

God Is Love:  
A Biblical and Systematic Theology

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## PREFACE

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

The main purpose of this book is to set out what God has revealed to us. That revelation is sufficient for our needs but it is not exhaustive and we must not press things beyond what he has chosen to tell us. At the heart of Christian theology there lies a personal relationship with God. Like all personal relationships, it is based on a degree of knowledge undergirded by trust. What we do not know we leave to God's judgment, because we believe that we can trust him to act in ways consistent with what he has told us. In human relationships we trust people all the time, even though we are fallible creatures and liable to disappoint others and be disappointed ourselves.



How much more should we be prepared to trust God, who is infallible and will never let us down?

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

Centuries of experience and reflection have produced an enormous body of commentary that seeks to probe the meaning of the mystery of God's love, giving rise to many controversies in the course of time. A companion volume to this one will address these things and show how one debate led to another. For the present, however, our aim is to show how Christian belief is firmly grounded in God's Word, so that we may have a sure and comprehensive foundation for what we preach and proclaim. It is beyond the scope of this book to investigate the claims made for particular books to be included in Holy Scripture or the doubts raised against some of the canonical texts. What the ancients called the *Hebraica veritas* (the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament) and the *Christiana veritas* (the New Testament) remain the foundation of our theology and have been treated as such here. Passages whose authenticity is open to doubt, such as Mark 16:9-20 or John 7:52-8:11, have not been used to support any doctrine, but this should not be understood as a denial of their canonical status. The attribution of particular books to named authors (such as Isaiah or Peter) is likewise respected, even when (as in the case of Matthew) there is no internal evidence to support it.

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

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

Basic or mere Christianity is not a shallow faith but draws deeply on the revelation of God’s Word and seeks to embrace

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

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

In pursuit of this aim, this volume recognizes that certain issues have shaped and divided the church, and has tried to see those issues in their scriptural context. It avoids detailed discussions of current theological questions where these reflect trends unlikely to have a major, long-term impact, and it avoids giving particular weight to the views of modern theologians

who will be forgotten in the next generation. Those who are looking for a guide to current debates or for the kind of theological ping-pong that sets one man's views against another's will have to look elsewhere. So too will those who are impressed by the number of theologians and books an author quotes to support his statements. Eternal truths have a staying power that transient ideas and arguments generally lack, and it is on those that we have sought to concentrate. Each generation seeks to deepen its spiritual experience and make its own contribution to the deposit of faith that was once delivered to the saints, but that faith remains what has been believed everywhere, at all times, by everyone who calls on the name of Christ in sincerity and truth. It is that truth which this book seeks to explain and anchor ever more profoundly in the hearts and minds of God's people.

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

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