

INTRODUCING
**CHRISTIAN
DOCTRINE**

THIRD EDITION

MILLARD J. ERICKSON

EDITED BY L. ARNOLD HUSTAD


Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 3rd Edition
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 1992, 2001, 2015. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 1992, 2001, 2015 by Millard J. Erickson

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

Printed in the United States of America

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

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Erickson, Millard J.

Introducing Christian doctrine / Millard J. Erickson ; L. Arnold Hustad, ed. —
Third Edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-4919-4 (cloth)

1. Theology, Doctrinal. I. Hustad, L. Arnold, editor. II. Title.

BT75.3.E73 2015

230—dc23

2015003286

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations labeled NIV 1984 are from the 1984 edition of the NIV.

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

Scripture quotations labeled RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 3rd Edition
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 1992, 2001, 2015. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

In memory of
Siri Mahal Erickson Inoferio
January 24–October 14, 1991

“Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me,
and do not hinder them,
for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’”
(Matthew 19:14)

Contents

Preface xiii

Part 1 Introduction

1. What Is Theology? 3

The Nature of Theology 4

The Method of Theology 7

2. Contextualizing the Christian

Message 13

The Contemporary Context of Theology 14

*Approaches to Contextualizing the Christian
Message* 15

The Permanent Element in Christianity 16

The Nature of Contextualization 18

The Criteria of Permanence in Doctrine 18

Part 2 Revelation

3. God's Universal Revelation 25

The Nature of Revelation 26

The Modes of General Revelation 26

*Biblical Passages Dealing with General
Revelation* 27

*Differing Assessments of the Value of General
Revelation* 29

*General Revelation and Human
Responsibility* 35

Implications of General Revelation 36

4. God's Particular Revelation 39

*The Definition and Necessity of Special
Revelation* 40

The Style of Special Revelation 41

The Modes of Special Revelation 43

*Special Revelation: Propositional or
Personal?* 45

Propositions or Narrative? 47

Scripture as Revelation 47

5. The Preservation of the Revelation:

Inspiration 49

Definition of Inspiration 50

The Fact of Inspiration 50

Theories of Inspiration 52

The Extent of Inspiration 53

Contents

- The Intensiveness of Inspiration* 54
A Model of Inspiration 55
6. The Dependability of God's Word: *Inerrancy* 59
Various Conceptions of Inerrancy 60
The Importance of Inerrancy 61
Inerrancy and Phenomena 62
Defining Inerrancy 63
Ancillary Issues 66
7. The Power of God's Word: *Authority* 69
Religious Authority 70
The Internal Working of the Holy Spirit 70
Objective and Subjective Components of Authority 73
The Bible and Reason 74
Historical and Normative Authoritativeness 74
- Part 3 God**
8. The Doctrine of God 79
The Immanence and Transcendence of God 80
The Nature of Attributes 84
Classifications of Attributes 85
9. The Greatness of God 87
Spirituality 88
Life 88
Personality 89
Infinity 90
Constancy 93
10. The Goodness of God 97
Moral Qualities 98
God's Love and Justice—A Point of Tension? 104
11. God's Three-in-Oneness: *The Trinity* 107
The Biblical Teaching 108
Historical Constructions 112
- Relative Authority of the Three Persons* 115
Essential Elements of a Doctrine of the Trinity 116
The Search for Analogies 117
12. God's Plan 121
Key Definitions 122
The Biblical Teaching 122
The Nature of the Divine Plan 124
Logical Priority: God's Plan or Human Action? 126
A Moderately Calvinistic Model 127
Various Understandings of History 131
13. God's Originating Work: *Creation* 133
Reasons for Studying the Doctrine of Creation 134
Elements of the Biblical Teaching on Creation 135
The Theological Meaning of the Doctrine 137
The Creation Doctrine and Its Relation to Science 139
Implications of the Doctrine of Creation 142
14. God's Continuing Work: *Providence* 145
Providence as Preservation 146
Providence as Government 148
Providence and Prayer 154
Providence and Miracles 155
15. Evil and God's World: *A Special Problem* 159
The Nature of the Problem 160
Types of Solutions 161
Themes for Dealing with the Problem of Evil 161
16. God's Special Agents: *Angels* 167
Good Angels 168
Evil Angels 171
The Role of the Doctrine of Angels 173

Part 4 Humanity

17. Introduction to the Doctrine of Humanity 177
- Images of Humankind* 178
- The Christian View of Humanity* 179
- The Biblical Account of Human Creation* 180
- The Theological Meaning of Human Creation* 182
18. The Image of God in the Human 185
- The Relevant Scripture Passages* 186
- Views of the Image* 187
- Evaluation of the Views* 190
- Conclusions regarding the Nature of the Image* 191
- Implications of the Doctrine* 193
19. The Constitutional Nature of the Human 195
- Basic Views of the Human Constitution* 196
- Biblical Considerations* 198
- An Alternative Model: Conditional Unity* 199
- Implications of Conditional Unity* 200
20. The Nature and Source of Sin 203
- The Difficulty of Discussing Sin* 204
- Biblical Perspectives on the Nature of Sin* 204
- The Source of Sin* 205
21. The Results of Sin 211
- Results Affecting the Relationship with God* 212
- Effects on the Sinner* 218
- Effects on the Relationship to Other Humans* 220
22. The Magnitude of Sin 223
- The Extent of Sin* 224
- The Intensiveness of Sin* 225

Theories of Original Sin 228

Original Sin: A Biblical and Contemporary Model 230

Part 5 The Person and Work of Christ

23. The Deity of Christ 237
- The Biblical Teaching* 238
- Historical Departures from Belief in the Full Deity of Christ* 243
- Functional Christology* 244
- Implications of the Deity of Christ* 244
24. The Humanity of Christ 247
- The Importance of the Humanity of Christ* 248
- The Biblical Evidence* 248
- Early Heresies regarding the Humanity of Jesus* 251
- The Virgin Birth* 252
- The Sinlessness of Jesus* 255
- Implications of the Humanity of Jesus* 256
25. The Unity of the Person of Christ 259
- The Importance and Difficulty of the Issue* 260
- The Biblical Material* 260
- Early Misunderstandings* 261
- Other Attempts to Solve the Problem* 263
- Basic Tenets of the Doctrine of Two Natures in One Person* 264
26. Introduction to the Work of Christ 269
- The Stages of Christ's Work* 270
- The Functions of Christ* 273
- The Manifold Theories of the Atonement* 276
27. The Central Theme of Atonement 281
- Background Factors* 282
- The New Testament Teaching* 284

Contents

- The Basic Meaning of Atonement* 287
Objections to the Penal-Substitution Theory 289
Implications of Substitutionary Atonement 292

Part 6 The Holy Spirit

28. The Person of the Holy Spirit 295
The Importance of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit 296
Difficulties in Understanding the Holy Spirit 297
The Nature of the Holy Spirit 297
Implications of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit 301
29. The Work of the Holy Spirit 303
The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament 304
The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life of Jesus 306
The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Christian 307
The Miraculous Gifts Today 309
Implications of the Work of the Spirit 314
30. Recent Issues regarding the Holy Spirit 317
The Holy Spirit and Prophecy Today 318
The Holy Spirit and Other World Religions 321
The Holy Spirit and Other “Spirits” 324
31. The Antecedent to Salvation: *Predestination* 341
Differing Views of Predestination 342
A Suggested Solution 346
Implications of Predestination 348
32. The Beginning of Salvation: *Subjective Aspects* 349
Effectual Calling 350
Conversion 351
Regeneration 355
Implications of Effectual Calling, Conversion, and Regeneration 358
33. The Beginning of Salvation: *Objective Aspects* 359
Union with Christ 360
Justification 363
Adoption 369
34. The Continuation and Completion of Salvation 373
Sanctification 374
Perseverance 378
Glorification 384

Part 7 Salvation

31. Conceptions of Salvation 331
Details on Which Conceptions of Salvation Differ 332
Current Conceptions of Salvation 334

Part 8 Church

36. The Nature of the Church 391
The Basic Meaning of the Term “Church” 392
The Unity of the Church 392
Biblical Images of the Church 393
Implications 398
37. The Role and Government of the Church 399
The Functions of the Church 400
The Heart of the Ministry of the Church: The Gospel 404
Forms of Church Government 406
A System of Church Government for Today 408

38. The Ordinances of the Church: *Baptism and the Lord's Supper* 411

Baptism: The Initiatory Rite of the Church 412

The Lord's Supper: The Continuing Rite of the Church 418

Part 9 The Last Things

39. Introductory Matters and Individual Eschatology 427

Introduction to Eschatology 428

Death 430

The Intermediate State 433

Implications of the Doctrines of Death and the Intermediate State 438

Scripture Index 481

Name and Subject Index 489

40. The Second Coming and Its Consequents 441

The Second Coming 442

Resurrection 447

The Final Judgment 450

Implications of the Second Coming and Its Consequents 452

41. Millennial and Tribulational Views 453

Millennial Views 454

Tribulational Views 461

42. Final States 469

Final State of the Righteous 470

Final State of the Wicked 475

Implications of the Doctrine of the Final States 479

Preface

Christian doctrine studies and articulates the faith “once for all given” to the church. In that sense, it is unchanging. Yet the questions posed to it and the situations to which it must relate change with time. Several years ago a number of instructors who were using my *Christian Theology* as a textbook in undergraduate courses expressed a desire for a briefer version of that book that would eliminate some of the more technical portions. The result was the first edition of *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, and instructor and student responses confirmed that it was meeting a genuine need. Over the years, as student interests have changed and new doctrinal issues have come to prominence, a second edition of each of these books was prepared, and recently a third edition of the longer work. This edition of the shorter work parallels the changes effected in *Christian Theology*.

Introducing Christian Doctrine is designed to provide a preparation for and transition to *Christian Theology*. It agrees in style and in perspective with that larger work, many sentences having been taken over unchanged from it. Students and others who desire more

extended discussions of some of the issues raised here, or treatments of some issues not addressed here, are encouraged to consult that larger work.

L. Arnold Hustad, professor of theology and philosophy at Crown College, did the original work of selection and condensation and has once again worked closely with me on this edition. His knowledge of current developments and his extensive experience in teaching undergraduates have been invaluable and his judgment wise. It has been a pleasure to work again with my onetime student and teaching assistant in this collegial relationship. I am grateful to Mr. Jim Kinney, editorial director of Baker Academic, for his encouragement to make these revisions and for his numerous helpful suggestions. Robert Hand and Arika Theule-VanDam skillfully guided the project through the editorial process. I am also appreciative of the comments and observations made by several instructors and students. These have all helped to make this work a better book than it might otherwise have been.

Millard J. Erickson

P A R T 1

Introduction

Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 3rd Edition
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 1992, 2001, 2015. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

What Is Theology?

Chapter Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Compose a brief definition of theology.
2. Demonstrate the need for doctrine in contemporary society.
3. Identify alternative starting points for studying Christian doctrine.
4. List and explain each of the steps involved in developing an adequate theology.

Chapter Summary

Christian theology seeks to understand the God revealed in the Bible and to provide a Christian understanding of God's creation, particularly human beings and their condition, and God's redemptive work. With Scripture as its starting point, theology is most effectively developed by following a definite methodology.

Chapter Outline

The Nature of Theology

- Theology as the Study of Doctrine
- The Necessity for the Study of Doctrine
- Theology as Science
- The Starting Point for the Study of Christian Doctrine

The Method of Theology

- Collection of the Biblical Materials
- Unification of the Biblical Materials
- Analysis of the Meanings of Biblical Teachings
- Examination of Historical Treatments
- Consultation of Other Cultural Perspectives
- Identification of the Essence of the Doctrine
- Illumination from Sources Beyond the Bible
- Contemporary Expression of the Doctrine
- Development of a Central Interpretive Motif
- Stratification of the Topics

The Nature of Theology

Theology as the Study of Doctrine

To some readers, the word “doctrine” may prove somewhat frightening. It conjures up visions of very technical, difficult, abstract beliefs, perhaps propounded dogmatically. Doctrine is not that, however. Christian doctrine is simply statements of the most fundamental beliefs the Christian has, beliefs about the nature of God, about his action, about us who are his creatures, and about what he has done to bring us into relationship with himself. Far from being dry or abstract, these are the most important types of truths. They are statements on the fundamental issues of life: namely, who am I, what is the ultimate meaning of the universe, where am I going? Christian doctrine is, then, the answers the Christian gives to those questions that all human beings ask.

Doctrine deals with general or timeless truths about God and the rest of reality. It is not simply the study of specific historical events, such as what God has done, but of the very nature of the God who acts in history. The study of doctrine is known as theology. Literally, theology is the study of God. It is the careful, systematic study, analysis, and statement of Christian doctrine. Certain of its characteristics will help us to understand the nature of the theological enterprise:

1. Theology is biblical. It takes its primary content from the Old and New Testament Scriptures. While additional insight may be obtained by the study of God’s creation, or what is sometimes referred to as the book of

God’s work, it is primarily God’s Word that constitutes the content of theology.

2. Theology is systematic. It does not look at each of the books of the Bible separately, but attempts to draw together into one coherent whole what the entirety of Scripture says on a given topic, such as human sinfulness.

3. Theology is done in the context of human culture. Theology, particularly in its more advanced or technical sense, must relate the teachings of Scripture to data found in other disciplines that deal with the same subject matter.

4. Theology is contemporary. The aim of theology is to restate timeless biblical truths in a form that is understandable to the people who are living today.

5. Theology is practical. Paul did not expound doctrine merely to inform his readers, so that they might have more data. Rather, he intended that the doctrine be applied to everyday life. The doctrine of the second coming of Christ can, of course, become the object of speculation—people attempt to ascertain when it will occur in relation to other events. Paul, however, in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–18 urges his readers to comfort one another with this truth. That the Lord will return and will resurrect all who have believed in him is a source of peace and encouragement in a world in which so much of value appears to be undergoing destruction.

The Necessity for the Study of Doctrine

Is there really a need to study doctrine? Isn’t it sufficient if I simply love Jesus? In the view of some people, doctrine is not only unnecessary

but also undesirable, and may be divisive. There are, however, several reasons why such study is not optional.

1. Correct doctrinal beliefs are essential to the relationship between the believer and God. Thus, for example, the writer to the Hebrews says, “And without faith it is impossible to

*Far from being dry or abstract,
Christian doctrine deals with
the fundamental issues of life:
namely, who am I, what is
the ultimate meaning of the
universe, where am I going?*

please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb. 11:6). Also important for a proper relationship with God is belief in the humanity of Jesus. John writes, “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (1 John 4:2). Paul emphasizes the importance of belief in the resurrection of Christ: “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess and are saved” (Rom. 10:9–10).

2. Doctrine is important because of the connection between truth and experience. Our age is one in which immediate experience is highly valued. Thus many utilize drugs because of the excitement or stimulation they provide. Fantasies supply satisfying experiences to some. Yet in the long run, our experience is affected

by—indeed, depends on—reality. A person who falls from an upper story of a tall building may shout while passing each window on the way down, “I’m doing fine,” but eventually the facts will catch up with the person’s experience. Simply feeling good about Jesus cannot be divorced from the question of whether he is genuinely the Son of God. Hope for the future depends on whether his resurrection took place and whether ours will some day.

3. Correct understanding of doctrine is important because there are many secular and religious systems of thought that compete for our devotion these days. Marxism, the basis of communism, long claimed the allegiance of many. Popular self-help philosophies and psychologies abound. Among the religious options are large numbers of sects and cults in addition to a great variety of Christian denominations. And not only are alternative religions found in foreign lands, but they also claim significant numbers of devotees in the United States. It is, therefore, not simply a question of *whether* one shall believe, but *what* one shall believe.

It has been suggested that the way to deal with the numerous alternatives is a thoroughgoing refutation and systematic exposing of their shortcomings. A positive approach of teaching the views of the Christian faith would seem to be preferable, however. This approach provides a basis on which to measure the alternative positions. Authentic merchandise is studied in order to recognize counterfeits. Similarly, correctly understanding the doctrinal teachings of Christianity is the solution to the confusion created by the myriad of claimants to belief.

Theology as Science

A question is sometimes raised regarding the legitimacy of the study of Christian

doctrine in an institution of higher education. Is the teaching of theology not mere indoctrination? To be sure, there are limits to the teaching of Christian theology in a state institution, where there cannot be any official connection with a given form of religion. However, there is nothing prohibiting an objective, scientific study of Christianity as well as of other religions. In a private institution, and particularly in one that has a commitment to Christianity, the study of Christian doctrine is quite appropriate. It need not in any way be inferior to the other disciplines studied.

To be a proper topic for study, theology must in some sense be a science. We do not mean to say that it must be a science in the narrow sense of the natural sciences.¹ Rather, it must have some of the traditional criteria of scientific knowledge: (1) a definite object of study; (2) a method for investigating the subject matter and for verifying assertions; (3) objectivity in the sense that the study deals with phenomena external to the immediate experience of the learner and therefore accessible to investigation by others; and (4) coherence among the propositions of the subject matter so that the content forms a definite body of knowledge rather than a series of unrelated or loosely connected facts.

Theology as we will be dealing with it meets these criteria. It also occupies common ground with the other sciences. (1) It accepts the same rules of logic as do the other disciplines. Where difficulties appear, theology does not simply invoke paradox or incomprehensibility. (2) It is communicable—it can be expressed in prop-

1. Here we are speaking of science in the broader European sense: the Germans, for example, speak of *Naturwissenschaften*, or sciences of nature, and *Geisteswissenschaften*, which are roughly what we would call behavioral sciences.

ositional verbal form. (3) To some extent, it employs methods used by other specific disciplines, particularly history and philosophy. (4) It shares some subject matter with other disciplines. Thus, it is possible that some of its propositions may be confirmed or refuted by natural science, behavioral science, or history.

And yet theology has its own unique status. Some of its subject matter is unique to it: for example, God. It also deals with common objects but in a unique way; for example, it considers people in terms of their relationship to God. Thus, while Christian theology or the study of Christian doctrine is a science, it is a science with its own peculiar status. It cannot be reduced to any other science, either natural or behavioral.

The Starting Point for the Study of Christian Doctrine

One of the questions that must immediately be faced when we study Christian doctrine is the source from which our knowledge will be drawn. Even in Christian circles, several answers have been given:

1. *Natural theology*. The created universe is studied to determine certain truths about God and about human nature. (This empirical approach to doctrine will be examined in chap. 3.)
2. *Tradition*. Inquiry is made into what has been held and taught by individuals and organizations identifying themselves as Christian. Thus, what has been believed is made normative for what should be believed.
3. *The Scriptures*. The Bible is held to be the defining document or the constitution of the Christian faith. Thus, it specifies what is to be believed and what is to be done.

4. *Experience.* The religious experience of a Christian today is regarded as providing authoritative divine information.

We will follow the third approach. A similar practice can be found in various institutions and organizations that have some charter, constitution, or articles of incorporation defining

The Bible is the constitution of the Christian faith: it specifies what is to be believed and what is to be done.

what the institution is to be and the procedures it is to follow. Where there is a dispute between two claimants to be the true representative of such a group or movement, a court of law will ordinarily rule in favor of the party deemed to adhere to the basic charter. In the United States, the Constitution is binding. Indeed, any law that contradicts the Constitution will be declared invalid by a court.

In the case of Christianity, we also are dealing with a constitution, namely the Bible. Christians are those who continue in the teachings that Jesus Christ himself laid down. They cannot deny or modify what was taught and practiced by Jesus, or by those whom he authorized. In theory, of course, it would be possible to amend the Constitution. Note that in human dealings, however, only certain persons are eligible to make such an amendment; an external organization cannot alter the Constitution. In the case of Christianity, its constitution, the Bible, was not created or formulated by the humans who make up the Christian church. Rather, it originated from God himself. That being the case, only God has the authority to change the standards of

belief and practice. The Bible is the guideline that is to be followed since it possesses the right of defining correct belief and practice.

This is not to say that Christianity down through the ages has repeated and will continue to repeat the accounts of the Bible in exactly that form. Much of the Bible deals with specific cases and was written to specific situations in history. To repeat the same words in the same fashion would be to distort the meaning. Rather, what is to be done is to express for today what Jesus or Paul or Isaiah would say if he were addressing the present situation. This does not involve an alteration of the fundamental meaning, but a re-expression and reapplication of it.

The Method of Theology

We have said that theology is a science. That means in part that it has a definite procedure. While the steps we will describe need not be rigidly followed in sequence, there is a logical development to them.

Collection of the Biblical Materials

The first step will be to identify all the relevant biblical passages dealing with the topic being investigated and then to interpret them very carefully. This is the process known as exegesis. The exegete will want to use the very best of theological tools and methods. These tools include concordances, commentaries, and, for the person who knows the original languages, the biblical texts, grammars, and lexicons.

It is important even at this step to think carefully about the materials being used. We should consider the position of the author of a commentary, for example. We should

at least be aware of the author's theological perspective so that presuppositions inconsistent with our own general orientation are not imported unknowingly. The potential problem here is like what may occur when we use an instrument for navigation. A small error in a compass can, when we have traveled a long distance, result in our being far off course. Thus, careful evaluation of our interpretational tools is important.

At this point, the crucial consideration is to determine precisely what the author was saying to his particular audience. This will involve the study of biblical backgrounds so that we understand, as it were, the other partner in the dialogue. Reading a biblical passage is somewhat like hearing one-half of a telephone conversation. Paul, for example, wrote to specific groups and related to positions that they held. Unless we are familiar with those positions, it will be difficult to determine Paul's meaning.

Such biblical inquiry will involve examination of various types of biblical material. In some cases we will do word studies; for example, we might determine the meaning of "faith" by a study of all occurrences of the Greek noun *pistis* and the verb *pisteuō*. It will frequently prove profitable to examine didactic passages of Scripture in which an author addresses a particular topic in forthright fashion. Because the specific intent of these passages is to teach, the doctrinal significance is often quite overt. More difficult, but also extremely important, are the narrative passages. Here we have descriptions of divine and human actions rather than discourses on theological matters. These passages frequently serve as illustrations of doctrinal truths. In some cases, the author also gives an interpretation or an explanation in which the doctrinal import is evident.

Unification of the Biblical Materials

It is important to learn what a biblical author says in different settings about a given subject. Doctrine, however, is more than a mere description of what Paul, Luke, or John said; and so we must draw these several witnesses together into some sort of coherent whole. In this, the theologian is following a procedure that is not totally different from that of other disciplines. In psychology, for example, one would ordinarily look first at the points of agreement among psychologists of a given school of thought and then seek to ascertain whether apparent differences are actual disagreements.

This very endeavor, of course, assumes a unity and coherence among the several biblical materials and biblical witnesses. While that should not make us blind to unique emphases and nuances of meaning, it does mean that we will look for agreement rather than disagreement. As a New Testament scholar once commented to me, "We interpret the 5 percent of materials in which the synoptic gospels [Matthew, Mark, and Luke] differ in light of the 95 percent in which there is clear agreement rather than the other way around."

Analysis of the Meanings of Biblical Teachings

When the doctrinal material has been collected into a coherent whole, we must ask what it *really* means. Part of the issue here is making certain that we do not read contemporary meanings into biblical references. It is also possible, when most of our conversation is with people who have long been familiar with a particular interpretation of Scripture, to simply assume that a concept such as being born again will be understood by everyone in the same way.

Theologians, therefore, must relentlessly press the question, "What does this really

mean?” If biblical concepts are to be accurately translated into a contemporary form, it is important that they be correctly understood. If they are not, there will be even greater imprecision at later points in the process as the ambiguity is compounded. As is commonly said, unless something is clear in the mind of the speaker, it will never be clear in the mind of the hearer. Likewise, unless something is clear in the mind of the theologian as exegete, it will not be clear in the mind of the theologian as preacher seeking in turn to communicate to others the results of exegesis.

Examination of Historical Treatments

One of the tools of theology is a study of church history. Here we are able to put our own interpretations in the context of how a particular doctrine has been viewed in the past. The purpose of this is not simply to formulate the lowest common denominator of what has been held at various points in the past, but also to help us realize that frequently our interpretations or constructions are parallels of earlier ones. We can, therefore, often tell the implications of a current view by looking at the historical results of a similar view.

Another benefit of the study of historical theology is that we learn the doing of theology by observing how others have done it. As we see the way Augustine and Thomas Aquinas adapted the expression of the Christian message to a particular situation of their time, we may learn to do something similar for our own period.

Consultation of Other Cultural Perspectives

We may have been blinded to our own cultural perspective to the point where we

identify it with the essence of the doctrine. For example, one Japanese Baptist pastor told a Baptist theology professor from the United States, “Your view of the priesthood of the believer is based more on the American Constitution than it is on the New Testament.” Was he right? That is not the point. Perhaps his view is based more on the Japanese structure of society than on the New Testament, but the point to be borne in mind is that we may unconsciously read our own experience into the Scriptures. Interaction with other cultural perspectives will help us to distinguish the essence of the biblical teaching from one cultural expression of it.²

Identification of the Essence of the Doctrine

Bearing in mind that the biblical teachings were written to specific situations and that our current cultural setting may be in some respects considerably different from that of the biblical writers, we must make sure that we do not simply re-express the biblical message in the same form. We must discover the underlying message behind all its specific forms of expression. We must ascertain, for instance, the common truth about salvation

2. There are various ways this can be done. One essential approach is reading theology written by those from different cultures. Even better is personal interaction with such Christians and theologians. I have personally found that serving on the Commission on Doctrine and Interchurch Cooperation of the Baptist World Alliance for thirty years and serving multiracial congregations and teaching in third-world countries periodically has been of great help. Interaction with Christians from many other countries and cultures, while sometimes uncomfortable, is a good sensitizing process. Writing one’s own intellectual autobiography is another good way to come to grips with the particularity of one’s own outlook. For a more extensive description of this process, see my *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 241–42.

that is found in the book of Deuteronomy and in the book of Romans. If we fail to do this, one of two things may happen. We may insist on preserving a particular form of a teaching. We might, for example, insist on retention of the Old Testament sacrificial system. The other danger is that we will, in the process of attempting to declare the message, so alter it that it becomes in effect a different genus rather than a different species within the same genus. In the example of the sacrificial system, what is permanent and unchanging is not the form of the sacrifice, but the truth that there must be a vicarious sacrifice for the sins of humanity. This task of identifying the permanent truth within temporary forms of expression is so important that we will be devoting a large portion of the following chapter to this subject.

Illumination from Sources Beyond the Bible

We said earlier that the Bible is the primary source of our doctrinal construction. While it is the major source, it is not the only one. God has revealed himself in a more general sense in his creation and in human history. Examination of that revelation will help us to understand more fully the special revelation preserved for us in the Bible.

An example is the question of the image of God in humankind. The Bible teaches us that God created humans in his own image and likeness. Though there are some general indications of its nature, we are not able to determine from Scripture what the image of God involves specifically. The behavioral sciences, however, may give us some insight into the image of God by enabling us to identify what is unique about the human among the various types of creatures.

It is worth noting that in the history of biblical interpretation some nonbiblical dis-

ciplines have in fact contributed to our theological knowledge—sometimes despite the reluctance of biblical exegetes and theologians. For example, the scholarly effort to determine whether the days referred to in Genesis 1 are to be thought of as twenty-four-hour periods, longer periods, or even nontemporal concepts has not been limited to biblical exegesis. Natural sciences, particularly geology, have contributed to our knowledge of what God did.

We need to make certain, however, that the Bible is the primary authority in our endeavor. We also need to be certain that we do not draw conclusions prematurely about the relationship between biblical and nonbiblical materials. While the Bible, when completely understood, and the creation, when completely understood, are in perfect harmony with one another, we must recognize that we do not have a perfect understanding of either one. Accordingly, there may well be some tension at times in our treatment of them.

Contemporary Expression of the Doctrine

Once we have determined the abiding essence or permanent content of the doctrine, we must express it in a fashion that is reasonably accessible to persons of our day. One of the ways this might be done was first formulated by Paul Tillich and is known as the method of correlation. The first step is to inquire what questions are being asked by our age. By this we mean not simply the immediate existential issues that individuals face but the whole way in which the general culture views reality. These questions then become the starting point for our presentation of the Christian message; that is, we relate the content of biblical theology to them. To be sure, we must not allow the non-Christian world to set the agenda completely, for in many cases it may

not ask or even recognize the existence of the most important questions. Nonetheless, it is frequently helpful to ascertain what questions are being asked.

A number of themes will present themselves as fruitful for exploration as we seek to formulate a contemporary expression of the message. Although our age seems to be increasingly characterized by depersonalization and detachment, there are indications that there is a craving for a personal dimension in life to which the doctrine of the God who knows and cares about each one can be profitably related. And although there has been a confidence that modern technology could solve the problems of the world, there is a growing awareness that the problems are much larger and more frightening than realized and that humans are the greatest problem to themselves. Against this backdrop the power and providence of God have a new pertinence.

Today it is popular to speak of “contextualizing” the message. This term is frequently used in the discipline of missiology, where there is a need to translate concepts from one’s own culture to a different contemporary culture. There seem to be three dimensions of the contextualizing process. The first we may call length. This involves taking the message from biblical times to the present and re-expressing it.

The second dimension we may call breadth—Christianity may assume different forms of expression in different cultures. Western missionaries must be certain that they do not simply carry their own culture to other parts of the world. Little white chapels with spires have sometimes been built for Christian worship in Africa. Church architecture is not the only realm where this problem occurs. It is imperative, for instance, that we

find out the philosophical distinctives of the various cultures. It has been observed that increasingly the most important distinction culturally will be between North and South, rather than East and West, as the third world grows in prominence. We must develop the ability to express concepts like sin and atonement in culturally relevant ways, for these concepts are of the essence of the Christian message.

There is also the dimension of height. A message can be expressed at different levels of complexity and sophistication. This may involve simply the age of the hearers. One should not, for example, communicate the Christian message in the same form to a child as to a university professor. Beyond that, there is the question of background in biblical and theological concepts. Frequently, students will read the work of a professional theologian who is at a much more advanced level than are those to whom they in turn will bear testimony to the truth. The ability to express biblical truth at different times and places and to different audiences is vital.

Development of a Central Interpretive Motif

It is not always necessary for individual Christians to formulate a basic central characterization of their theology. Often, however, this is helpful. Sometimes this motif reflects one’s denomination. For example, some persons of the Reformed tradition stress the sovereignty of God, whereas some Lutherans emphasize the grace of God and the role of faith. The way in which we characterize our theology is often related to our own personality and background. The customizing touch will make biblical truth more functional when we install it into our own lives.

Stratification of the Topics

It is important that we decide what the major issues of theology are and what the subpoints or subissues are. The more major a given point, the greater should be the degree of tenacity with which we insist on it. Thus, while one may not as a condition of fellowship with another believer insist on agreement as to whether the church will be removed from the world before or after the great tribulation, there must be agreement on the issue of whether Christ will return. In part, this is a matter of simply outlining our theology so that we can determine the major points, the subpoints, and the topics that are subordinate to the subpoints.

Having said this, however, we recognize that there is still a gradation among the major doctrines. For example, the doctrine of Scripture is fundamental because our understanding of

all other doctrines is derived from it. Further, the doctrine of God is basic because it supplies the very framework within which all other theological construction is done. It also may be the case that at a given time a particular issue or topic requires more attention because it is under attack or because it receives special treatment in the world we are addressing. Clearly, a careful consideration of the relative significance of theological topics is essential.

Questions for Review and Reflection

- What are the five facets of the definition of theology?
- Why may theology be considered a science?
- What are the potential sources for Christian doctrine, and why is this question important?
- What steps are involved in the process of doing theology? Illustrate how it should be done.
- How might theology be significant in solving an ethical dilemma?