologian should attempt to take those biblical teachings (along with the biblical mindset) and apply them to issues that are especially confronting the church in the theologian's own day. For example, 150 years ago, an evangelical theologian doing work on the doctrine of man would likely have discussed issues such as the creation of man and the constituent parts of man's being. Such a theology might even have included a discussion about human institutions such as marriage, noting in general the respective roles of husbands and wives in marriage. However, it is dubious that there would have been any lengthy discussion with various viewpoints about the respective roles of men and women in marriage, in society, and in the church. But at our point in history and in light of the feminist movement and the issues it has raised even among many conservative Christians, it would be foolish to write a theology of man (or, should we say, a "theology of humanity") without a thorough discussion of the issue of the roles of men and women in society, the home, and the church.

Because systematic theology attempts to address itself not only to the timeless issues presented in Scripture but also to the current issues of one's day and culture, each theology will to some extent need to be redone in each generation. Biblical truth does not change from generation to generation, but the issues that confront the church do. A theology that was adequate for a different era and different culture may simply not speak to key issues in a given culture at a given time. Hence, in this series we are reworking evangelical systematic theology, though we do so with the understanding that in future generations there will be room for a revision of theology again.

How, then, do the contributors to this series understand the nature of systematic theology? Systematic theology as done from an evangelical Christian perspective involves study of the person, works, and relationships of God. As evangelicals committed to the full inspiration, inerrancy, and final authority of Scripture, we demand that whatever appears in a systematic theology correspond to the way things are and must not contradict any claim taught in Scripture. Holy Writ is the touchstone of our theology, but we do not limit the source material for systematics to Scripture alone. Hence, whatever information from history, science, philosophy, and the like is relevant to our understanding of God and his relation to our world is fair game for systematics. Depending on the specific interests and expertise of the contributors to this series, their respective volumes will reflect interaction with one or more of these disciplines.

What is the rationale for appealing to other sources than Scripture and other disciplines than the biblical ones? Since God created the universe, there is revelation of God not only in Scripture but in the created order as well. There are many disciplines that study our world, just as does theology. But since the world studied by the non-theological disciplines is the world created by God, any data and conclusions in the so-called secular disciplines that accurately reflect the real world are also relevant to our understanding of the God who made that world.

Hence, in a general sense, since all of creation is God's work, nothing is outside the realm of theology. The so-called secular disciplines need to be thought of in a theological context, because they are reflecting on the universe God created, just as is the theologian. And, of course, there are many claims in the non-theological disciplines that are generally accepted as true (although this does not mean that every claim in non-theological disciplines is true, or that we are in a position with respect to every proposition to know whether it is true or false). Since this is so, and since all disciplines are in one way or another reflecting on our universe, a universe made by God, any true statement in any discipline should in some way be informative for our understanding of God and his relation to our world. Hence, we have felt it appropriate to incorporate data from outside the Bible in our theological formulations.

As to the specific design of this series, our intention is to address all areas of evangelical theology with a special emphasis on key issues in each area. While other series may be more like a history of doctrine, this series purposes to incorporate insights from Scripture, historical theology, philosophy, etc., in order to produce an up-to-date work in systematic theology. Though all contributors to the series are thoroughly evangelical in their theology, embracing the historical orthodox doctrines of the church, the series as a whole is not meant to be slanted in the direction of one form of evangelical theology. Nonetheless, most of the writers come from a Reformed perspective. Alternate evangelical and non-evangelical options, however, are discussed.

As to style and intended audience, this series is meant to rest on the very best of scholarship while at the same time being understandable to the beginner in theology as well as the academic theologian. With that in mind, contributors are writing in a clear style, taking care to define whatever technical terms they use.

Finally, we believe that systematic theology is not just for the understanding. It must apply to life, and it must be lived. As Paul wrote to Timothy, God has given divine revelation for many purposes, including ones that necessitate doing theology, but the ultimate reason for giving revelation and for theologians doing theology is that the people of God may be fitted for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17). In light of the need for theology to connect to life, each of the contributors not only formulates doctrines but also explains how those doctrines practically apply to everyday living.

It is our sincerest hope that the work we have done in this series will first glorify and please God, and, secondly, instruct and edify the people of God. May God be pleased to use this series to those ends, and may he richly bless you as you read the fruits of our labors.

John S. Feinberg
General Editor

P R E F A C E

Writing a book is a labor of love. Researching and composing this book has required the better part of a decade. I have done many other things during that time, some of them quite unexpected. So writing this book was a longer journey than anticipated.

I must thank a number of people who contributed in different ways to this project. I have been privileged to work with many fine teaching assistants, each paid by Bethel Seminary. Of this group, Tim Johnson and Chris Vena especially made important contributions. My current assistant and research specialist, Mike Kukuska, has given selflessly in checking citations for the final preparation of this manuscript. A dear friend and Bethel College faculty colleague, Paul Eddy, deserves my thanks. He shared his significant knowledge of pluralism as I wrote chapter 10. Another great friend, my former research specialist and now Bethel College faculty colleague Jim Beilby, has earned my gratitude. Not only did he help me build my house, he vigorously discussed with me almost all the topics in this book. He wrote drafts of his basic research for parts of chapters 10, 11, and 12, and this assistance was essential to their completion. Another friend, Win Corduan, gave me an incredible gift by generously responding to a complete draft of this work. He does not agree with everything I say, but his insights saved me from many a blunder.

I enjoy the friendship of a number of selfless and gifted faculty colleagues at Bethel Seminary. It is a privilege to be in a learning community where we work, think, and talk informally about theology and its implications for spiritual formation and transformational leadership. Carla Dahl, Nils Friberg, Mark McCloskey, Bob Rakestraw, Glen Scorgie, LeRon Shults, and Steve Sandage deserve much more than the appreciation I can offer.

Our editor, John Feinberg, has worked patiently on this series. He both produced his own volume and also coached me. I greatly appreciate his endurance and his friendship. I need to say that none of these people is responsible for any flaws you may find in this work.

Finally, I draw great joy and strength from my family. Sandy is an astonishing life partner—bright, patient, creative, and compassionate beyond

belief. My sons, Tyler and Ryan, are completely different from each other and both a blast. I love them both deeply. I am one lucky guy to have each of these three wonderful people, each a child of God, as a part of the adventure that is my life.

Having completed these chapters, I feel conflicting emotions. I recognize the summary nature of the discussions I offer on these topics. As I read over various sections, I know each topic deserves more extensive, complex, and adequate treatment. I tried to explain things simply and clearly enough for students. I also tried to present the whole of this work with a kind of symmetry, beauty, or sanity—along with insights and original ideas—to make it worthwhile for colleagues. I am reminded of J. L. Austin’s words: “What I shall have to say here is neither difficult nor contentious; the only merit I should like to claim for it is that of being true, at least in parts.”¹ I am probably too contentious at points. But I think I have the main things right, at least in parts.

I feel an increasingly profound sense of the rationality and the sanity of the evangelical faith. Though critics may see the seamier sides of evangelical life, the aroma of a confident yet generous expression of evangelical Christian faith, if it is lived out in true community, is alluring. This is not due to the merits of any particular evangelical theologian I can think of, but to the beauty of the Savior whom we love and about whom we speak.

In view of this, I feel frustration, frankly, that some evangelicals do not take good theology seriously. Or—and this leads to similar problems—others take poor theology overly seriously. As theological conservatism (I will use that word in place of the pejorative word ‘conservative’),² we sometimes place too much weight on peripheral issues. Our champions call us into combat on too many side issues. We have written too many books with the words ‘Battle for’ in the title. We should apply ourselves more diligently to writing such good, positive theological works that counterfeits pale by comparison. This is no easy task, but I hope we will see more efforts of this kind.

I wish that more people, especially more young people, would patiently explore the wisdom that Christ offers. One of my most gut-wrenching experiences—and this happens not infrequently—is talking with young people who have given up on faith. Some, having grown up in the church, find their leaders unable to respond authentically to nagging doubts or reasonable questions. Others, having *not* grown up in the faith, have yet to hear an expression of the gospel in witness, or to see an incarnation of the gospel in community, that possesses irresistible power. These young people deserve our best efforts. Their lives make our theology extraordinarily important. The faith is astonishingly reasonable, and news of that fact needs to get out.

On the other hand, I am thrilled that the world evangelical movement is blossoming. Evangelical evangelism is a global and international reality. Evangelical efforts for social justice do go on quietly, though they need to gain strength. We live in an exciting time when the Spirit’s work is evident all

around. This too makes evangelical theology important. Theology is the expression of the wisdom of God for peoples in all cultures. Thinking excellently about theology is critical to the global church. For we must not only reach people of diverse cultures with the gospel of Christ but also partner with them as they grow in the unity of the Spirit. Theology is essential to the church as it invites seekers to faith, forms people after Christ, and builds truly biblical communities that change the world.

For these reasons and for many more, excellence in evangelical theology matters greatly.

EVANGELICAL PATTERNS IN THEOLOGY

Knowing and loving God. This is the greatest thing bar none.

In the beginning, God created all things, including woman and man, for his purposes. Who is this Creator? What is his character, and what are his purposes? How can we fulfill his purposes for us, individually and communally? What is our destiny with this Creator, and how shall we live on this earth in light of that destiny?

These are the most vital questions of life. The truth about these weighty matters is more important than a cure for cancer, the latest Third World political crisis, who won the last World Cup final in soccer, new data on global warming, the trajectory of the world's stock markets, or anything else that might occupy our time, attention, and effort. It is the work of theologians—and of all believers as they do theology—to serve God by discerning what is true about the most crucial issues of life. The task is to learn of God. The privilege is to love God passionately with the mind.

The purpose of this book is to answer the question: What is evangelical systematic theology? Unpacking this leads to other important questions. Is systematic theology a legitimate intellectual enterprise? How does theology build upon the teachings of the Bible? How can evangelical theologians in different cultures assist each other? How does theology contribute to transforming society? What does the existence of other religions mean for evangelical theology? How does systematic theology relate to other intellectual disciplines? How does it connect with the life of the church? What are the purposes and the final goal of systematic theology?

Writing a book on these topics feels a bit like writing a book to train baseball umpires. Umpires are necessary to the ball game, omnipresent on the field, and highly influential on the outcome of the contest. But enjoying their performance is not the point of coming out to the old ball yard. Similarly, the kinds

of questions I discuss here are not ends in themselves. Knowing and loving God. That is the end. But attention to details will assist any theologian in her task. And so I write to present what I could call a philosophy of evangelical systematic theology.

That phrasing betrays some of my predispositions. I speak as a self-confessed evangelical. I claim to speak *to* and *for* evangelicals. Of course, in speaking *to* evangelicals, I will settle on answers to certain intramural debates, and some fellow evangelicals will disagree with me. On these issues, I speak to my dissenting theological brothers and sisters as dialogue partners in hopes of persuading them to accept commitments that (I think) will bring us closer to a balanced understanding of God's will and ways. In speaking *for* evangelicals, I will present (and sometimes defend) views on issues about which evangelicals generally agree. In this case, I speak to the broader theological and religious community in hopes of showing how a reasonable, articulate, and credible evangelical theology can proceed.

I speak also as a philosopher of religion. I have taught systematic theology for all my adult life. But the arena where I have something of an academic home court advantage is in philosophy of religion. I use the strategies of analytic philosophy in my thinking. This is closer to the style of thinking common among English-speaking philosophers than to the approach typical of Continental philosophers or contemporary scholars of religion.¹ This is partly why I describe this book as a "philosophy of evangelical systematic theology." A "philosophy of . . ." some discipline or activity is about the nature, purposes, methods, and limits of that discipline or activity. People can develop a philosophy of education, a philosophy of coaching, or a philosophy of leadership. This "philosophy of evangelical systematic theology" is an analysis of the nature, purposes, methods, and limits of evangelical systematic theology. This, in a nutshell, is what I hope to do here.

As I was about halfway through this project, a friend, Kurt Richardson, asked me one day to identify my mentors in this effort. What theologians was I following? His question caught me a bit off guard. I remember stuttering. The truth is that I am quite eclectic, for I find myself attracted to insights from a variety of sources. But I believe we can very often integrate the insights of varied, sometimes apparently conflicting theological viewpoints. The apparent conflicts arise because good insights are too often grossly overstated. Theologians will make two correct and complementary insights seem to contradict each other by stating their ideas in bold, assertive ways.

For example, on the one hand, our knowledge is limited by cultural perspective. On the other hand, we can work together to find knowledge that is more and more faithful to the object of our inquiry. But some people get only one half of that balance. Some defend perspectivalism (see chapter 4): all knowledge is encased in the subjectivity of conceptual perspectives. So we cannot really know what is objectively true. Others will endorse objectivism: reality is what it is, and it possesses a certain ontological solidity that (if we are

rigorous) we can correctly discover. So we can know quite certainly what is objectively true. Now these are contradictory conclusions. But I believe *both* that cultural perspectives can blind us to aspects of reality *and* that reality can push through the limitations of our cultural perspectives to shape genuine knowledge. It is obviously the case that culture influences us; it is also plainly true that we have found reliable ways to partially overcome our shortcomings. Clearly, we can identify opinions that are speculative, steered by “group-think,” or driven by political agenda. And obviously, we can spot convictions that reflect honesty, result from careful study, and represent epistemic virtue at work.

As in this example, I will often choose a carefully stated middle way. I will often claim that the insights of apparently contradictory viewpoints can and should be drawn together. This middle way is holistic. It is systemic in that it acknowledges the essential insight of systems theory: all things in a system relate to all other things in a system. The members in a system mutually affect and reinforce each other. This is true of all sets of theological convictions. As G. K. Chesterton once wrote, “Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites by keeping them both and keeping them both furious.”² So I resist either/or quandaries. I see many as false dilemmas that are due to imprecision and overstatement, to inferences that go beyond the evidence, or to hasty generalizing. Some are rhetorically driven. They are created and maintained for political reasons. A false either/or can deliver rhetorical punch or create political impact. But the truth of things is rarely so simple. Clear definitions, precise distinctions, careful analysis, and modest conclusions are the antidote. These are not flashy, but they belong in the tool kits of good theologians.

Recent comments from Richard Mouw echo this stance. As he mulled over some of the common themes usually linked with postmodernism, Mouw identified things like the role of community in interpretation, the value of stories and narrative, and coherence as an epistemic value. Then he said that evangelical thinkers in his Reformed tradition—stalwarts like Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, E. J. Carnell, and Francis Schaeffer—took the themes that postmodern thinkers get jazzed about “out for a walk.” These great evangelical thinkers defended properly modest versions of these motifs, Mouw argued, but they always kept these themes “on a leash.” They did not lock these dogs in small kennels. They took them out for walks. But they did not fear to pull back on the leash when these motifs strained too hard in the wrong direction—that is, when they threatened to make all truth relative.³ The spirit expressed in Mouw’s metaphor reflects the wisdom I seek.

Pulling in the leash at just the right time and in just the right way demands a deft touch. I believe that we who are part of the evangelical theological community can improve our work in this regard. We could exercise greater precision. Non-evangelical scholars who navigate their theological boats downwind, sailing with the prevailing winds of the academy and broader culture, can express their views more loosely. The usual view is that any scholar

who “privileges” a source of truth like the Bible forfeits academic respectability (though this may be changing somewhat). Those who sail *with* this wind can overstate the implications of their premises for rhetorical effect or underproduce evidence or arguments without seeming odd or unreasonable. But as evangelical theologians, we tack *into* this wind. This is a more difficult kind of sailing. So we cannot speak and write loosely. Articulating the viability of evangelical theology and faith in the current world calls for a higher level of clarity, precision, and restraint. Because we work against mainstream assumptions of the contemporary intellectual world, we do not have the luxury of appealing in general ways to exaggerated claims. We must be chastened and specific.

Such precision and clarity have paid off in another context. Anyone remotely aware of the current situation in philosophy knows of a revival of scholarship in philosophy of religion that promotes a critical realist view of God and of faith. This revival owes much to what is called the Reformed epistemology movement. In a remarkable article, naturalist Quentin Smith brought the news out of the closet, writing that orthodox Christians are making significant inroads in the philosophical world. “God is not ‘dead’ in academia,” wrote Smith. “He returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments.”⁴ So to answer Kurt Richardson’s question, if any group of thinkers is important for my work, it is the philosophers of the Reformed epistemology movement. The careful thinking typical of analytic philosophy as practiced by Reformed epistemologists often shows how complementary insights, when expressed modestly, do in fact cohere. Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and William Alston model for us the clarity and precision I seek to emulate. They preserve the wisdom of the orthodox tradition, but do so in ways that satisfy the guidelines of contemporary thought. Unlike too many contemporary theologians, they do not discard the tradition too easily. I hope that evangelical theologians in the next generation will work with the intellectual rigor, reasoned understatement, and humble courage that characterize this movement.

In exploring the nature of evangelical theology, I obviously presuppose important questions. One important issue is the meaning of “evangelical theology.” Every theologian stands in some tradition, and I am no exception. Evangelical theology is not the theology of a specific denominational tradition like Anglicanism. It cuts across denominations. Many Methodists and Presbyterians describe themselves as evangelicals. Other Methodists and Presbyterians do not. Nor is evangelical theology limited to a clearly delineated theological tradition like Lutheran thought. Evangelical theology includes intellectual traditions as varied as Pentecostal and Anglican. Evangelical theology is, not surprisingly, the theology of a loose coalition or broad movement of like-minded Christ-followers known as evangelicals. So then, to back up one step, what is evangelicalism?⁵

Evangelicalism is a spiritual movement that displays sociological, theological, and experiential features. Some interpreters interpret evangelicalism pri-

marily through *sociological* lenses. Martin Marty once quipped that evangelicals are “people who find Billy Graham or his viewpoints acceptable.”⁶ Graham’s strategy was to invite any self-described Christian—including mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic believers—to cooperate in his evangelistic campaigns. Various mainline people and groups then decided whether to accept Graham’s overtures. Similarly, fundamentalist leaders, churches, and ministry agencies of the 1950s chose whether they were “for Billy or against Billy.” A majority decided they were “for Billy,” and the evangelical movement gradually gained some cohesiveness, then size, and finally stature. A generation after World War II, the popular press acknowledged the evangelical coming of age when a major news magazine designated 1976 the “Year of the Evangelical.” So evangelicalism today includes all who are connected with a particular network of social institutions—churches, ministry agencies, schools, magazines—and who relate to a certain set of people—leaders, artists, and preachers. Evangelicals are Christians who network with *Christianity Today*, Willow Creek, World Vision, Wheaton College, InterVarsity, Chuck Colson, Michael W. Smith, and, of course, Billy Graham.

A sociological grid for characterizing evangelicalism offers important insights. But as evangelicals, we typically define ourselves in another way. Like the fundamentalists, who defined themselves by citing fundamental theological beliefs, evangelicals commonly assume that the essential defining characteristics of evangelicalism are *theological* in nature. In this vein, David Bebbington asserted that evangelicals are those who hold to four things: “*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.”⁷ Roger Olson, writing on “The Future of Evangelical Theology” in the quintessential evangelical magazine, *Christianity Today*, called evangelicalism a theological movement. Evangelicals accent four nonnegotiable theological commitments: the supremacy of the Bible, a supernatural worldview centering on the living Creator God, a conversion experience of God through Christ, and the imperative for mission and service.⁸

In this essay, Olson suggested that among evangelicals, “traditionalists” and “reformists” are striking out in different theological directions on issues like the nature of theology as well as the relation of theology to other religions and other cultures. Traditionalists advocate caution concerning new theological proposals and emphasize historic theological expressions as important safeguards against intellectual compromise. Their top priority is ensuring that relevance to contemporary culture does not erode commitment to historic Christian theology. Reformists promote careful exploration of theological innovations and regard historic Christian theological claims as valuable but also fallible. Their main concern is continuing to open up new expressions of Christian truth, based on the authority of Scripture, even to the point of replacing traditional interpretations. Olson described the different orientations of tra-

ditionalists and reformists as a kind of fault line along which pressure has been building for several decades. Unless this crisis is resolved, he claimed, the “shaky unity” of evangelicalism may dissolve. On the other hand, vigorous debate of the fundamental perspectives of traditionalists and reformists may reenergize evangelical theology, providing catalytic energy that will drive forward the creativity and influence of historic Christian faith.⁹

Regardless of how one evaluates the two mentalities Olson identified, there is a more fundamental question: Is evangelicalism basically a *theological* movement? Kenneth Kantzer, a leading evangelical theologian, wrote, “As constituting a movement, evangelicals may be defined as orthodox Protestants adhering to the ‘material’ or content principle of salvation through personal faith in Jesus Christ and the ‘formal’ or formative principle of the final authority of Holy Scripture.”¹⁰ Olson and Kantzer assumed that evangelicalism is essentially a theological movement.

By contrast, Stanley Grenz wrote that the enduring essence of evangelicalism is the experience of conversion. Theology is very important, in Grenz’s account, but it is secondary to experience.¹¹ This makes evangelicalism most fundamentally an *experiential* movement. The reaction of many established evangelical theologians to this proposal is at best lukewarm and at worst strong rejection.¹² In my view, their response contains some wisdom. The problem with assuming that evangelicalism is an experiential movement—a movement defined most essentially by the experience of conversion—is that religious experience is notoriously malleable. In my theologically formative years, I had this lesson drilled into me. My undergraduate theology professor reminded his charges over and over again that Friedrich Schleiermacher was a Pietist. Schleiermacher, who emphasized religious experience, launched liberal theology. By citing this fact, my professor meant to warn us that placing experience at the center of faith opens a door to theological error.

So is evangelicalism most essentially a sociological, theological, or experiential movement? Grenz and other reformists usually say that evangelicalism is an experiential movement. Although I see the wisdom in the warnings sounded by Grenz’s critics, I think Grenz landed his horseshoe closest to the pin. Evangelicalism is a movement of people and communities drawn to the Father, by the Holy Spirit, through the redemption of Christ. As we come to the Father, we experience spiritual healing and wholeness that issues in a life of worship and service. We who are evangelical share this experience.

But then, how is Schleiermacher’s error avoided? How do we ensure that the path to heterodoxy (or worse) is blocked? My answer is that evangelicalism is, more fundamentally than anything else, a *spiritual* movement. By this I mean that evangelicalism is a movement where spiritual experience is the identifying feature. Evangelicalism is *experiential* in that theological truth *must be* embodied in vivid, personal experience and in service. This experience is not Schleiermacher’s generic religious experience. It is not some squishy, contemporary spirituality. This is because evangelicalism is *theological*. Evangelicalism

is theological precisely because the teaching about reconciliation to the triune God shapes spiritual experience. Having *this kind* of spiritual experience is at the heart of evangelical identity. Describing and interpreting *this kind* of spiritual experience lies at the core of the task of evangelical theology. Again, the furious opposites.

So evangelicalism is both a *theological* and an *experiential* movement. On the intellectual side, it depends on theology as a science (what Augustine called *scientia*). This is theology directed toward a disciplined intellectual knowledge of God. Theology as science is necessary for evangelical spirituality. And it is penultimately important for faith. But knowledge of truth is *not identical* to experience of God, and it cannot replace the experience. Evangelicalism is a movement that coalesces around the spiritual experience of reconciliation with the Father through Christ and by the Spirit.

This is why theology is *never less* than truth about God. But theology is *never only* about expressing true information about God. It is *always that*, and it is *always more* than that. Evangelical theology is more ultimately wisdom (what Augustine called *sapientia*) which is the application of truth directed toward the transformation of people and communities. This is of ultimate importance. Unlike dead orthodoxy, the theological dimension is always incarnated in experience. Unlike misguided heresy, the experiential dimension is always shaped by genuinely biblical theology. The *scientific* side of theology, as evangelicals understand it, is a necessary but not sufficient pathway to the *sapiential* purposes of theology. In other words, spiritual life must have theology as one of its ingredients, but having this one ingredient will not by itself guarantee that spiritual life blossoms. So this is the evangelical distinctive: spirituality—a theological experience, an experiential theology, all at once. Knowing and loving God!

The wedding band offers a simple illustration. The ring illustrates evangelicalism's status as a spiritual movement. The ring's outer surface is theological; its inner surface is experiential. The whole is spiritual. One cannot imagine a ring that has but one surface. The ring and its outer surface, though necessarily united, are not identical—evangelical faith is essentially theological. The ring and its inner surface again are necessarily united but not identical—evangelical spirituality is essentially theologically experiential or experientially theological.

A better illustration yet is the Möbius Strip. This is like a wedding band, but it has a single 180° twist. The Möbius Strip has two sides, yet the twist means that the two sides exhibit an obvious unity. An ant walking along the band will find he is able to hike continuously. He circles once on the inside, then hits the “twist” and circles on the outside, only to hit the “twist” and go back to the inside. The strip appears to have two sides, but the sides actually form a single continuous side. The two-ness and the one-ness are mutual.¹³ Similarly, evangelical spirituality is a dynamic, two-in-one reality in which the theological dimension and the experiential dimension are both essential. Each mutu-

ally reinforces the other, and both are needed to create the whole. In evangelical spirituality, theology and experience comprise an essential unity.

To describe an appropriate model for fostering evangelical spirituality, I begin in chapter 1 by recounting the history of the concept of theology. I conclude that theology is like a bridge between Scripture and a particular culture. But this image leaves the question: Exactly how can we do theology so that it is both entirely faithful to its source, the Bible, and completely relevant to its goal, the transformation of people and communities in particular cultures? So in chapter 2, I address the question of theology's faithfulness to its source. This is the authority of the Bible. But the very idea of religious authority smacks people the wrong way. So can we defend a concept of religious authority without caving in to authoritarianism? Can we argue for biblical authority without making our arguments the supreme authority? How can we visualize our commitment to *sola scriptura* so that we both preserve God as the ultimate source of truth and also properly warrant our knowledge of God? In chapter 3, I turn to the other pole, namely, connection with context. We come to the Bible with our culture and life experience in place. No one is a theological *tabula rasa*. If theology speaks to our situation, does it lose connection with the Bible? What strategy shields our thinking from influences in the culture that could distort our readings of the Bible?

In light of chapter 3 especially, I need to make a special point about culture. Clearly, I use the tools of an intellectual tradition—analytic philosophy—to analyze evangelical systematic theology. I acknowledge that many people associate this tradition with Western styles of thought. I hope it will be clear to every reader, however, that the formal analysis that I offer will open up space for truly contextual theology. Now *doing analysis of theology formally*, and *doing theology contentfully* in a particular culture are not the same thing. The tools for *doing analysis of theology* are, of course, abstract and philosophical. The tools for *doing contextualized theology* are not exclusively so. The fact that a conceptual analysis of the nature, task, and purposes of theology is necessarily philosophical in nature *does not entail that theological work and ministry communication had best follow a philosophical style*. By using the tools of philosophy to do the specific task of this book I do not hint in any way that good theology must be *philosophical* and therefore *Western* theology. It is critical that no reader makes this wrong inference. Good theology is true to the Bible and powerfully transformative for real people in real cultures. And, as my analysis will show, good theology that achieves transformation will use a variety of modes of thinking, forms of art, and styles of communication as situations dictate.

Specifically, in chapter 3, I argue that Christian communicators rightly use symbols that are powerful for their specific audience, though they should do so critically. In chapter 7, I offer a model that shows the five phases or stages of theology. This “five-phase model” honors the need for conceptual clarity in the testing of theological models. Equally, it highlights the need for evocative

power in the communication of theological motifs in a particular culture. So my writing is philosophical and analytical in style. But the point of that writing is to strongly urge Christians in every context to creatively use the modes of thought, styles of communication, and forms of artistic expression of their local culture as they communicate the gospel. These expressions can be both biblically sound and culturally powerful. If we fail in this, we will not fulfill the culture-transforming purposes of theology.

The next two chapters concern diversity and unity in theological thinking. In chapter 4, I tackle a perilous assumption common in the intellectual life of our culture. This is the idea that all truth is true only within a particular perspective or point of view. Clearly, our perspectives do shape human thinking. But a full-blown perspectivalism implies that we cannot get out of our finite perspectives to find an ultimate unity of truth. Can we recognize any wisdom in the persistent contemporary idea that knowledge is always from a point of view without sliding into relativist thinking? These first four chapters form a unit that describes theology's role in connecting Scripture and culture. Chapter 5 explores whether the churchly academic disciplines—church history, biblical studies, and systematic theology—achieve a unity of truth. Can we benefit from the different viewpoints represented by these disciplines and still arrive back at a unity of truth?

Then I turn to several questions that cluster around the relation of theology to the church. In chapter 6, I explore the role of theology in the university setting. People who work in higher education believe that universities cannot commit to an allegedly uncriticizable source of truth like the Bible. They opt for the supposedly neutral study of religion, rather than the discipline of theology. How does theology interact with religious studies? How can theology fulfill its purposes if it interacts with the values of the university? Or does theology really belong in the church? But that raises the question of chapter 7. How does theology serve the church? What is the purpose of theology? Is it primarily to mark out the boundaries of the Christian or evangelical church over against academic values, secularized theology, or cultural pluralism? Or are there other purposes?

Next I turn to explore how theology interacts with several important disciplines of study. Chapter 8 introduces theology in its relation to the sciences. Is it best to see theology and science in conflict, in separate compartments, or in a complementary relationship? Or are there new ways to see the integration of science with theology? Another discipline is philosophy. In chapter 9, I discuss different notions of how philosophy operates. Are there ways to apply the insights of philosophical work in the building of a theological worldview? How do presuppositions affect theology? Of what relevance is evidence to theology? How should we think about the structuring and organizing of our theological beliefs? In chapter 10, the issue is religious pluralism. What if many or all of the world's religions actually teach what is true, or what if they all lead to God? That raises several sets of questions for evangelical faith. But the main issue

here is this: Does the challenge of religious pluralism mean that Christians should not proceed with their theological work?

In chapter 11, I address questions of truth. What is truth? Is it reasonable to think there is such a thing? And what account can we give of truth, language, and reality? Does the traditional notion that true statements correspond to the world—that language refers to a real world—make sense? Finally, in chapter 12, I shift the focus slightly to specifically religious language. If human language does speak about the world, does it speak about God? What sort of view regarding language can we exploit to understand how we talk about God, talk to him in worship, and talk with him in prayer?

I believe all these questions have reasonable answers. To explain and defend all those reasonable answers is a monumental task. But we can, I believe, hold that evangelical theology is a reasonable human activity and that it is a medium of true knowledge of God through which we can know and love him. Evangelical systematic theology is this: it is the science by which evangelical believers learn of God. It is rooted in the Bible and focused on Christ. Through this knowledge, the Spirit transforms us into followers of Christ and forms us into Christian communities, awakening in us the wisdom of God that leads to genuine worship and cultural transformation. Through theology we know and love God.

Good theology provides the vision that guides and motivates those who desire God. Good theology fosters the love of God without which no one becomes good. Passionate love motivates theology about God without which no one becomes truly wise. Those who become good because they open themselves to being loved by God will enter covenant relationship with him and with fellow believers. God will satisfy their deepest longings for love and belonging, for meaning and significance—to the praise of God's eternal glory.

N O T E S

P R E F A C E

1. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 1.
2. J. I. Packer is the one who suggested the term 'conservationist' for those of us who care to conserve the tradition without being conservative in the negative sense of that word.

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1. See William J. Wainwright, ed., *God, Philosophy, and Academic Culture*, AAR Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion, no. 11, ed. David E. Klemm (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996).
2. Quoted in Philip Yancey, "Living with Furious Opposites," *Christianity Today*, 4 September 2000, 74.
3. Richard J. Mouw, "How Should Evangelicals Do Theology?" *Books and Culture*, May/June 2001, 21.
4. Quentin Smith, "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism," *Philo* 4 (2001): 195-215. See also Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Between the Pincers of Increased Diversity and Supposed Irrationality," in *God, Philosophy, and Academic Culture*, ed. William J. Wainwright, AAR Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion, no. 11, ed. David E. Klemm (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), 13-20.
5. See Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 58-59, regarding the question of who gets the title "evangelical."
6. Martin Marty, quoted in Kenneth L. Woodward, "The Split-up Evangelicals," *Newsweek*, 26 April 1982, 89.
7. D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-3.
8. Roger E. Olson, "The Future of Evangelical Theology," *Christianity Today*, 9 February 1998, 40-50.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Kenneth S. Kantzer, "A Systematic Biblical Dogmatics: What Is It and How Is It to Be Done?" in *Doing Theology in Today's World*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 484.
11. Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty-first Century* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).
12. See Tom Nettles, review of *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, in *Trinity Journal* 15 (1994): 123-130; David Parker, review of *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 23 (1999): 280-283; Robert Pyne, review of *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995): 361-362.
13. For history on the Möbius Strip, see J. Fauvel et al., eds., *Möbius and His Band: Mathematics and Astronomy in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For this and other citations on the Möbius Strip, plus an application of this image to theological method, see F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 206-210.

C H A P T E R I

1. Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin, the Martyr*, 21-23, 44, 46. The section Justin thought Plato borrowed from Moses is found in *The Republic* 617e.
2. Frank Whaling, "The Development of the Word 'Theology,'" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981): 289-293.
3. Justin, *Apology*, 1-30.
4. *Ibid.*, 31-53.
5. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 1.20.
6. Because its form is more comprehensive than that of its predecessors, *On First Principles* takes a step toward what we would call a systematic theology. See Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), 87-129.
7. Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.2.4-4.3.5.
8. Tertullian, *The Prescriptions Against the Heretics*, 7, trans. S. L. Greenslade, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 5, *Early Latin Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 36.