

MICHAEL HORTON

THE CHRISTIAN
FAITH

A **Systematic Theology**
for Pilgrims On the Way



ZONDERVAN.com/
AUTHORTRACKER
follow your favorite authors

THE LAST BATTLE AND LIFE EVERLASTING

Particularly in an era when there is so much talk of holy war, clarity on the Last Judgment—and the difference between the present era and Christ’s return in glory—is critical for Christian faith and practice. On one hand, there are those who regard any concept of divine wrath as repugnant to the moral imagination. In an era of religious terrorism, many people—including theologians and ministers—argue that the Old Testament’s “texts of terror” must simply be repudiated. On the other hand, some appeal to these texts as if they were still in force and could be invoked for their own national, moral, or political causes. A proper interpretation of the holy war theme in Scripture, however, refuses both options.

I. HOLY WAR AND THE HISTORY OF REDEMPTION

The concept of holy war cannot be understood apart from its relation to holiness. In fact, the Hebrew word *hērem* means “to devote to destruction” or “to place under the ban.” Thus, we encounter yet another covenantal term, this time in relation to God’s enemies. It is inextricably tied to the structure of the treaty itself: its sanctions of curse and blessing. Even among evangelical scholars there has been a wide spectrum of interpretation on this subject.¹ Some verge on a Marcionite

1. C. S. Cowles, Eugene H. Merrill, Daniel L. Gard, Tremper Longman III, *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). Referring to these holy wars as “genocide” already prejudices the discussion, however. Genocide is a crime of wiping out a people

simply because of its ethnic/racial background. The Bible represents the holy wars as God’s judgment of violent and immoral idolaters who have occupied his holy land and threaten his holy people. Regardless of one’s evaluation of these texts, genocide is not the appropriate category.

opposition between the Old and New Testaments, between the God of Israel and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.² According to C. S. Cowles, the Old Testament texts of holy war are “pre-Christ, sub-Christ, and anti-Christ.”³

Cowles’s interpretation requires a “canon-within-a-canon” hermeneutic. The authoritative passages of Scripture must be only those (like the Sermon on the Mount) that call believers to nonviolence in their witness to the Lamb of God. To maintain consistency, he would have to judge as noncanonical (at least as not canonically binding) Jesus’ own teaching concerning a final judgment. After all, Jesus said that his return in judgment on the last day will make the destruction of Sodom pale in comparison (Lk 10:12). Responding to Cowles’s antithesis between Joshua (warrior) and Jesus (Prince of Peace), Eugene Merrill judges, “Not only does this claim ignore texts that portray Yahweh as warrior (e.g., Ex. 15:3), but it overlooks eschatological descriptions of this same Prince of Peace as one who ‘judges and makes war,’ who is ‘dressed in a robe dipped in blood,’ and from whose mouth ‘comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations’ (Rev. 19:11–15).”⁴ Further, Jesus identifies his Father (and our God) as the God of the patriarchs and prophets (Mt 22:32), as does Peter in Acts 3:13 (cf. 7:32).⁵ At the end of the day, it does not seem that even such passages of nonviolence are themselves the ultimate canon in Cowles’s interpretation. Rather, the canon becomes *our* moral sense of what constitutes violence and peace.

As Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod reminds us,

Immanuel Kant, in commenting on Psalm 79:11–14, in which he finds “a prayer for revenge which goes to tarrying extremes,” can dismiss with contempt a writer who comments, “The Psalms are inspired; if in them punishment is prayed for, it cannot be wrong, and we must have no morality holier than the Bible,” and instead hurl the following rhetorical question which, for Kant, obviously settles the issue: “I raise the question as to whether morality should be expounded according to the Bible or whether the Bible should not rather be expounded according to morality.”⁶

“Expounding the Bible according to morality, the choice of Kant,” Wyschogrod properly concludes, makes our natural (indeed, perverted) judgment the measure of justice.⁷

At the other extreme are many conservative Christians (especially in the United States) who seem to think that such Old Testament passages can be invoked by us against whatever nations or groups we regard as external or internal threats to

2. See C. S. Cowles’s essay in Cowles et al., *Show Them No Mercy*, 11–44.

3. *Ibid.*, 36.

4. Eugene H. Merrill, “Response to C. S. Cowles,” in Cowles et al., *Show Them No Mercy*, 49.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations* (ed. R. Kendall Soulen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 216–17, citing Immanuel Kant’s *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (trans. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson; New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 101.

7. *Ibid.*, 217.

the “American way of life.” Although Israel alone was taken into God’s care as a covenant nation, and the theocracy was a temporary regime typological of Christ’s kingdom, these texts of national blessing and curse are often applied directly to the United States or to Israel—or both. Neither view does justice to the different redemptive-historical contexts in which this theme emerges in Scripture.

In recent decades, M. G. Kline has offered a helpful category, which he calls *intrusion ethics*, for defining the nature and role of *hērem* (or holy) war in the Bible.⁸ At various points in redemptive history, God’s heavenly kingdom has descended to earth. Under these conditions, the stipulations governing the covenant people have encompassed the totality of life: both cult and culture, and the sanctions (life and death) were carried out immediately and directly by God himself. Yahweh was Israel’s great king, ruling in the midst of his people. Just as God’s miraculous acts in redemptive history suspend the ordinary course of natural processes, they also suspend the ordinary course of common law that God has ordained for the nations.

A. FROM ADAM UNTIL MOSES

In Eden, the covenantal representative of humanity—prophet, priest, and king of the earthly sanctuary—was called to “work it and keep [or guard]” it (Ge 2:15). (The same verbs are used for the vocation of the Levitical priests.) After the disobedience of the covenant servant, God approaches: “And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Ge 3:8). Although *rūah*—here translated “cool”—can mean “wind,” it is the usual term for “spirit,” including the Holy Spirit. It makes little sense in the context—especially with the trial and sentencing of Adam and Eve in the verses that follow—to imagine God entering the garden caressed by a gentle morning breeze. Rather, as Kline suggests, “This passage must be played fortissimo.”⁹ The Covenant Lord comes in judgment to prosecute the servant who defiled his sanctuary instead of guarding and keeping it. Since the servant did not expel the beguiling serpent but instead succumbed to his seductions, the man and woman will be exiled from the holy land.

Thus, “the Spirit of the day” refers to the arrival of Yahweh coming in the day of judgment. We have seen in chapter 17 that the Spirit’s presence is judicial: judging and justifying. The Spirit is sent to convict the ungodly and to give them faith to embrace the forgiveness of sins. The Spirit’s indwelling presence is an *arrabōn* (legal

8. M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 154–71. This view is defended in Cowles et al., *Show Them No Mercy*, in the essays by Daniel

Gard (111–49) and Tremper Longman III (159–87).

9. M. G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (S. Hamilton, Mass.: self-published, 1986), 98.

pledge) guaranteeing the final vindication of believers at the resurrection of the dead. The Spirit separates, as he did the waters in creation. Already at the arraignment of Adam and Eve, then, we encounter the Spirit of judgment. In *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, Kline argues,

It was not the fall in itself that delayed the consummation. According to the conditions of the Covenant of Creation the prospective consummation was either/or. It was either eternal glory by covenantal confirmation of original righteousness or eternal perdition by covenant-breaking repudiation of it. The fall, therefore, might have been followed at once by a consummation of the curse of the covenant. The delay was due rather to the principle and purpose of divine compassion by which a new way of arriving at the consummation was introduced, the way of redemptive covenant with common grace as its historical corollary.¹⁰

However, at various points later in Genesis, cult and culture once again become fused as God's heavenly kingdom becomes identified with a particular family (Noah and the ark) and then Israel. In these cases, God again separates the waters, exercising judgment on the ungodly while delivering his people.

In the creation narrative, seven times the declaration resounds, three times in the first triad of days and four in the second triad, twice each in the third and sixth days (one of the marks of their correspondence in the parallelism of the two triads). In the seventh, summarizing occurrence the pronouncement is heightened to "very good." In the land of Canaan there is the contest between David and the Philistines. "On that occasion," as Kline observes, "David's advance on earth was matched by (or better, corresponded to) Yahweh's advance above, the latter signaled by the 'voice' of marching over the tree-tops (II Sam. 5:24)."¹¹ Seven acts of "seeing" by the Spirit-Creator are recorded, and here, it would seem, is the ultimate source of the imagery of "the seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth" (Rev 5:6) on judicial missions, the seven eyes which are seven torches of fire burning before the Glory-throne of judgment (Rev 4:5).¹² "And the prophet attributes to the Glory-Spirit the guidance of Israel through the depths of the sea (Isa 63:13; cf. Deut. 32:10; Gen. 1:2) on to the Sabbath-rest in the land of their inheritance: 'The Spirit of the Lord brought him to rest' (Isa 63:14; cf. Deut. 12:9)."¹³ The seventh day is the Day of the Lord: a day of deliverance and judgment.

Similarly, the prophets often receive their commission and visions "in the Spirit," as they are—in their visions—caught up in the heavenly courtroom where Yahweh, arrayed in majesty, prepares for judgment (for example, compare the scenes in Eze 1:4–28 and Rev 1:10–19; 4:1–11). The Day of the Lord/Spirit is a day of judicial verdict.

10. M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (rev. ed.; self-published, 1989), 155.

12. *Ibid.*, 109–10.

11. Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, 99.

13. *Ibid.*, 112.

The concept of *hērem* war is not left behind when we cross the threshold of the testaments. “Baptism is a sign of the *parousia* of the Spirit in judgment.”¹⁴ “At Jesus’ birth, his identifying sign (*sēmeion*) was his clothing, the swaddling clothes, the garment of his humiliation, and his position, lying in a manger (Lk 2:12). At his coming again, the identifying (name-) sign of his exaltation will be the Glory-robe in which he is arrayed, his Spirit-clothing, and his position, standing in the heavens.”¹⁵ In fact, “invested with the Glory-Name, he comes in the day of the Lord as the Spirit of the day.”¹⁶

Intrusions, like sacraments, are prolepses of realized eschatology. Beyond merely pointing to the reality, these intrusions are previews of the last judgment and the age to come. However, these old covenant types are never the full realization of the consummation. “The identification of the new covenant with the consummation keeps pace with the stages in the exaltation of the Son of Man; and while we see him sitting on the right hand of power, we have not yet seen him coming in the clouds of heaven. Hence, there is not yet a corresponding antitype [fulfillment] for every element of Old Testament typology.” Some types (namely, the sacrifices) are fulfilled, but others (e.g., the final judgment) are not.¹⁷

Already now, the kingdom of God is present, but it is not identified with any nation or ethnic people. For now, it is manifested as a kingdom of grace, bringing the forgiveness of sins, not yet as the kingdom of glory, bringing final justice, righteousness, and peace to the earth. Because Christ alone—with his body—is the temple, holy land, and society of prophets, priests, and kings, there is no nation, building complex, or plot of land to which we may point as the locus of God’s kingdom. All places are common—cathedrals no less than public parks. In whatever buildings God’s people are gathered around the world on the Lord’s day, they are the place, the living stones being built into a holy sanctuary filled with the Spirit of Glory. Since there is no holy land, there can be no holy war. Christ himself has driven the serpent from the archetypal sanctuary, toppled his kingdom, and looted his prisons, and now dispenses the treasury of his kingdom by his Spirit.

Therefore, the believer’s attitude toward unbelieving neighbors is determined by common grace, not by either taking judgment into our own hands or basing this neighbor-love on any illusion of universal salvation. For now, James and John are rebuked for wanting to call down God’s judgment on unbelievers (Lk 9:53–55), but not if they make the same request in the age to come. The imprecatory Psalms, invoking God’s judgment on enemies, are appropriate on the lips of David and the martyrs in heaven. However, they are entirely out of place on the lips of Christians today, guided as we are not by the ethics of intrusion but by the ethics of common

14. *Ibid.*, 125.

15. *Ibid.*, 128–29.

16. *Ibid.*, 131.

17. *Ibid.*, 157.

grace.¹⁸ Therefore, moderns are wrong for *dismissing* such episodes as immoral, and fundamentalists are wrong for *invoking* them as if they were in effect during this intermission between Christ's two advents.

Once again, therefore, we recognize the precariousness, and often the ambiguity, of this era of redemptive history in which we must live as the church. It is an in-between time. We are living in neither the typological theocracy of Canaan nor its consummated realization at the last judgment. Israel's conquest of its promised land was a prolepsis of this last judgment, directly commanded by God, as a suspension of the laws of common grace. However, we are living in a different era, when God patiently endures the injustice, idolatry, and immorality of the nations so that his gospel can be brought peacefully to the ends of the earth. When God commanded Abraham to place Isaac on the altar of sacrifice or called his prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute as a vivid illustration of his relationship to Israel, they must obey. "When our Father shall say, 'It is done,' we must listen to his voice. But if we are listening to him today, we are still seeking by his grace to be good Samaritans."¹⁹

Lutheran biblical scholar Daniel L. Gard properly concludes, "Kline's 'intrusion ethics' and its understanding of the Old Testament destruction of the Canaanites as the final judgment foreshadowed is extraordinarily helpful in coming to grips with what is for many an ethical quandary." Gard adds,

God's justice will be manifested before the universe on the Last Day, just as it was against the Canaanites. But those with whom God has established his covenant of grace will live. Is God unjust in preserving the Israelites and destroying the Canaanites, especially since all have sinned and equally deserve condemnation? If it appears so, the issue is not only of God's justice but of human fallibility and inability to fully comprehend the ways of God.²⁰

It makes a great deal of difference whether we treat the old covenant holy wars as simply another attempt by one ethnic group to eliminate others or as periodic and localized divine judgments that could easily have been final and universal were it not also for God's mercy.

In light of the preceding discussion, I will summarize what I take to be the general plot within which the theme of holy war must be situated. The dual themes of election and common grace can be observed side by side in the stories of Seth ("Appointed") and Cain, over whom God proclaims a providential rather than redemptive benediction (Ge 4:15–16). Similarly, although Isaac is chosen, Ishmael and his mother Hagar are, like Cain, sent away from the covenant community, yet God promises Hagar that he will make a great nation of Ishmael, confirming

18. *Ibid.*, 157.

19. *Ibid.*, 171.

20. Gard, in Cowles et al., *Show Them No Mercy*, 202.

this oath by providing mother and child with water to drink in the desert (Ge 21:18–19). In fact, “God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow” (v. 20).

Yet the warfare between the “two seeds” promised to Eve in Genesis 3:15 intensifies with the calling of Abraham and especially with the liberation from Egypt and conquest of Canaan. Each of the Old Testament judgments is based on ethical rather than ethnic considerations. Therefore, to refer to these as examples of “ethnic cleansing” is misleading. Even God’s promise to bring Abraham’s descendants to the land presupposes that it is God’s land. It does not belong to Israel any more than it belongs to the pagan nations that occupied it (Lev 25:23–24). Israel was not using God to justify its own policy of ethnic cleansing. Rather, God was using Israel for the *ethical* cleansing of his holy garden. In fact, the delay of occupation of Canaan by the long sojourn of Abraham’s descendants in Egypt was based on the fact that “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (Ge 15:16). It was because they were thoroughly corrupt, not because they were Amorites, that God exercised his judgment through Israel his servant.

After Yahweh liberates his people from Egypt—described repeatedly in the Old Testament (especially the Psalms and prophets) as a new creation—he brings them to Sinai to receive the terms of his suzerainty treaty. As a new Adam, Israel must drive the serpent from God’s temple and guard and keep it. The land is not simply a gift to be enjoyed, but a task to be fulfilled; the land must be subdued and brought under God’s lordship. It is significant that the first holy war legislation appears in the Book of the Covenant itself (Ex 23:20–33). It is not added but intrinsic to the covenant. Yahweh alone is to be worshiped—by anyone, anywhere. Delbert Hillers observes that “the covenant framework served to set in its place a potentially dangerous notion, the idea of election, the affirmation that Israel was the chosen people.”²¹ The nations deified themselves (the king) and had the gods as witnesses, but only Israel had a covenant with its God.

In the federation, each family unit is to pledge loyalty (Dt 6:6–7), while in the monarchy it is the king who represents the nation’s pledge before Yahweh. Israel’s commission in the land (a land which belongs to Yahweh, not ultimately to Israel) is to cleanse it from idols and make it a luxurious habitation for God’s presence in their midst. Echoes of Eden are explicit (especially in the prophets). Israel’s holy wars are echoes from the past failure of Adam to cleanse God’s garden, finally succumbing (along with his wife) to the serpent’s treason. And they are also echoes from the future, anticipating the day when the Last Adam would rid the world of

21. Delbert Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 65.

sin and evil “in one day” — the “last day” before the Sabbath, when the whole earth will be filled with God’s glory. In Judges 5 we see the Spirit who clothed creation now clothing the trumpeter and saying, “Follow after me!” “Before the battle the word is: ‘Yahweh has delivered them into your hands.’”²² As suzerain, Yahweh lays out the terms of Israel’s holy wars on his behalf (Dt 20:1–20). “The spoils belong to Yahweh, too. This is especially clear from the story of Achan’s theft (Joshua 7).”²³

The rules of holy war are explicitly set forth in Deuteronomy 20. The priest is to prepare the troops by reminding them that Yahweh, the Great King, is the leader of the campaign, “to give you victory” (v. 4). After the officers have invited the soldiers to return to dedicate new homes and enjoy the fruit of them, as well as marry and enjoy their wives (in case they die in battle), the troops assemble to receive their battle instructions. Upon entering a town, they are to offer it terms of peace and, upon acceptance, take the inhabitants as slaves. If the town does not submit but instead fights, it must be besieged and its male inhabitants “put to the sword,” although the women, children, livestock, and goods must be preserved and taken as a tribute to the Great King.

More stringent commands are given with respect to those towns that God has marked out for judgment. Reminiscent of the story of the flood, Deuteronomy 20 continues, “But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes.” Again, it is ethical, not ethnic, cleansing: “that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God” (vv. 16–18).²⁴ The tribes mentioned in Deuteronomy 20 to be given over into Israel’s hand are explicitly mentioned in Genesis 15 (vv. 16, 19–21), where God deeds the land to Abraham. What is significant here is that the holy war being adumbrated in Deuteronomy 20 presupposes the radical corruption of the inhabitants. From what we know of Hittite and Canaanite practices, child sacrifice was part of the cultus, as were prostitution and draconian measures against the surrounding peoples who were victims of their perpetual thirst for blood and land. However, from a theocentric perspective, idolatry alone was sufficient to justify the sentence of death.

It will not be adequate to dismiss such Old Testament passages in favor of an ostensibly milder Jesus, since he says himself that the judgment awaiting all who reject him will be greater than that which fell on Sodom and Gomorrah (Lk 10:12; cf. Mt

22. *Ibid.*, 83–84.

23. *Ibid.*, 85; cf. 150, where Hillers observes the suzerainty structure of Deuteronomy.

24. Interestingly, if we continue with the rules of holy war in Deuteronomy 20, Yahweh decrees that the trees of a besieged town must be spared. “You may eat from them, you shall not cut them down. *Are trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you?*” (vv. 19–20; emphasis added). This further underscores the point that these were holy wars, divine judg-

ments, against rebels of God and his kingdom. The natural creation, as the psalmist will remind us, is still “[declaring] the glory of God,” pouring “out speech” in testimony to God’s majesty, goodness, and power (Ps 19:1–4). God lodges no complaint against creation as such, which “was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it” (Ro 8:20), and which groans because of human sin (v. 22). God’s action through Israel is a focused campaign.

11:20–24). In fact, it is significant that Jesus speaks these ominous warnings to the religious leaders of Israel. It is on the basis of the covenant, not ethnicity, that God distinguishes between friends and foes. The same covenant code that commanded holy war against the idolatrous Gentiles threatened exactly the same measures against Israel itself should it violate its terms (esp. Dt 28:1–68; cf. 30:11–20). In fact, this sentence was prophesied and carried out, as God used pagan nations as his instruments of judgment upon Israel and Judah. God’s “firstborn,” Israel, was given the same commission as Adam, as a type of things to come. Yet “like Adam, Israel broke my covenant” (Hos 6:7), as the Angel of the Lord underscores when he recounts the failure of those whom he brought up from Egypt to fulfill his commission in the land (Jdg 2:1–5).

If this interpretive path is taken, then these passages that provoke such offense can actually be seen to reveal divine forbearance and mercy as well as justice. Given the verdict of universal sinfulness (Ge 8:21), it might be reasonably asked why God limited the focus of this campaign to the Amorites, Hittites, Canaanites, and Jebusites. If the kingdom of God could only come with such a thorough housecleaning, might it not have been more thorough? Furthermore, throughout its history in the land, Israel displayed a halfhearted commitment to this commission, and the prophets will point to the failure to fully cleanse the land as one of the reasons for the apostasy of Israel and Judah, as the covenant people adopted the civil and cultic practices of the Gentiles. Then, as now, the victims of injustice and oppression protest against God’s delay of such sweeping judgment, while oppressors (or at least those whose relative peace, prosperity, and security numbs them to injustice) deny any final reckoning.

Although Israel often refused to carry out the thorough judgment that its covenant Lord required, there were instances of *un*holy and unauthorized warfare that are frankly judged as such. For example, we recall the reaction of Dinah’s brothers after she was raped by Shechem, prince of the Hivite region. Although there was treachery on both sides after this incident, Dinah’s brothers hatched an elaborate plot for vengeance and slaughtered the males and plundered the city. “All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and plundered” (Ge 34:29). What is especially interesting about this incident is that Shechem was in fact on God’s list for a holy war that would eventually be waged (Ex 23:27–31; Dt 20:16–20); nevertheless, the brothers were executing their own vengeance, on their own timetable, rather than divine judgment, on God’s schedule. They were acting in the absence of any divine warrant. In his last words to his sons, in effect reading his last will and testament, Jacob pronounced on these brothers,

Simeon and Levi are brothers;
 weapons of violence are their swords.
 Let my soul not come into their council;
 O my glory, be not joined to their company.

For in their anger they killed men,
 and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen.
 Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce,
 and their wrath, for it is cruel!
 I will divide them in Jacob
 and scatter them in Israel. (Ge 49:5–7)

In another example of unholy war, the Gibeonites (a remnant of the Amorites) were given sworn protection by Israel (Jos 9:14–19), but “Saul had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah” (2Sa 21:2). This “zeal,” however, was self-determined and self-motivated, a nationalistic rather than religious zeal. God tells David, “There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death” (v. 1). Israel’s story is that David therefore made an atonement to the Gibeonites by fulfilling their request for the representative execution of seven of Saul’s own sons. David’s own blood-stained hands, as well as those of his house, were thoroughly recounted in Israel’s scriptures (2Sa 11).

When God acts in judgment, it is righteous and serves the purpose ultimately of establishing justice, righteousness, and peace in an otherwise violent and hostile environment. Yet when humans arrogate to themselves the right to execute this divine judgment, they only perpetuate violence and become part of that very bloody fabric of hatred that has provoked God’s holy wars against the godless. The recurring implication is that such judgment must be seen in God-centered rather than in human-centered terms. God’s justice must neither be ignored when Yahweh speaks nor be executed when Yahweh is silent. Interestingly, holy war is described as “vengeance for the covenant” (Lev 26:25). It is nothing like ethnic cleansing.

Christians interpret the “war songs” of the Psalter in light of the messianic king greater than David. Jesus Christ, then, is the King whom God has installed on his holy hill, requiring all rulers to do him homage, even demanding that they “kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps 2:11). In Psalm 144, attributed to David, we read, “Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle; he is my steadfast love and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield and he in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me” (vv. 1–2). How we interpret these messianic references, however, makes all the difference, as we will see below.

The themes of salvation and holy war are inextricably bound in the Psalter. The messianic reign, as in Psalm 99, observes Oliver O’Donovan, draws together such themes as “‘judgment’ (*mišpāt*), ‘equity’ (*mēšārīm*) and ‘right’ (*šēdāqā*)....”²⁵ Salva-

25. Oliver O’Donovan, *Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 33.

tion is identified with military victory.²⁶ The group of words formed on the root *šdq* are traditionally translated “righteousness” or “justice”; but their sense is often better caught by “vindication” or “justification,” as Luther famously discovered. If with *hesed* we are in a relation known only from within, inscrutable to the outside world and private to Yahweh and his people, with *šedeq* we are in the fully public realm of a world court. When Yahweh’s right hand and holy arm have effected a victory for his people, it is a matter of international notice (Ps 98:2).²⁷ Zion “is to be ‘redeemed by *mišpāt* ([Is.] 1:26f).”²⁸ The Levites were without property. “Yhwh himself was their possession (Deut. 8:1f. etc.) . . .,” a theme that is also picked up elsewhere: “The Lord is my portion” (La 3:24, with Ps 73:26). “The Lord is my portion; I promise to keep your words” (Ps 119:57). To say that Yahweh is king is to say that “he gives Israel victory; he gives judgment; he gives Israel its possession,” with Mount Zion as its security.²⁹

Therefore, O’Donovan concludes, the result of the divine victory in battle is the restoration of that worship that is God’s due, a political act on the part of the covenant people, renouncing their allegiances to other lords and taking Yahweh alone as their great king:

“Gather us from the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise” (Ps. 106:47). The community is a political community by virtue of being a worshipping community; while the worship of the single believer, restored from some affliction and desiring to thank God, must, as it were, be politicised by being brought into the public arena of “the great congregation” (Pss. 35:18; 40:9f.) in “the gates of the daughter of Zion” (Ps. 9:14). Otherwise, the poet says, Yhwh’s righteousness, faithfulness, salvation, love and truth would be “hidden” and “concealed” (Ps. 40:10).³⁰

Given such moral complexity, Israel’s story simply cannot be reduced to yet another attempt to legitimize nationalistic ambitions by religious justifications. The same Scriptures that called for holy war in the name of the covenant Lord brought the same judgment upon Israel itself for executing violence. This becomes especially obvious in the prophetic literature.

B. FROM THE PROPHETS UNTIL CHRIST

One of the interesting interpretive paradoxes in the prophets is the indictment against Israel for both failing to thoroughly discharge the duty of holy war (thus making the people prey to idolatry) and failing to refrain from the shedding of

26. *Ibid.*, 36.

27. *Ibid.*, 37.

28. *Ibid.*, 39.

29. *Ibid.*, 45.

30. *Ibid.*, 47.

innocent blood. If the interpretive line I have suggested is about right, this twofold indictment fully coheres.

“Generally, the other cultures of the biblical world were, by comparison to Israel, remarkably tolerant,” according to Jon D. Levenson. “Their pantheons absorbed gods with ease.”³¹ “The radicalism of this aspect of covenant theology must not be missed. The covenant with YHWH is here presented as the alternative to conventional political relations.”³² In the tradition of the judges, YHWH alone is king. “In the theo-politics of this stream of tradition, there is no room for earthly government. The state is not part of the solution to the problems inherent in human society, but itself one of the problems.”³³

Israel itself has now thoroughly violated the terms of its covenant with Yahweh. The land of promise, typological of the everlasting Sabbath, has been made desolate not by the invading armies but by the judgment that Israel’s sin deserves. Having driven out the bloodthirsty nations and oppressors in order to establish a regime of justice for the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the alien, Yahweh now drives out his own bride from his defiled land. The tables are turned and God executes holy war on the apple of his eye.

Once again, this points up the fact that, whatever one finally makes of it, this story is not about justifying national aims but about loyalty to God’s covenant: righteousness, love, justice, peace, and integrity. Israel’s God is not a national mascot nor a respecter of persons: unrighteousness, idolatry, and violence will not go unpunished. The covenant Israel made with God at Sinai is her source of both security and danger. Yet, Levenson notes, Hosea 2:20 prophesies a new covenant: “All threats, whether from nature or from war, will vanish. Lurking behind these great promises are the blessings of the covenant formulary. *But we hear nothing of the curses, for the vision is one of redemption through covenant, and the assumption seems to be that, where God mediates and thus guarantees covenant, the stipulations will be fulfilled as a matter of course*” (emphasis added).³⁴ Interpreting the Sinai covenant in the light of the New Testament, we see that the geopolitical theocracy could only anticipate the everlasting blessing of the Sabbath; it could never bring it about. Only on the basis of God’s own unchangeable oath and faithfulness could there be forgiveness of sins and a genuine renewal of creation.

Already in the prophets attention turns from the theocracy (including its holy wars), as a typological kingdom pointing forward to the everlasting city, to the desacralization (desecration in the most literal sense) of that earthly kingdom as the reality it anticipates draws near. When the Messiah comes, his people are not to be

31. Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 65.

32. *Ibid.*, 72.

33. *Ibid.*, 73.

34. *Ibid.*, 78.

active in holy war, but to “be still.” Levenson relates Psalm 46 to Isaiah 30:15 in this regard: “In quietness and trust shall be your strength,” the prophet declared, “in calm and confidence shall be your heroism.” In that day, it will be time for Israel to simply stand back and watch God work salvation in all the earth.³⁵

Although the returning exiles from Babylon sought to reinstitute the Sinai covenant, Israel never recovered from exile, but remained under the oppressive dominion of foreign powers. Not by looking back to Sinai and Israel’s oath, but forward to Zion, and God’s unfailing promise, could redemption be fully and finally expected.

Whereas Sinai represents everything that is conditional, violable, threatened by human disobedience, and subject to political intrigues from within and without, Zion is the “unshakable kingdom” because it is Christ’s throne:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. . . . Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb 12:18–29)

Everything that belongs to “this present age,” including the church to the extent that it is not yet the kingdom of Christ, is exposed to this divine shaking that will leave only the immovable and eternal standing. Both the shadows of Sinai and the Gentile parodies of the kingdom of God will belong to the past, and Zion will remain forever, in a state of perpetual festival.

II. HOLY WAR AND THE MESSIANIC KINGDOM

The theme of holy war hardly disappears in the New Testament. Rather, it reaches its fulfillment—of which the Old Testament examples were merely

35. *Ibid.*, 154–55.

previews. In his Sermon on the Mount (paralleling Moses' delivery of the law at Mount Sinai), Jesus issues his famous decrees: "You have heard it said, '...,' but I say,..." He is not here condemning the law of Moses. In fact, he repeatedly affirms and interprets the law, adding nothing to the law, for example, in his conversation with the rich young ruler and also with the religious leaders in Mark 7:1–13. The moral law (summarized in the Ten Commandments) remains in full force, but the ceremonial and civil laws that governed the "intrusion ethics" of the theocracy are now being fulfilled and are therefore passing away. There was a time when there was a holy land and there were holy wars, when pagan nations were to be driven from the land, but now is the era of forgiveness, good news, and grace. Yet the same Jesus clearly—more clearly than any biblical figure—warns of the day when he will come in the clouds to judge, separating the sheep from the goats, issuing in the blessing of everlasting life for all who believe in him and the sentence of everlasting death for those who reject him.

The holy war theme is drawn upon by the New Testament, but within a distinct politics. The overtly military recognition of Yahweh, "Through you we push back our enemies" (Ps 44:4), can now be heard in the light of Jesus' declaration that "the gates of Hades will not prevail against" the church to whom Christ has given the keys to bind and loose (Mt 16:18–19). Similarly, Paul's appeal to believers to put on "the whole armor of God" prepares them for the real battle that the holy wars foreshadowed:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Eph 6:12–17)

On one hand, there is a tendency to interpret such passages in quasignostic fashion, as a purely internal battle within the individual to conquer the body and its passions and aspire to pure spirit. On the other, we may so identify the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" with certain political and economic systems that the claim that "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh" is muted.

The cosmic struggle that dominates the story from Genesis 3 to the Apocalypse is that war between the serpent and his seed on the one hand and the woman and hers on the other. In fact, Revelation 12 can be seen as a snapshot of that redemptive-historical battle, with the "woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under

her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (v. 1). Crying out in the agony of childbirth, she is threatened, as “another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems.”

His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days. (vv. 4–6)

At this point, we read, “war arose in heaven,” with the devil and his angels defeated. “And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, ‘Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God’” (vv. 7–10). The martyrs triumph by their testimony to the Lamb. “Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” (vv. 11–12). Verses 13–17 then capture something of this persecution of the enraged, if overthrown, enemy, who “went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

Once we see what these stories were prefiguring—the kingdom of Christ—they no longer can be seen as belonging to the bleak history of the will to power among nations and empires. When Christ wages war, the blind see, the deaf hear, the poor have the gospel preached to them, the weak are made strong, and the victims are liberated. The entire order of Gentile power and submission in the fallen world no longer obtains in the kingdom of Christ, as Jesus not only taught and exemplified but brought about in his own humiliation and exaltation. He proved that in this story at least, we have a Lord—the only lord who really *is* Lord of all—as a servant of all. Thus, Luther’s famous paradox of the freedom of the Christian, which can happen for the Christian only because of union with Christ, the Lord who is Servant. When *this* King declares war, the whole earth leaps for joy. It is the Year of Jubilee, the liberation day of the world from its bondage to decay, oppression, and violence. We should be cynical about the pretensions of the City of Man to bring peace through violence, but we have already seen too much in Christ’s first advent to allow us to entertain the same logic for the church’s mission here and now.

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus explains that the Son of Man will come in glory and power at the end of the age. “You will see the son of man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mt 26:64, with Lk 22:69; Mk 14:62). There was a partial realization of this in the vision of Stephen the Martyr

(Ac 7:56), whose execution the preconversion Paul approved (8:1), as also in the vision of Paul on his way to another campaign against the believers in Damascus (9:1–6). Yet they saw Christ enthroned in heaven; we still await his “coming on the clouds of heaven,” which marks the transition from a kingdom of grace to the kingdom of glory.

That the cosmic warfare envisioned by the New Testament is not ethereal or irrelevant to earthly realities is clear enough already in the history of this battle between the serpent and the woman inaugurated in Genesis 3:15, running from Cain’s murder of Abel to the flood, Israel’s exodus, conquest, and captivity, until finally reaching its climax at the cross. The story behind all of these stories is that of one cosmic battle commenced in Eden and reaching its climax in the massacre of the male infants by Herod (Mt 2:13–23). The “exile” in Egypt and repatriation to Nazareth already announce that this singular child is recapitulating Israel’s history and, in so doing, bringing about the triumph of the “seed of the woman” over the serpent and his human agents. In fact, in Jesus’ outlook, the opposition of his own people to the kingdom that belonged to them was really a playing out of this cosmic battle:

You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your own synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. (Mt 23:33–35)

Belonging to the right (covenant) line and performing the right worship, Abel by faith brought the sacrifice God had commanded, while Cain did not (Ge 4:4–8 with Heb 11:4). Even Peter’s attempt to dissuade Jesus from the cross can be treated by Jesus as the voice of Satan (Mt 16:23).

For Jesus, then, the story behind the stories is not ethnic cleansing or even the restoration of an earthly theocracy. Good and evil cannot be easily classified in the static categories of ethnic, national, or political allegiance. “Outsiders” and “insiders” are redefined in exclusive reference to him. Exorcisms and healing in the New Testament, therefore, are not odd habits of an ancient people lacking the proper tools of psychological and medical analysis, but are redemptive-historical signposts, harbingers of the new creation: Jesus’ contest with the powers of the age. *Christus Victor* meets *Agnus Dei*; the conquering King and the substitutionary Lamb are one and the same in this unique person and his kingdom. Jesus responds to the elation of the seventy at being able to subdue even the demons (in the language of treading on serpents, redolent of Genesis 3:15) with the even greater news that their names are written in heaven.

While the strong man may be bound, and consequently the extraordinary ministry of Jesus and his disciples may be succeeded by the ordinary ministry of Word

and sacrament, our warfare “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12) continues unabated. Discovered especially wherever the progress of the gospel most threatens the kingdom of Satan, such pernicious forces are also recognized in the arrogance and rebellion of the nations and in heresy and schism in the church. As throughout the history recounted above, the cosmic battle is waged through earthly agents, both personal and institutional, religious and social, cultic and cultural, rhetorical and political. Wherever human beings are seduced into deeper self-confidence and away from the proclamation of Christ and his kingdom, the battle lines are drawn.

Thus, the kingdom of grace is not a geopolitical entity, like the empires and nations of this age. Neighbor love, inscribed on the human conscience in creation, still governs all laws and constitutions. God still protects Cain and his rebellious city by his common grace. It is not the era of intrusion ethics, but of the rule of common law measured by equity (justice tempered by love), to which believers and unbelievers are bound in secular friendship.³⁶ The heresy of Constantinianism, old and new, is to imagine that the church or the nations of this age can invoke the holy land and holy war passages from the Sinai covenant for our own time and place. Whatever wars may be waged among nations and powers in this present evil age, Christians may appeal to general principles of justice and love of neighbor, but not to Israel’s national covenant.

Nevertheless, Christ is King and he is building his kingdom. It is composed of citizens from every nation and tongue, is founded in the blood of its King rather than his subjects, and expands by the Word and Spirit rather than by the sword. As O’Donovan comments, the kingdom of Christ in its present manifestation unmasks the powers of darkness arrayed against God and his Christ. “Unmasking supposes a theological point of vantage, essentially an eschatological one. Christ has led captivity captive; he has disarmed the principalities and powers; the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. When we claim to have seen through the appearances of political power, we act, as King Lear says (v.3), ‘as if we were God’s spies.’”³⁷

III. HEAVEN AND HELL

In this era, Christ’s kingdom does not overthrow the kingdoms of this age. Nor does it execute God’s wrath. However, when Christ returns, he will judge and reign in glory over all the earth.

The idea of heaven as a place where souls are forever freed from their bodily

36. See Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008).

37. O’Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 7.

carapace to enjoy a dreamlike existence is far from the biblical understanding. I have already pointed out that the Christian hope is oriented not to the intermediate state (going to heaven when we die), but to the renovation of creation, including our natural bodies. In this light, heaven is not so much a place as it is a condition of God's Sabbath, where (and when) he sits enthroned in the midst of his people. The whole earth will be raised from death to life when the children of God are revealed (Ro 8:19–21).³⁸ When the covenant of peace is consummated, “the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (Isa 55:12).

Biblical eschatology has always run counter to the prevailing assumptions of paganism, Eastern and Western, affirming liberation of rather than from creation. Heaven is a real place, not just a state of mind (Lk 24:51; Jn 14:2–4; Ac 1:11; 7:55–56). Nevertheless, the biblical vision of a new heaven and a new earth is not the abolition of the old creation, but describes the new condition of the world that the Father has made and remade in his Son and by his Spirit.

Heaven and hell appear together, affirmed side by side, in the New Testament as well (Mt 25:31–46; 1Pe 3:22; 2Pe 3:13; Rev 20:11–21:3). As we have seen, the most detailed and frequent references to the reality of hell come from the mouth of Jesus himself. Even in John's vision Jesus announces, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev 1:17–18). Christ gives Death and Hades the power to devour a fourth of the earth (Rev 6:8). “Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev 20:14–15). The term that Jesus often used, *Gehenna*, has its origins in the perpetually burning fire of the Ben Hinnom valley, where Israel imitated the pagan practices of its neighbors in child sacrifice (Jer 19:5; 32:35). The wicked will find themselves facing the same fate.

A. ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

We are now living in an era of common grace, in which neither salvation nor judgment has been fully consummated. For now, wheat and weeds grow together, awaiting the final separation. However, the era of God's patience will come to an

38. To be sure, 2 Peter 3:10 and Revelation 20:1, 11 speak of a “passing” of the old creation and creation of the new world, but in both instances the apocalyptic language of the prophets is borrowed. In this genre, natural “signs in the heavens” are employed to refer to historical turning points of cosmic significance. Although Grudem does not favor the view that the creation will be destroyed, he interprets 2 Peter 3:10 as referring to

“the surface things on the earth (that is, much of the ground and the things on the ground)” (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 1161). However, if my interpretation of the genre is correct, there is no reason even to go this far in assuming a catastrophic natural disaster, since the goal is redemption rather than destruction of creation.

end. From the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he was announced as the judge who baptizes with the Spirit and also with fire (Mt 3:11–12). In fact, Jesus speaks more directly and vividly of the reality of hell than any Old Testament prophet or New Testament apostle (Mt 5:30; 8:10–12; 13:40–42, 49–50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30, and parallels; cf. Lk 16:19–31). In his Olivet Discourse Jesus explained, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.” Echoing Isaiah 2 (as well as chapter 11), Jesus says that the nations will appear before the Son of Man in judgment and all will be separated, as sheep and goats, “into eternal life” and “into eternal punishment” (Mt 25:31, 41, 46). If we have trouble with Joshua and his campaigns, we should be more unsettled still by Jesus.

The epistles reveal the same solemn expectation. God is not ignoring human rebellion. “But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.” For the wicked and unbelieving, “there will be wrath and fury . . . tribulation and distress” (Ro 2:5, 8–9). First Thessalonians 5 warns that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night,” just when everyone is proclaiming peace and security (vv. 1–3). This event of salvation-and-judgment will be as final as it is sudden,

when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified by his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. (2Th 1:7–10)

Elsewhere we read that Sodom and Gomorrah “serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire,” and false teachers are “wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 7, 13). Second Peter 3:7 speaks of “the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.”

The Apocalypse deserves its own special treatment of the theme of holy war, but a few examples will suffice. With the opening of the sixth seal, the powerful and wealthy of all the earth who have feared neither God nor mortals call “to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’” (Rev 6:15–17). This is followed by the vision of the bowls of wrath and of the fall of the great Babylon, symbol of the earthly city in all of its infamous pride, injustice, and immorality, not to mention its persecution of the saints (chs. 16–18). Finally, Babylon—symbolic of the human attempt to rise up in pride against the Lord and his Messiah—is judged and destroyed, with the saints singing, “‘Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever’” (Rev

19:1–3). The marriage feast of the Lamb is contrasted with “the great supper of God,” as the angel calls the birds of prey to feast on “the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great” (19:6–18).

After this the rider on the white horse defeats the beast and its armies, and then there is a thousand-year interim, which I take (in amillennial fashion) to refer symbolically to the present era between Christ’s advents. At the end of history, Satan is “thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev 19:11–20:10). The dead are then judged. “This is the second death, the lake of fire” (20:14–15). It is the finality of this holy war that ushers in the finality of the new heavens and earth, where there is no longer any judgment, war, pain, suffering, or oppression. And it is there, finally, where the Tree of Life yields its fruit for the healing of the nations (chs. 21–22).

It is certainly true that the images of the last day and heaven and hell are communicated in an apocalyptic form. Therefore, such images are not meant to be read like a morning newspaper. Nevertheless, they are also not meant to be ignored. They indicate realities that are beyond our conceptual grasp, yet are certain to come to fruition. Ours is not the first age to have found the doctrine of everlasting punishment difficult to accept. In recent decades, contemporary views have been classified as (1) *pluralist* (all religions are paths to God), (2) *inclusivist* (salvation comes by Christ alone but not exclusively through explicit faith in Christ), and (3) *particularist* (also identified, usually by critics, as exclusivism or restrictivism, holding that salvation comes only through faith in Christ). Affirming a pluralist view, John Hick represents a wide agreement of liberal Protestants.³⁹

Most evangelical positions today that reject particularism/exclusivism (salvation through explicit faith in Christ) embrace various forms of inclusivism rather than pluralism. Generally speaking, inclusivism tends toward universalism without foreclosing the possibility that some may be lost. Some inclusivists defend their position as an affirmation of God’s sovereign grace, while others follow a more synergistic (Arminian) line of argumentation. Two varieties should especially be mentioned.

1. APOKATASTASIS AND INCLUSIVISM

The concept of universal restoration (*apokatastasis*) was taught by the ancient Gnostics and also by the church father Origen, but was condemned at the Fifth Council of Constantinople in 553. Nevertheless, it has had its admirers throughout the ages, including John Scotus Erigena and some Anabaptist leaders (Hans Denck and Hans Hut), and continues to inspire universalist speculations in our own day.⁴⁰

39. John Hick, “The Pluralist View,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralist World* (ed. Dennis L. Ockholm and Timothy R. Phillips; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 27–59.

According to Origen's barely disguised Platonizing of Christian eschatology, all spiritual essences (including human souls) will be at last freed from the body and reunited with their origin, but only after passing through successive cycles of educative purgation through reincarnation in other worlds. Even Satan and his hosts will be at last reunited with God.

Unwilling to endorse an absolute principle of universal salvation, many Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians in the modern era have embraced *inclusivism*: the belief that although Jesus Christ is the only Savior, people may be saved without explicit faith in Christ.

The logical consequence of Karl Barth's doctrine of election is universal salvation. One may continue to object, to refuse to be defined by one's election and reconciliation in Christ, but that rejection is not finally decisive. "God does not permit [the human person] to execute this No of his, this contradiction and opposition."⁴¹ Even God's No is overtaken by God's Yes; hence, Law must always be finally subsumed under Gospel.⁴² "This No is really Yes. This judgment is grace. This condemnation is forgiveness. This death is life. This hell is heaven."⁴³ It might be suggested that for Barth human existence under the reign of sin, death, unbelief, and condemnation is finally like the existence of the prisoners in Plato's cave. It is not the truth of their reality, but a terrible dream from which they need to be awakened. "There is no one who does not participate in [Christ] in this turning to God. . . . There is no one who is not raised and exalted with him to true humanity."⁴⁴ Nevertheless, according to Barth, we cannot say with certainty that every person will be saved, because this would compromise the absolute freedom of God in grace. Barth insists, "The Church ought not to preach Apokatastasis."⁴⁵

40. Like Origen himself, some Roman Catholic theologians seek to revive *apokatastasis* by way of the dogma of purgatory, suggesting that after various levels of "suffering love," the souls of all will be finally educated in spiritual ascent. In 1983 the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote a foreword and afterword commending a new edition of a 1967 book by Valentin Tomberg, *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2002). Balthasar commends Tomberg's reflections for weaving together ancient Babylonian and Indian religion, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Cabbala, magic, and astrology as "veiled presentiments of the Logos" (659). Acknowledging that Origen's views of reincarnation and *apokatastasis* were condemned by the church, Balthasar nevertheless sees these reflections of secret gnosis as leading believers more deeply into the wisdom of the Catholic Mystery (659). Although this particular form of universalism finds some support among liberal Protestants, most evangelicals reject it. It was taught by Herbert W. Armstrong (founder of the World Wide Church of God). In 2004, television evangelist Carlton Pearson became a staunch advocate of this view, but

the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops concluded that this position was heretical. Clark Pinnock finds the concept of purgatory consistent with Arminian theology, while insisting on the possibility of some being finally annihilated in merciful love out of respect for their free will. See John Walvoord, William Crockett, Zachary Hayes, and Clark Pinnock, *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 119–66.

41. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, pt. 3.1, p. 3.

42. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pt. 2, 13: "The Yes cannot be heard unless the No is also heard. But the No is said for the sake of the Yes and not for its own sake. In substance, therefore, the first and last word is Yes and not No."

43. Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (trans. Douglas Horton; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956, 1957), 120.

44. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, pt. 2, p. 271. A helpful discussion of Barth's view on this point is found in George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 128–35.

45. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, pt. 2, 417.

Jürgen Moltmann follows a similar interpretation, although he seems less reticent than Barth to affirm universal salvation.⁴⁶ Like Barth, he bases his inclusivism on God's grace rather than on human goodness, but unlike Barth, he makes God's "suffering love" necessary to God's being and therefore compromises the very idea of grace as a free decision and act. It is difficult to resist the impression that both theologians reflect a nearly fatalistic interpretation of God's sovereign grace. In fact, Moltmann criticizes the notion of annihilation (see below) for making human free will ultimate rather than God's grace. Taking aim at a 1995 statement by the Church of England in defense of annihilation, Moltmann writes,

The logic of hell is nothing other than the logic of human free will, in so far as this is identical with freedom of choice. . . . Does God's love preserve our free will, or does it free our enslaved will, which has become un-free through the power of sin? Does God love free men and women, or does he seek the men and women who have become lost? It is apparently not Augustine who is the Father of Anglo-Saxon Christianity; the Church Father who secretly presides over it is his opponent Pelagius. And it is Erasmus who is the saint of modern times, not Luther or Calvin. . . . The first conclusion, it seems to me, is that it is inhumane, for there are not many people who can enjoy their free will where their eternal fate in heaven or hell is concerned.⁴⁷

"God is merely the accessory who puts that will into effect."⁴⁸ Rather, "the Christian doctrine of hell is to be found in the gospel of Christ's descent into hell, not in a modernization of hell into total non-being."⁴⁹ "The true universality of God's grace is not grounded in 'secular humanism'" but in "the theology of the cross."⁵⁰ Like Barth, Moltmann is attracted to the Christian Socialist preacher, Christoph Blumhardt: "Jesus can judge but not condemn."⁵¹ "Judgment is not God's last word. . . . From this [new creation] no one is excepted. . . . Transforming grace is God's punishment for sinners. It is not the right to choose that defines the reality of human freedom. It is the doing of the good."⁵² This form of inclusivism is therefore more "Augustinian," but with God's electing grace encompassing every person.

Evangelical Arminians like Clark Pinnock and John Sanders share the presupposition that all of God's attributes are subservient to his love and that his purpose is to save every person. In fact, Pinnock recognizes that these theses function as presuppositions or "axioms" by which exegesis must be tested.⁵³ However, these

46. Jürgen Moltmann, "The Logic of Hell," in *God Will Be All in All: The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann* (ed. Richard Bauckham; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 43–48.

47. Moltmann, "The Logic of Hell," 44, reviewing the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, *The Mystery of Salvation: The Story of God's Gift* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995).

48. *Ibid.*, 45.

49. *Ibid.*, 46.

50. *Ibid.*, 47.

51. Christoph Blumhardt, as quoted in *ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*

53. Clark Pinnock, "Overcoming Misgivings about Evangelical Inclusivism," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 33–34. He adds, "I agree that inclusivism is not a central topic of discussion in the Bible and that the evidence for it is less than one would like. But the vision of God's love there is so strong that the existing evidence seems sufficient to me" (35).

theologians differ sharply from the inclusivism of theologians like Barth and Moltmann in at least two crucial respects. First, they argue that salvation is dependent on the free will of individuals. Second, they believe that the content of saving revelation is mediated apart from the gospel, even in and through other religions as “means of grace.”⁵⁴ Therefore, where Barth and Moltmann ground inclusivism in a notion of God’s universal electing grace, Pinnock’s inclusivism is grounded in a notion of God’s making grace universally accessible to those who respond to the offer of it even apart from explicit faith in Christ. As Pinnock acknowledges, his version is especially indebted to the “anonymous Christian” concept of Karl Rahner and the Second Vatican Council.⁵⁵ Pinnock appeals to the examples of Melchizedek and Job and to Paul’s quotation of pagan poets in Acts 17 to defend the idea that God reveals himself in a saving way outside of biblical revelation.⁵⁶

2. ANNIHILATION

Other Christians have concluded that the exegetical evidence for the reality of hell is impossible to reconcile with universal salvation. The question addressed by

54. These theses are defended in the following works by Clark H. Pinnock: “An Inclusivist View,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 251–54; *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); “Acts 4:12—No Other Name under Heaven,” in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (ed. William Crockett and James Sigountos; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 114ff. See also John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); “Inclusivism,” in *What about Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995). Sanders’s position, however, is less inclusivist than Pinnock’s. See also Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); Stanley J. Grenz, “Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 31 (Winter–Spring 1995): 49–65. None of the major theses and presuppositions of inclusivism is original with Pinnock or other evangelicals. It has been defended and assumed within much of mainline Protestantism as well as post-Conciliar Roman Catholicism. This view is distinguished from religious pluralism by its affirmation that while saving truth is present in other religions, all truth derives from Christ and its fullness is found in special revelation. Within evangelical circles, a more Augustinian (and guarded) interpretation of inclusivism is argued by John Stackhouse, *What Does It Mean to Be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), and by Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004). Nevertheless, even these last two proposals reflect the tendency (much more

pronounced in the previously cited volumes) to identify the revelation of God in creation (and therefore in other religions) as differing in degree rather than in kind from the revelation of God in the gospel.

55. Pinnock, “Overcoming Misgivings about Evangelical Inclusivism,” 34: “Scripture speaks in different ways about how people are saved subjectively. For example, it says that God loves seekers and rewards them, even if they are not Jews or Christians (Heb 11:6). It says that Christ will save some people who have no idea who Jesus is but who showed by their deeds that they love God’s kingdom (Mt 25:37).” It should be noted that neither of these passages even implies that the subjects are outside of the covenant community. On the contrary, for example, in Matthew 25 Jesus speaks of a final separation of sheep and goats, with the former told, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (v. 34, emphasis added). The good deeds that Jesus then goes on to describe are consequences and evidences of these persons’ being in Christ, not the means, and the context is the imminent threat of persecution, when believers will be cast into prison for their faith in Christ. Pinnock appeals to “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” par. 2, in *The Documents of Vatican II* (ed. Walter M. Abbott; trans. Joseph Gallagher; New York: Herder & Herder, 1966), 662.

56. Pinnock, “Overcoming Misgivings about Evangelical Inclusivism,” 35–36: “I find support in Paul’s statement that people may search for God and find him from anywhere in the world (Ac 17:27). I appreciate him saying that the gentiles have God’s law written on their hearts (Ro 2:16) and may be given eternal life when, by patiently doing good, they seek for glory and honor and immortality (Ro 2:7). As a Catholic might put it, there are people with a desire for baptism who have not been able to be baptised.”

annihilationism is not the scope of God’s mercy, but the nature of hell. Some annihilationists (such as Philip E. Hughes) could be considered exclusivists (i.e., salvation through explicit faith in Christ alone), while others (such as Clark Pinnock) are inclusivists. At the same time, they interpret various passages as teaching that unbelievers are raised on the last day for destruction (the second death) rather than for everlasting, conscious torment. Because they are destroyed forever, Scripture can still speak in apocalyptic terms of “their smoke going up forever” and their being eternally destroyed. However, this need not entail conscious punishment.⁵⁷

Historically, this view has not gained adherents except among the Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christadelphians, and other groups. More recently, however, it has gained ground especially in British evangelicalism, including (possibly) C. S. Lewis, as well as John Wenham, Philip E. Hughes, and, more tentatively, John Stott.⁵⁸ It has also been defended, in more emotional language, by Clark Pinnock and Edward Fudge.⁵⁹ Proponents of this view cite the emotional difficulty of accepting the idea of conscious punishment that lasts forever, but most finally defend their view as most consistent with Scripture.

Annihilationists claim that the notion of eternal, conscious torment is based on the Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul. In its place, they argue for conditional immortality. At the final resurrection and judgment, the immortal God will grant immortality to believers and condemn unbelievers to destruction. Satan and the false prophet are said to suffer eternal consciousness in hell, but no one else (Rev 14:9–11; 20:10). Jesus’ description of the fire as “eternal” and “unquenchable” (Mt 3:12; 18:8; 25:41; Lk 3:17) can be interpreted as annihilation. Positively, advocates of this view appeal to passages that speak of unbelievers perishing (Jn 3:16) and being destroyed (Mt 10:28), and believe that the reference in Revelation 20 to the “second death” can only refer to this annihilation. In Matthew 10:28, Jesus warns hearers to “fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

57. One of the most extensive treatments of eternal punishment from this perspective is Edward W. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment* (Houston, Tex.: Providential Press, 1982). Various studies interact thoughtfully with Fudge’s thesis, including Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1995). Cf. Edward W. Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views on Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

58. It is difficult to discern exactly what Lewis held on this matter. In *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1940, 2001) C. S. Lewis writes, “The characteristic of lost

souls is ‘their rejection of everything that is not simply themselves.’ Our imaginary egoist has tried to turn everything he meets into a province or appendage of the self. The taste for the other, that is, the very capacity for enjoying good, is quenched in him except in so far as his body still draws him into some rudimentary contact with an outer world. Death removes this last contact. He has his wish—to lie wholly in the self and to make the best of what he finds there. And what he finds there is Hell” (124–25). For Stott’s view, see David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 314–20.

59. Clark Pinnock, “The Conditional View,” in *Four Views on Hell* (ed. William Crockett; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 135–66; Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*.

3. EVALUATING THESE ALTERNATIVES

Any notion of a final restoration of all spiritual beings, including Satan and his demonic forces, is dispelled by the clear teaching of Scripture that they will be destroyed. In offering a brief response to the inclusivist position I would direct readers to earlier places in this volume where I have defended (1) God's simplicity against the tendency to assimilate God's character to a single attribute, (2) God's sovereign election of many but not all sinners and his grace in Christ alone, received through faith alone, and (3) the distinction between law and gospel (and the corollary distinction between general and special revelation).⁶⁰

While Origen's doctrine may be characterized as somewhat Pelagian as well as Platonic, the view of Barth and Moltmann might be better described as "Augustinian universalism."⁶¹ In fact, given that according to this view even those who do not wish to be saved are saved against their will, it might be justly reckoned a "Hyper-Calvinistic universalism." However, Scripture clearly gives decisive importance to faith in Christ, apart from which no one can be saved. This hardly represents a "Pelagian" triumph of human will over divine grace, since Scripture also teaches that faith is a gift of God. Whatever the plausibility of Moltmann's quarrel with Arminian accounts, an Augustinian interpretation of salvation through faith in Christ is just as committed to *sola gratia*. The question is not whether God's "Yes" overcomes our "No," but whether God is free to show this mercy to whomever he will and whether the nonelect are responsible for their rejection of the gospel.

According to Barth and his school, one practical outcome of his view is a strongly objective doctrine of God's sovereign, electing, and irresistible grace. Everyone is elect in Christ, the Elect One, and therefore there is no place for questioning this fact. Everyone is already saved in Christ, at least *de jure*.⁶² At the same time, as we have seen, Barth explicitly rejected Origen's view, and he thought that any absolute denial of the possibility that some human beings may finally be lost compromised God's sovereign freedom. This seems quite strange, since it means that for the first time in church history it has been suggested that it is possible that some whom God

60. In addition, the following resources are recommended: Ronald Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); R. Douglas Geivett, "Is Jesus the Only Way?" in *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); and R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips, "A Particularist View: An Evidentialist Approach," in Okholm and Phillips, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*; D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Ajith Fernando, *The Supremacy of Christ* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1995); Paul R. House and Gregory A. Thornbury, eds., *Who*

Will Be Saved?: Defending the Biblical Understanding of God, Salvation, and Evangelism (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000); Douglas Moo, "Romans 2: Saved Apart from the Gospel?" in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (ed. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 137–45; Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelized: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle, U.K.: Pater-noster Press, 2002).

61. See Oliver D. Crisp, "Augustinian Universalism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 53 (2003): 127–45.

62. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, pt. 3, p. 811.

has eternally and unconditionally included in Christ as elect, justified and sanctified may nevertheless be finally condemned.

Barth's position is only as persuasive as his exegesis of the relevant passages. Contrary to Barth's interpretation of "sheep" and "goats" as the dialectical truth about every person, Jesus speaks clearly of the one group being welcomed into heaven and the other group being cast into hell. Although Brunner objected as strongly as Barth to the doctrine of particular election, he recognized that according to the New Testament, only the elect are "in Christ" and they are "those who believe."⁶³ Barth mistakes human responsibility for synergism.⁶⁴ Brunner suggests that, besides ignoring the conditions in Scripture, Barth eliminates "the vital tension, based on the dialectic of God's Holiness and Love, by means of a monistic *schema*."⁶⁵ We do recognize in Jesus Christ the consistency of God's love and holiness. "But outside of Jesus Christ, outside of faith, God's Holiness is not the same as His Love, but *there* it is His wrath; *there* what God is 'in Himself' is not the same as that which He is 'for us,' *there* it is the unfathomable, impenetrable mystery of the '*nuda majestas*'; *there* is no election, but rejection, judgment, condemnation. . . ."⁶⁶ God's wrath is not a form of grace. Apostolic preaching in the New Testament announces forgiveness for all who believe, but it also warns that apart from faith there is the fearful expectation of wrath, not merely a lack of awareness of being saved.

If the decisiveness of history—and the decisions that human beings make within it—are treated too lightly by Barth, human willing and acting become *ultimately* determinative in the synergistic versions of inclusivism.

With respect to the inclusivist position, with its notion of the "anonymous Christian" (see p. 979 above), it should be noted that although revelation progresses from Old Testament shadows to New Testament reality, the object of faith is the same. However, the religions of the nations are regarded as idolatrous throughout this history. Ever since Justin Martyr, some Christians have claimed that the pagan philosophers prepared the way for Christ among the Gentiles as Moses and the prophets prepared the Jews. But this is to confuse general revelation with special revelation and the law with the gospel.

Pinnock's examples cited above do not demonstrate that there can be a saving knowledge of God apart from his revelation to Israel. From what little we know about Melchizedek, he could not have been a "noble pagan."⁶⁷ He was "king of

63. Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (trans. Olive Wyon; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946), 315.

64. *Ibid.*, 316.

65. *Ibid.*, 334, 336.

66. *Ibid.*, 337. Brunner adds (in my concluded ellipsis), "... but no eternal decree."

67. James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), 276–78.

Salem” (proto-Jerusalem), “priest of God Most High,” “God Most High” (*ʿēl ʿelyôn*) being identified as none other than “the Lor d [Yahweh], God Most High” (Ge 14:18–22). He brought Abram bread and wine, blessed him, and received a tributary tithe—all of these actions reflecting a covenantal context in which Abram recognized Melchizedek as his high priest. Nor can Job qualify as an anonymous believer. Whatever his precise relationship to Abraham, Job’s allusion to Psalm 8:4 (Job 7:17–18) and direct quotations of Psalm 107:40 and Isaiah 41:11–12 in Job 12 (vv. 21–24) place him squarely in God’s covenant community.⁶⁸

Paul quotes pagan poets to his audience of Athenian philosophers in Acts 17 for the express purpose of demonstrating that they are not even living consistently with general revelation. In any case, Paul declares, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Ac 17:30–31). However lenient God may have been in “the times of ignorance,” the appearance of Christ in these last days leaves everyone without excuse. It is the universal-public character of Christ’s decisive work and coming judgment that gives to the missionary enterprise the kind of urgency that is found throughout the book of Acts.

At the same time, I do not believe that we can conclude that no one can be saved apart from explicit faith in Christ. First, it is precisely because God is sovereign and free in his grace that he can have mercy on whomever he chooses. From first to last, “Salvation is of the Lor d” (Jnh 2:9). Second, since the children of believers are comprehended with their parents in the covenant of grace, in the words of the *Canons of Dort*, “godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom it pleases God to call out of this life in their infancy (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39; 1 Cor. 7:14).”⁶⁹ Third, we are not told what God does in extraordinary cases: e.g., those who are physically or mentally incapable of understanding God’s Word. As in all theological questions, we must restrain our curiosity and refuse to speculate beyond God’s own instruction. Apart from God’s self-disclosure in Scripture, we do not know what God has ordained from all of eternity. Whatever God *might choose to do* in any given case, he has *promised* to save all of those—and only those—who call on the name of his Son.

Finally, with respect to annihilationism, Jesus’ teaching concerning the final separation of the saved and the lost seems to treat punishment and life as equally

68. These examples, often put forward by inclusivists, as well as other principal arguments from this camp, are treated respectfully and carefully in *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism* (ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

69. *Canons of Dort*, ch. 1, art. 17, in *Psalter Hymnal: Doctrinal Standards and Liturgy of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1976), 95. There is also the example of the death of David’s week-old son. “I shall go to him,” David said, “but he will not return to me” (2Sa 12:23).

eternal: “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Mt 25:46). If it is generally assumed that “eternal life” means unending, conscious joy, then it would seem that annihilationists bear the burden of proof in treating “eternal punishment” as otherwise in duration. Regardless of how one finally interprets these passages, it cannot be decided on the basis of our fallen moral judgment of God and his ways and our consequent emotional revulsion at the admittedly difficult idea of conscious punishment forever. Nor, indeed, can it be decided out of concern to protect the missionary imperative, as if the motive for our evangelism were to be based on the fear of conscious eternal punishment. The only decisive question is whether Scripture teaches it. Furthermore, we must be careful to distinguish scriptural teaching from the popular images of hell that we have inherited from popular mythology, whether pagan or Christian. We must admit candidly that the elaborate descriptions of hell from Dante’s *Inferno* to Billy Sunday are as speculative as they are evocative. The critical point to be made from Scripture with regard to eternal punishment is not its degree or duration, but its horrifying reality as God’s personal judgment that is final and forever.

B. EVERLASTING ŠĀLŌM

I have argued that in the old covenant *some* places were holy, and that in the present phase of Christ’s kingdom there are *no* holy places. However, when Christ returns, cleansing the land in a final judgment, *everything* will be holy. Zechariah prophesies the day when the true temple will be cleansed of all traders and everything that defiles. The most common household pots and pans—even the bells on the horses—will bear the inscription, “Holy to the Lor d!” (Zec 14:20–21). The wasteland will again become a lush garden, from which the violent and the oppressor is banished (Isa 35). One last time the world will be shaken and the nations will come to the Desire of All Nations, the end-time Temple filled with the glory of the Spirit (Hag 2:6–7). “The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lor d of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, says the Lor d of hosts” (v. 9).

Undoubtedly, 1 Kings 6 sets the compass for the theocracy and its later developments of this theme of the temple, as we transition from the movable tabernacle to the stationary sanctuary. It was sixty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high (v. 2), with the inner sanctuary being the perfect cube (v. 20). Following the specific commands he was given, Solomon relates detailed orders, “in order that the whole house might be perfect” (v. 22 NRSV). The foundation was made of “costly stones” (7:10).

After the destruction of the first temple, Ezekiel received a vision of the new one (Eze 40–42), and he relates the return of the Glory-Cloud to the temple in chap-

ter 43. A man “whose appearance was like bronze” stood with a measuring rod, six cubits long (40:3, 5). Detailed measurements were taken, along with specific instructions for its construction and furnishings. “He measured the court, a hundred cubits long and a hundred cubits broad, a square. And the altar was in front of the temple” (v. 47). More detailed measurements follow, with the final measurement of the entire new temple, each of the four sides measuring five hundred cubits, with a wall separating the holy from the common (42:16–20). Recalling that cherubim were posted at the eastern gate of Eden, barring reentry to the sanctuary after the fall, as was the case when the Glory evacuated Israel’s first temple, Ezekiel is now taken in his vision to the gate that faces east: “and it was shut. And the Lord said to me: ‘This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it. Therefore it shall remain shut. Only the prince may sit in it to eat bread before the Lord. He shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gate, and shall go out by the same way’” (44:1–3). Nothing “uncircumcised” will be allowed to enter its sacred precincts (vv. 4–9).

Finally, in Revelation 21 and 22 we have a similar description of the temple. First, it will be the ultimate dwelling place of God among his covenant people, bringing a final end to suffering, sin, pain, and injustice. “And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new’” (21:5). The inhabitants will drink freely of the water of life, just as they are finally allowed to eat from the Tree of Life. “The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (vv. 7–8). John is then shown “the Bride, the wife of the Lamb,” which is none other than “the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (vv. 9–10). Rare jewels, high walls, twelve gates and twelve foundations are mentioned. And once more the angel appears with a measuring rod. “The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal” (v. 16). In fact, it becomes increasingly clear that the temple is not something within the city, but the city itself. “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (v. 22). Unlike the temples of Eden and Jerusalem, it will remain unpolluted forever, for “nothing unclean will ever enter it,” and therefore this Sanctuary’s gates “will never be shut,” so that all whose names “are written in the Lamb’s book of life” may enter (vv. 25–27). There is no sea there, which surely means that just as the wild beasts no longer threaten on land, the chaos monster of the dark and turbulent depths no longer has a home from which to assault the citizens of Zion.

In his remarkable treatment of this theme, G. K. Beale articulates “a biblical theology of the dwelling place of God,” as the subtitle of his book indicates.⁷⁰

Our thesis is that Israel’s temple was composed of three main parts, each of which symbolized a major part of the cosmos: (1) the outer court represented the habitable world where humanity dwelt; (2) the holy place was emblematic of the visible heavens and its light sources; (3) the holy of holies symbolized the invisible dimension of the cosmos, where God and his heavenly hosts dwelt. . . . The identification of the outer court as the visible earth and sea is suggested further by the Old Testament description, where the large molten wash-basin and altar in the temple courtyard are called respectively the “sea” (1 Kgs. 7:23–26) and the “bosom of the earth” (Ezek. 43:14; the altar also likely was identified with the “mountain of God” in Ezek. 43:16). The altar was also to be an “altar of earth” (in the early stages of Israel’s history) or an “altar of [uncut] stone” (Exod. 20:24–25), thus identifying it even more with the natural earth.⁷¹

It is not too fanciful to suggest that the movement from the inner court, entered only by the High Priest once a year, to the surrounding precincts of the Holy Place, and finally to the outer court of the Gentiles is typological of Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ query at his ascension, “‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or season that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in *Jerusalem* in all *Judea and Samaria*, and to the *ends of the earth*’” (Ac 1:7–8).

In its typological-theocratic form, Israel was a centripetal community, separated from the nations; in its fulfillment, it becomes a centrifugal community, sent out from the Holy of Holies, through the Holy Place, out to the court of the Gentiles. This is the force of Christ’s Great Commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .” (Mt 28:18–19). “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15).

The end-time sanctuary, made without hands, has finally appeared in Christ. Far greater than the rending of the temple curtain at Jesus’ crucifixion is the rending of Jesus’ own body on the cross, opening up direct access to all believers. There our High Priest has entered the heavenly sanctuary of which the earthly temple was merely a type, and he enters bearing his own blood as the complete and final sacrifice for sin. There will be no renewal of the Sinai covenant, no going back to the shadows now that the reality has come. Now believers, Jew and Gentile, are being

70. G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

71. *Ibid.*, 32–33.

built up into Christ as living stones. The people have become the place of God's dwelling, robed in the glorious robes of Christ's righteousness.

The city and the temple in the book of Revelation encompass the whole cosmos. "Not only does the horizontal demarcation between the old temple and city disappear in the New Jerusalem," notes Kline, "but the vertical distinction between heavenly and earthly temples as well."⁷² Not only the prophets and apostles, but the whole people of God are now "caught up in the Spirit" to stand in the heavenly council, covered in priestly vestments, sent from the throne-room as witnesses.⁷³ In the New Testament, the glory of Christ's face (2Co 4:5–6) reveals judgment from heaven. "It is a *parousia*-glory, as Jesus returns on the last day (Mt 16:27; Mk 8:38; Lk 9:26)."⁷⁴ In Hebrews 12, this *parousia*-glory is identified with his voice (cf. Rev 1:10–15).⁷⁵ In John's account of his vision of the heavenly worship, he describes how, amid flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, the twenty-four elders were seated around God's throne, with flaming torches burning before each throne. And behind the thrones hangs the rainbow of peace (Rev 4:2–5). The flaming torches in Revelation are reminiscent of the flame of fire above each Spirit-endowed witness at Pentecost. The new temple is not built "by human hands" (Ac 7:48), and Christ's witnesses are "circumcised by a circumcision without human hands, by the circumcision [death] of Christ" (Col 2:11).⁷⁶

The new creation is therefore entirely the work of God, and the end-time sanctuary is the temple that God has built for himself. "Judaism highlighted this by saying that God would 'build the temple [of Exod. 15:17] . . . with his two hands' (*Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Shirata* 10.40–42)."⁷⁷ It is not built by us but by God, whose indwelling presence is not conditioned on the nation's faithfulness but on his own covenant faithfulness; it is erected not from inanimate blocks that may be pulled down but from living stones taken from every tribe under heaven, with Christ as the cornerstone (1Pe 2:4–8).

Far from the vision of disembodied spirits floating on ethereal clouds with harps, Isaiah 65 speaks of a "new heavens and a new earth" (v. 17), with buildings and vineyards, trees, labor, and fellowship with all of creation. What is gone are not emotions, but "the sound of weeping and the cry of distress" (v. 19). Its inhabitants "shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit," enjoying the fruit of their labor rather than building and planting only to have their homes occupied by invaders (vv. 21–22a). Not work itself, but the curse of tiresome, frustrating, and meaningless labor, will be no more (vv. 22b). Children will be a blessing rather than a cause for distress over their future (v. 23). No one will need

72. Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, 35.

73. *Ibid.*, 94.

74. *Ibid.*, 121–22.

75. *Ibid.*, 122.

76. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, 233–34.

77. *Ibid.*, 235n66.

to cry to the Lord, for “while they are yet speaking I will hear” (v. 24), and it is not the absence of wildlife but of danger that will characterize this Sabbath land (v. 25). The book of Isaiah closes with this prophecy:

For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the Lord. And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh. (Isa 66:22–24)

The resurrection of the body underscores the anticipation of the final state as redemption of nature rather than its oblivion.

In the New Testament as well, the final heavenly abode is a created place (Lk 24:51; Jn 14:2–4; Ac 1:11; 7:55–56; 1Pe 3:22). To be sure, the renewal is so radical that it can be described only in apocalyptic terms (2Pe 3:12–13), as passing away (Rev 21:2–3). Nevertheless, we should think not in terms of the end of God’s creation itself but of the end of creation *in its current condition*. Steven Prediger-Bouma observes, “An orthodox Christian eschatology speaks not of the annihilation of the earth but of its renewal and restoration.”⁷⁸ Our heavenly hope is not only of saved souls but of a saved creation (Ro 8:19–21). Just as Jesus ate and drank after his resurrection, there will be eating and drinking in the new creation, although this time at the consummated marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9), with Jesus drinking wine with us (Lk 22:18). The theme of eating and drinking in the presence of the Lord that we find throughout the Old Testament narratives and again so prominently in Luke’s Gospel will be fully realized in that day.

Revelation 22 employs the imagery of a river flowing through the city, with the tree of life “yielding its fruit each month” (Rev 22:2). Again, it is apocalyptic imagery, but the purchase of such imagery is lost if there is no physical creation. Just as the imagery of fire, outer darkness, and the grave seem contradictory if taken literally and yet, taken together, indicate the horrible condition of hell, the imagery of wedding feasts, rivers, trees, and a city with streets of gold is richly suggestive of a condition that we cannot conceive of apart from such analogies. This does not mean that these are “mere metaphors,” since the value of metaphors is to actually convey

78. Steven Prediger-Bouma, *For the Beauty of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 125. It is worth noting that although Moltmann is sharply critical of dispensationalist emphases on apocalyptic catastrophe, his tendency to allow the new creation (eschatology) to swallow the original creation (protology) may lead in the same direction. Peter Macek has raised this question: “Does not Moltmann’s *creation nova*, interpreted as a *novum ex nihilo*, rather than ‘restoration,’ presuppose total

and active *annihilatio mundi* and not only *annihilatio nihil*? Or, to put it differently, does not the necessity of ‘new creation’ undercut the goodness of *creatio originalis* and does it not in this sense fail to account for the biblical distinction between ‘creation’ and ‘fall’?” (Peter Macek, “The Doctrine of Creation in the Messianic Theology of Jürgen Moltmann,” *Communio Viatorum* 49, no. 2 [2007]: 180).

truth. Whatever the condition of “the life everlasting,” it is more, certainly not less, than the embodied joy that such imagery suggests. We are creatures of time and space, and we will transcend not our humanity but the bondage of our humanity to the conditions of sin and death.

Interpreting the apocalyptic imagery of 2 Peter 3:12–13 literally, classic dispensationalism anticipates a complete annihilation of the cosmos.⁷⁹ The title of Hal Lindsey’s classic bears this point: *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Lewis Sperry Chafer and John Walvoord write, “The day of the Lord, which begins at the Rapture and includes in its introduction the judgments preceding and immediately following the Second Coming, concludes with the end of the millennium and with the final destruction of the present heaven and earth.”⁸⁰ After the great white throne judgment, “the old creation is destroyed. . . . Because of the destruction of the present earth and heaven, the judgment of the great white throne apparently takes place in space.”⁸¹ The heavenly Jerusalem coming down from heaven, beautifully described in Revelation 21, is apparently uncreated: “It is most significant that the city is not said to be created, and it apparently was in existence during the preceding period of the millennial kingdom, possibly as a satellite city above the earth; as such, it may be the millennial home of the resurrected and translated saints.”⁸²

Although Grudem does not favor the view that the creation will be destroyed, he interprets 2 Peter 3:10–13 as referring to “the surface things on the earth (that is, much of the ground and the things on the ground).”⁸³ While I appreciate his attempt to limit the effects of a literalized interpretation, these verses seem to encompass the whole created order. Furthermore, if what is eliminated is “much of the ground and the things on the ground,” such destruction leaves little of creation left. If, however, such apocalyptic language in 2 Peter is to be interpreted like apocalyptic language elsewhere, there is no reason to interpret these verses as communicating anything more than a complete transition from one condition of existence to another. “This present age” versus “the age to come,” not this present world versus another world, reflects the consistent emphasis of New Testament eschatology. This whole creation will be wholly saved, and yet wholly new.

If our goal is to be liberated *from* creation rather than the liberation *of* creation, we will understandably display little concern for the world that God has made. If, however, we are looking forward to “the restoration of all things” (Ac 3:21) and

79. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Doctrines* (ed. John Walvoord; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 353: “In this discussion it will be assumed that prophecy should be interpreted in the same literal sense as any other theme of divine revelation.” However, interpreting prophetic and apocalyptic literature—or, for that matter, parables and poetry—as if they

were historical narrative results in violence to the actual intention of the text.

80. *Ibid.*, 334–35.

81. *Ibid.*, 367.

82. *Ibid.*, 370.

83. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1161.

the participation of the whole creation in our redemption (Ro 8:18–21), then our actions here and now pertain to the same world that will one day be finally and fully renewed.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explore the theme of “holy war” from Genesis to Revelation.
2. Distinguish “just war” from “holy war.” God is sovereign over history and reveals his moral will in this matter, but in different ways at different times. How would you explain this difference? Can we invoke Israel’s “holy war” passages against our enemies today? Can nations?
3. Does the New Testament also teach this theme of holy war? How is it different from the holy wars of the Old Testament?
4. What are the different views concerning eternal punishment? Which do you think is most biblical?
5. Describe the biblical promise of *šālôm*. How was Israel’s theocracy a type of this condition? How will the consummation transcend it? Is this final peace something that we can bring about? How does this hope transform our lives today?

ZONDERVAN

The Christian Faith

Copyright © 2011 by Michael Horton

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook. Visit www.zondervan.com/ebooks.

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Horton, Michael Scott.

The Christian faith : a systematic theology for pilgrims on the way / Michael S. Horton.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-310-28604-2 (hardcover)

1. Theology, Doctrinal. 2. Reformed Church—Doctrines. I. Title.

BT75.3.H67 2010

230'.42—dc22

2010019271

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

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

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers printed in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

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—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design: Rob Monacelli

Interior design: Matthew VanZomeren

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	7
<i>Abbreviations</i>	9
<i>The Nicene Creed</i>	11
<i>Introduction: The Dogma Is the Drama: A Theology for Pilgrims on the Way</i> ...	13

PART 1: KNOWING GOD: THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THEOLOGY

1 Dissonant Dramas: Paradigms for Knowing God and the World.	35
2 The Character of Theology: A Theoretical or a Practical Science?	80
3 The Source of Theology: Revelation	113
4 Scripture as Covenant Canon.	151
5 The Bible and the Church: From Scripture to System	186

PART 2: GOD WHO LIVES

6 God: The Incommunicable Attributes	223
7 God: The Communicable Attributes	259
8 The Holy Trinity	273

PART 3: GOD WHO CREATES

9 The Decree: Trinity and Predestination	309
10 Creation: God's Time for Us	324
11 Providence: God's Care for All He Has Made	350
12 Being Human.	373
13 The Fall of Humanity	408

PART 4: GOD WHO RESCUES

14 The Person of Christ	446
15 The State of Humiliation: Christ's Threefold Office	483
16 The State of Exaltation: The Servant Who Is Lord	521

PART 5: GOD WHO REIGNS IN GRACE

17 Called to be Saints: Christ's Presence in the Spirit	551
18 Union with Christ	587
19 Forensic Aspects of Union with Christ: Justification and Adoption	620
20 The Way Forward in Grace: Sanctification and Perseverance.	648
21 The Hope of Glory: "Those Whom He Justified He Also Glorified" (Ro 8:30) . .	688
22 The Kingdom of Grace and the New Covenant Church	711
23 Word and Sacrament: The Means of Grace	751
24 Baptism and the Lord's Supper.	788
25 The Attributes of the Church: Unity, Catholicity, and Holiness	828
26 Apostolicity: A Fellowship of Receivers and Deliverers.	872

PART 6: GOD WHO REIGNS IN GLORY

27 A Dwelling Place	906
28 The Return of Christ and the Last Judgment.	919
29 The Last Battle and Life Everlasting.	957
<i>Glossary</i>	991
<i>Scripture Index</i>	1005
<i>Subject Index</i>	1027
<i>Name Index</i>	1035
<i>Confession Index</i>	1047

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Especially for a book like this one, it is impossible to list all of the names of those to whom I am indebted. Therefore, I will only express gratitude to those who provided direct input on this project.

In addition to my professors, colleagues, and students who have encouraged, refined, and corrected my thinking, I am grateful to my seminary research assistants over the past several years (now alumni), Ryan Glomsrud and Brannan Ellis, who have offered useful critiques. I owe a special debt to my current research assistant, Brian Hecker, as well as Jeff Eicher, for labors especially in correcting footnotes and compiling indexes, respectively. Keith Mathison generously read through the penultimate version, and I am grateful to him for his thorough evaluation and suggestions.

I also express thanks to Brett Watson, Eric Landry, and the team at White Horse Inn/*Modern Reformation* magazine, who have endured my lengthy preoccupation with this project. For constant sustenance and the opportunity to test this material on exceptional parishioners, I thank Christ United Reformed Church (Santee, California), and especially our gifted pastor, Michael Brown. I am grateful also to Zondervan's exceptional team, especially to Stan Gundry, who encouraged me to write this book, and to my editors, David Frees, Dirk Buursma, and Verlyn Verbrugge, for their expertise and support along the way.

For our entire marriage, I have tested my wife's patience in the process of writing, first, my four-volume dogmatics series and now this one-volume systematic theology. More than a decade (and four children) later, she is more precious to me than ever for her encouragement and support, as well as for her wisdom and insight into God's Word. It is to her and to our children—James, Olivia, Matthew, and Adam—that I dedicate this volume.

ABBREVIATIONS

- ANF* *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1976)
- BDAG** Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000)
- BSac* *Bibliotheca sacra*
- Church Dogmatics* Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; trans. G. W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1975)
- CO** *Calvini opera*, 59 volumes. In *Corpus reformatorum* (ed. C. G. Bretschneider, H. E. Bindseil, et al., vols. 29–87; New York: Johnson, repr. 1964)
- CTJ* *Calvin Theological Journal*
- Elenctic Theology* Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison Jr.; trans. George Musgrave Giger; Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992)
- HTR* *Harvard Theological Review*
- Institutes* John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960)
- JAOS* *Journal of the American Oriental Society*
- JETS* *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
- JR* *Journal of Religion*
- LXX** Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament)
- m. Pesah* Mishnah, *Pesah*
- NPNF1* *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (ed. Philip Schaff et al.; 1st series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1982)
- NPNF2* *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (ed. Philip Schaff et al.; 2nd series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1982)
- OS** Ioannis Calvini, *Opera Selecta* (ed. P. Barth and G. Niesel; 5 vols.; Munich: Kaiser, 1926–1936)
- PG** *Patrologia graeca* (ed. J.-P. Migne; 162 vols.; Paris, 1857–1886)

- PL** *Patrologia latina* (ed. J.-P Migne; 217 vols.; Paris, 1844–1864)
- PRRD** Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003)
- SJT** *Scottish Journal of Theology*
- SNTSMS** Society for New Testament Studies Monograph series
- TDOT** *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006)
- ThTo** *Theology Today*
- TT** *Tracts and Treatises* (trans. Henry Beveridge; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1958)
- WBC** Word Biblical Commentary
- WTJ** *Westminster Theological Journal*

THE DOGMA IS THE DRAMA: A THEOLOGY FOR PILGRIMS ON THE WAY

In 1949, the English playwright and novelist Dorothy Sayers observed the common antipathy in her day toward doctrine: “‘Dull dogma,’ they call it.” According to Sayers, however, Christianity is the most interesting story ever told. “And the dogma *is* the drama.”¹ For many Christians, words such as *doctrine* and *theology*—and especially *systematic theology*—conjure up images of intellectual pride, divisiveness, and the presumption that we can put God in a box, neatly explained by our categories and formulations. Of course, we are nearly infinitely resourceful in using good things with corrupt motives and for less than noble ends. We can exhibit spiritual pride also in our experience or morality. However, it is the goal of good theology to humble us before the triune God of majesty and grace. As we will see more fully, the older theologians of the Reformation and Post-Reformation eras were so convinced that their interpretations fell far short of the majesty of God that they called their summaries and systems “our humble theology” and “a theology for pilgrims on the way.”

I. WHY THEOLOGY? DRAMA, DOCTRINE, DOXOLOGY, AND DISCIPLESHIP

Theology simply means “the study of God,” and *doctrine* means “teaching.” Since the main message of Scripture is the unfolding mystery of Christ, who reveals his Father and reconciles us to him, theology is a central concern of every believer. It would be odd if we told our spouse or other loved ones that we wanted to spend time with them and experience their fellowship regularly but did not want to know anything about them—their characteristics, accomplishments, personal histories, likes and dislikes, and plans for the future.

Yet when it comes to God, people often imagine that it is possible to have a

1. Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1949), 3.

personal relationship with God apart from theology. In fact, some Christians assume that knowing doctrine and practical living are competing interests. The modern dichotomy between doctrine and life, theology and discipleship, knowing and doing, theory and practice has had disastrous consequences in the life of the church and its witness in the world. I hope to change some readers' minds about systematic theology and its relevance by first changing our working assumptions about its nature, goals, and methods.

A. DRAMA: THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD

A modern myth is that we outgrow stories. When someone asks us to explain who we are, we tell a story. Furthermore, we interpret our personal narratives as part of a larger plot. Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going? What's the point? Is there a God and if so can we know him? Why is there evil in the world? The biggest questions, demanding the most rigorous intellectual analysis, are really doctrines that arise from a particular story that we either assume or embrace with explicit conviction. The Christian answers these big questions by rehearsing the story of the triune God in creation, the fall of the creatures he made in his own image, the promise of a redeemer through Israel, and the fulfillment of all types and shadows in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus Christ. The Apostles' and Nicene creeds are not just a list of key doctrines; they are a confession in the form of a story, our shared testimony to the most significant facts of reality.

Modern secularists often imagine that their most deeply held beliefs are not really beliefs at all, but more like a simple acknowledgment of facts. They suppose that they are not personally involved, and certainly they have no sense of these "facts" being interpreted through a wider set of assumptions (i.e., narrative). In fact, "telling a story" is often classified with myths and fairy tales. Although the cure can be worse than the disease if taken in excessive doses, postmodern criticism of the "myth of neutrality" or "the view from nowhere" offers a powerful antidote to the hubris of modern reason. It is not only the remote tribe or religious enthusiast whose assumptions, convictions, and practices are shaped by a particular story; the modern ideas of "progress," "enlightenment," and "liberation" are also part of a shared narrative that has been assumed by Westerners since the Renaissance, but especially since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Of course, "reality" is not merely a construction of the will; "truth" is not just a useful lie or clever fiction, as Friedrich Nietzsche thought. However, our apprehension of the truth of reality is always interpreted. For example, at the graveside of a loved one, three people may be grappling with the same reality (i.e., death). However, the first person interprets the event within the narrative of being "dead in Adam" versus having everlasting "life in Christ," while the second person treats it as

a liberation of the soul for a (hopefully) higher reincarnation, and the third person might interpret it as no more than the cessation of bodily functions.

For over three centuries now, atheists and skeptics have catechized the West in the belief that as cultures progress, belief in God or at least in extraordinary divine intervention in nature and history will wane. What proponents forget is that this concept of “progress” itself presupposes a certain kind of faith: an interpretation of reality that requires personal commitment. Among other things, it presupposes that reality is entirely self-creating and self-regulating (autonomous), such that the very idea of a personal God who enters into a world that we have defined as “without God” already precludes the possibility of entertaining specific claims to the contrary. The most rigorous physicist can become the most rigid dogmatist, closing his or her mind arbitrarily to every argument or evidence that might challenge such presuppositions. Narrative paradigms are resilient. They can be overthrown, but everyone works hard at preserving them from impeachment. Once upon a time in the West, one could become an atheist or deist only with considerable difficulty; the widespread narrative within which everyone operated rendered unbelief implausible. Today, it is exactly the opposite. To believe in the triune God of Scripture who speaks and acts in history requires an act of apostasy from the assumed creed of our age.

I say all of this to make the point that it’s not only religion that needs stories. The inextricable connection of faith and practice in terms of drama, doctrine, doxology, and discipleship has evident corollaries in every philosophy, religion, and culture. The drama determines the big questions as well as the answers. The doctrines are convictions that arise in light of that drama. People do not collect their beliefs one at a time, stacking one on top of another. Rather, there is a certain limitation in the beliefs a particular person is likely to hold given the plausibility of the paradigm (or drama) that he or she currently assumes to be true. And then, no less than the most ardent believer does the religious skeptic live out these convictions. No less than Christianity, Marxism and capitalism, democracy and totalitarianism, feminism and fascism are stories that involve personal commitment. It’s not that there are only interpretations (stories) and no facts (truths), but that there are no uninterpreted facts.

Since God is the author of reality, it is his interpretation that we must pursue. No one can actually live in the world that is imagined by secularism. Not even the most hardened nihilist can live in the world of pure meaninglessness that his or her narrative presupposes. In their daily practice, the most ardent religious skeptics have to presuppose a basic order and intelligibility in reality that contradicts the creed of self-creation through random chance.

Today a story (narrative) that pretends it isn’t one is called a *metanarrative* (*meta* meaning “beyond”). Many of the most unquestioned presuppositions of modernity

were simply taken as the deliverances of absolute and universal reason. For example, where progress meant for Christians both God's outworking of his redemptive plan in history and our growth in the grace and knowledge of Christ (defined by the biblical story), for modern secularists it meant outgrowing childhood superstition (i.e., belief in the miraculous intervention of a transcendent God within history and nature). Everything in religion — particularly biblical faith — that belonged to a narrative or story was dismissed as myth, and any truth contained in these stories had to be demonstrated by the canons of universal reason and morality. In its most authoritarian version, religion was considered “unscientific.” In the middle of the twentieth century, theologian Rudolf Bultmann formulated a method of “demythologizing” the Bible, so that modern people could still find the gospel relevant to their existence in the world without having to accept its miracle-laden stories.

This is not the first time that philosophy attempted to translate myth into pure and timeless principles of reason, morality, or experience. In fact, the great figures of ancient Western philosophy — especially Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle — attempted to refine the gold of truth from the dross of the Greek myths of the gods. The result is a metanarrative—a story masquerading as a purely rational description of “the way things really are.”

In a seminal essay, Jean-François Lyotard summarized postmodernism as “incredulity toward any metanarrative.” As he defines it, a metanarrative is a “demythologized” story. By pretending to have transcended particular narratives and discovered the archetypal truth in itself, we forget that many of our most cherished values, expectations, and convictions are creations of a particular time and place rather than universal truths.²

In reaction against postmodernism, some Christians have insisted that Christianity is, in fact, a metanarrative. However, this is based on a misunderstanding. For Lyotard, a metanarrative is a certain way in which modernity has legitimized its absolutist discourse and originated or grounded it in autonomous reason. “In philosophical discourse,” notes Merold Westphal, “*meta* signifies a difference of level and not primarily of size.” Biblical faith, however, does not legitimize itself or ground itself in this way. “Now, undeniably Christianity is a *mega* narrative, a big story. But the story that begins with ‘Let there be light’ and ends with the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ under the baton of the angel Gabriel is not a *meta* narrative. The recital of the *Heilsgeschichte* [history of redemption] in creed and in sermons belongs to first-order Christian discourse.”³ It is a confession of faith, a personal act of witness

2. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi; Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv, xx, 34, 37. For a superb interpretation of Lyotard's intention, see

Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2001), xiii–xv.

3. Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology*, xiii–xiv.

to the God who has entered our history in and through a particular narrative that cannot be “translated” or demythologized in secular terms. All of our worldviews are stories. Christianity does not claim to have escaped this fact. The prophets and apostles were fully conscious of the fact that they were interpreting reality within the framework of a particular narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation, as told to a particular people (Israel) for the benefit of the world. The biblical faith claims that its story is the one that God is telling, which relativizes and judges the other stories about God, us, and the world—especially the ones that have assumed the shape of Promethean metanarratives. The modern (Enlightenment) narrative has given rise to a host of dogmas that have, in turn, generated a form of life—practices that we take for granted. As the wars of the last hundred years attest, these narratives and systems have literally moved armies.

The writing of metanarratives is precisely what many Western philosophers (and theologians) were up to when they tried to transpose the Christian story into symbols of supposedly higher truths. For example, even though to them Christ was not the incarnate God who died for our sins and was raised bodily on the third day, modernity allowed that his death and resurrection may still be important symbols of the universal kingdom of ethical duty, love, or religious experience.

Whenever the history of redemption is exploited for its symbolic potential in the cause of reason, religion, morality, Communism or democracy, capitalism or socialism, scientific progress, or imperial and national hubris, it is no longer Christianity. For the Greek philosophers, the myths of the gods were “just a story”—the dispensable husk that hides the kernel of timeless truth. The Enlightenment (and Protestant liberalism) followed the same course with Christianity, assuming that philosophy and science dealt with judgments of *fact* (what actually happened), while religion was concerned with judgments of *value* (the meaningfulness we find in the myth).

The prophets and apostles did not believe that God’s mighty acts in history (*meganarratives*) were dispensable myths that represented universal truths (*metanarratives*). For them, the big story did not point to something else beyond it but was itself the point. God really created all things, including humans in his image, and brought Israel through the Red Sea on dry ground. He really drowned a greater kingdom than Pharaoh and his army in Christ’s death and resurrection. God’s mighty acts in history are not myths that symbolize timeless truths; they create the unfolding plot within which our lives and destinies find the proper coordinates.

Metanarratives give rise to ideologies, which claim the world’s allegiance even, if necessary, through violence. The heart of the Christian narrative, however, is the gospel—the good news concerning God’s saving love and mercy in Jesus Christ. It is the story that interprets all other stories, and the lead character is Lord over

all other lords. However, the Christian story differs from such metanarratives also in origin and in legitimization, having “its origin in revelation, not in philosophy, and most especially not in modern philosophy, grounded in the autonomy of the human subject, whether that be the individual as knower (Descartes’ *ego cogito*), the individual as bearer of inalienable rights (Locke, Jefferson), or modern humanity collectively as the fulfillment of history (Hegel, Marx, popular American self-consciousness as the city set on a hill).⁴

Consequently, Westphal adds, “Christianity has at least as good grounds as Lyotard to be skeptical and suspicious, skeptical of claims to be the voice of pure reason on the grounds that human finitude and fallenness undermine this ideal, which goes back to Plato’s notion of the soul as divine, and suspicious when (perhaps with Lyotard’s help) modernity’s metanarratives are seen for what they are, the self-congratulatory self-legitimation of modernity.”⁵ Metanarratives attempt to justify “us” and judge the rest of the world, while in biblical faith God judges us as well and justifies the ungodly.⁶

We do not have to say that Christianity is a metanarrative to affirm that it is *true*. C. S. Lewis pointed out that Christianity is the *true* myth—the myth that actually became fact. “It *happens*—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth.”⁷ In other words, it is still a story, even though it is true. Not even the resurrection is a metanarrative; its meaning cannot just be read off of the surface of historical events but is defined by its intratextual context as part of an unfolding plot.

The prophets, apostles, and evangelists of the Bible did not imagine that *story* and *fact* were somehow antithetical (equivalent to fiction and nonfiction). Nor did it occur to them that in order to offer testimony to actual historical events they had to occupy an ostensibly neutral, value-free vantage point. However, they also claimed that this was God’s story and that they were both eyewitnesses of his acts and his appointed messengers who had received God’s own interpretation of those acts. Unlike the idols of the nations that are the spitting image of their maker, the God of Israel is the Creator and Redeemer, Alpha and Omega, Lord and Consummator of history.

4. *Ibid.*, xv.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Westphal notes that according to the Christian story there is only one absolute kingdom, and it progresses not by violent conquest but by the proclamation of the gospel. In the process, it relativizes every human kingdom and in fact delegitimizes every form of absolutism, “including democratic capitalism and the Christian church, just to the degree that they are not the full

embodiment of God’s kingdom.” Westphal (*ibid.*) concludes, “Modernity’s metanarratives legitimize ‘us’; the Christian narrative places ‘us’ under judgment as well. In knowing how the story ends we do not know which aspects of our work will be burned as wood, hay, and stubble. Christianity is not Lyotard’s target.”

7. C. S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” in *God in the Dock* (ed. Walter Hooper; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 66–67.

While modernity built its empires on the basis of a metanarrative of progress and self-sufficiency and confidence in a destiny of perfectible humanity, the tendency in our postmodern times is to lose any conscious sense that our own lives are part of a larger plot. We become aimless drifters who come from nowhere special and have no divinely given destiny but are free to write our own individual scripts from the meaningless combinations of endless choice. In our day, the script is sold to us with persuasive advertising that promises health, wealth, and happiness here and now. Our daily experience is flooded with images of the successful person and the life story that we could have if we purchase the appropriate props. Even “God,” “Jesus,” and spirituality have their place, as long as they are merely tools or resources for our self-making and self-transformation. However, there is nothing especially *postmodern* about this outlook. What we witness in our contemporary Western cultures is not so much a renunciation of metanarratives but the dominance of a new one, namely, the metanarrative of coming from nowhere and going nowhere but making things up as we go, in between birth and death. This nihilism (lit., “nothingnessism”) aspires to the status of absolute ideology just as surely as the triumphalistic crusades that preceded it.

However, the Christian faith is a counterdrama to all of the meganarratives and metanarratives of this passing age—ancient, medieval, modern, and postmodern. It speaks of the triune God who existed eternally before creation and of ourselves as characters in his unfolding plot. Created in God’s image yet fallen into sin, we have our identity shaped by the movement of this dramatic story from promise to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. This drama also has its powerful props, such as preaching, baptism, and the Supper—the means by which we are no longer spectators but are actually included in the cast. Having exchanged our rags for the riches of Christ’s righteousness, we now find our identity “in Christ.” Instead of God being a supporting actor in our life story, we become part of the cast that the Spirit is recruiting for God’s drama.

The Christian faith is, first and foremost, an unfolding *drama*. Geerhardus Vos observed, “The Bible is not a dogmatic handbook but a historical book full of dramatic interest.”⁸ This story that runs from Genesis to Revelation, centering on Christ, not only richly informs our mind; it captivates the heart and the imagination, animating and motivating our action in the world. When history seems to come to a standstill in sin, guilt, and death, the prophets direct God’s people to God’s fulfillment of his promise in a new covenant.

8. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 17.

B. DOCTRINE: THE GRAMMAR OF FAITH

The great doctrines of the Christian faith arise out of this dramatic plot. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). Where the world’s religions focus on timelessly eternal truths, the most important teachings of Christianity concern historical events. There once was a time when the Son was not incarnate and had not yet won our redemption at Golgotha. Yet we live on this side of that divine achievement. At the same time, Christ has not yet returned to consummate his kingdom. Much has already happened, but there is still more to come. That means we are different from what we were, but we are not yet what we will be; our identity is still being defined by the unfolding mystery of the gospel. The gospel is *good news*, not good instructions, good ideas, or good techniques. It announces the “new thing” that God has accomplished in history for us and for our salvation:

Oh sing to the Lor d a new song;
sing to the Lor d, all the earth!
Sing to the Lor d, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day. (Ps 96:1–2)

Doctrine simply means “teaching.” God not only promises and fulfills a particular future; he explains the implications. So, for example, the Gospels focus on the dramatic narrative as Jesus Christ is actually winning our redemption, while the Epistles unpack the significance of those events. Not only was Jesus Christ crucified and raised on the third day; he “was delivered up *for our trespasses* and raised *for our justification*” (Ro 4:25, emphasis added). As an effective communicator, God tells us what he is going to do, does it, and then tells us what he did. Doctrine summarizes these divine accomplishments. As Paul Ricoeur noted, doctrine keeps the narrative from slipping into the past; it indicates the meaning of these events for us now and into the future.⁹

Especially as the purpose of his mission becomes more evident as the disciples approach Jerusalem, Jesus directs their attention to his crucifixion and resurrection. And yet, even after Peter offers his marvelous confession of Jesus as the Christ (Mt 16:13–20), he rebukes Jesus for bringing up his impending death (vv. 21–23). Only after the resurrection, when Jesus explained how he was the central character (Lk 24), did the disciples understand the story that their own Scriptures had anticipated. In his Great Commission, Jesus commanded the disciples to take this message to

9. Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (trans. David Pellauer; ed. Mark I. Wallace; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 173.

everyone, baptizing and teaching in his name (Mt 28:18–20), and at Pentecost they were empowered as witnesses to proclaim that which they had seen and heard.

As we hear this story, the Spirit draws us in and casts us as characters in the unfolding drama. Along with the disciples on their journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, we find ourselves understanding the point of Jesus' mission, not really understanding it, and then really recognizing his person and work. Because of Pentecost, we understand the meaning of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and second coming even more than the disciples before the Spirit's descent.

In their epistles, the apostles unpack and interpret this drama under the Spirit's inspiration (2Ti 3:10–17; 2Pe 1:16–21), relating the various aspects of the gospel and explaining its implications for the new society inaugurated by Christ's resurrection. Now they see clearly what was less evident to them before, interpreting not only their own eyewitness experience of Christ's person and work but the Old Testament narrative that led up to it. Under this apostolic testimony, we too can discover the meaning of these events. It is the doctrine that defines and refines our understanding of the unfolding drama. When Philip was sent to the treasurer of the Ethiopian court, he joined him in his chariot as he was reading Isaiah 53. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. The treasurer replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" After being invited to sit with him, "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus" (Ac 8:30–31, 35). This is why Christ gave teachers to his church—first of all, prophets and apostles, and now pastors and teachers.

Separated from its dramatic narrative, doctrine becomes abstract, like mathematical axioms. However, if we focus only on the Christian story (the tendency of some narrative theologies), we miss crucial implications of that plot and the inner connections between its various sequences.

As Dorothy Sayers observed in *The Lost Tools of Learning*, we begin our educational development by parroting our parents, older siblings, and teachers. Children at this *grammar* stage delight in simple rhymes and repetitive phrases that increasingly become the stock of basic knowledge on which they will draw for the rest of their lives. Then, as we move into our teenage years, we like to argue. Beginning to think through the logical connections between the various facts of our knowledge and experience, we enter the *dialectical* stage, typically a period of questioning, testing, and thinking through why we believe what we believe. In the past at least, it was thought that the purpose of high school was to form our habits of thought and expression when we enter our *rhetorical* stage of development.

We pass through these stages in our Christian growth and discipleship as well. Whether as new converts or as children raised in the church, we are introduced to words such as *God, redemption, Trinity, image of God, means of grace, justification,*

and *eschatology*. Eventually, we are competent enough with this new language to ask good questions—even to challenge our teachers to give us reasons for this faith that we profess and to show us how the various doctrines are related to each other in a system of truth. By questioning and testing our interpretation of God’s Word, we come to know what we believe and why we believe it, so that the grammar of faith becomes our own language of worship through which we interpret all of reality and live in the world.

Theology is the concern of every believer because it is the *grammar* of the Christian faith. Imagine the response if elementary schools decided to eliminate the teaching of the alphabet, multiplication tables, or the difference between a noun and a verb simply because the children often found it irrelevant, boring, and rote. We know from experience how difficult it is to learn a new language as adults in comparison with childhood: whether the new grammar is French, Hebrew, Mandarin, or the language of a new vocation. Those of us raised on typewriters are often amazed at the superior skills our children have acquired with computers by learning the grammar of this recent technology at the stage when it is most easily acquired. If we decided we would never learn anything that is difficult, involved, and often tedious, the range of our human knowledge, emotions, and experience would become narrow. We would miss out on some of the most interesting and fulfilling aspects of reality.

In systematic theology, we are drawing together all three of these stages at once: teaching the vocabulary and rules of speech (grammar) of Christianity, investigating its inner consistency and coherence as well as comparing and contrasting it with rival interpretations (logic), so that we can defend our faith in an informed, compelling, and gentle manner (rhetoric) (1Pe 3:15–16). In his ascension to the Father’s right hand in power and glory, Jesus Christ poured out gifts on his church, including shepherds whose ministry of preaching and teaching brings completion, edification, unity, and maturity to Christ’s body so that we will “no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ . . .” (Eph 4:14–15 NRSV).

C. DOXOLOGY: SAYING “AMEN!”

When the doctrine is understood in the context of its dramatic narrative, we find ourselves dumbfounded by God’s grace in Jesus Christ, surrendering to *doxology* (praise). Far from masters, we are mastered; instead of seizing the truth, we are seized by it, captivated by God’s gift, to which we can only say, “Amen!” and “Praise the Lord!” This pattern can be discerned in the apostolic epistles. For example, after

leading hearers along the Alpine summits of God’s electing, justifying, regenerating, sanctifying, and preserving grace—with the consummation still up ahead—Paul breaks out in wonder at the vista: “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Ro 8:31). After another excursus on God’s electing purposes, Paul exclaims,

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.
Amen. (Ro 11:33–36)

Without knowing the dramatic plot and its doctrinal significance, our doxology becomes unfocused. Our praise lacks not only depth but even its rationale: For what exactly are we praising God? Are we responding to God’s character and works, or merely expressing ourselves?

At the same time, doxology challenges our intellectual pride and curbs our thirst for speculation. Sound doctrine fuels worship, not sectarian strife. When the apostle Paul reaches the threshold of God’s majesty in these doxologies I have cited, he no longer asks and answers questions but worships the God who eludes comprehension.

The better theologians in history have evidenced a similar submission to mystery. For example, at numerous points in his *Institutes*, John Calvin summarizes his interpretation of a scriptural teaching and then exhorts us to adore the mystery rather than attempt to grasp it. Centuries before, Anselm of Canterbury wrote even his deepest theological investigations in the form of prayer, such as this famous one: “I do not endeavor, O Lord, to penetrate thy sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand.”¹⁰

D. DISCIPLESHIP: THE WAY OF CHRIST IN THE WORLD

Our minds transformed by God’s Word so that we are grateful captives of praise to God, we become reshaped in Christ’s image as new characters in his drama. Theology is inextricably tied to baptism. Upon taking their oath of citizenship,

10. Anselm, “Proslogion,” in *St. Anselm, Proslogium and Monologium* (trans. Sidney Norton Deane; Chicago: Open Court, 1935), 6.

immigrants begin to learn the language and customs of their new country. In baptism, *God's* oath comes first. Yet when God claims us as the beneficiaries of his covenant mercies in Christ, we are relocated from the fading empire of sin and death to the kingdom of grace. As the visible sign and seal of God's saving promise, baptism also provokes our response of repentance and faith—not just once but throughout our pilgrimage. This is called *mortification* and *vivification*: recognizing that our “old self” (the dead-end character “in Adam”) has been crucified and buried with Christ and that our “new self” has been raised with Christ. Learning God's Word—including its doctrine—is a nonnegotiable responsibility of our new citizenship. The baptized are privileged and obligated to learn the language of Zion.

Unless we are relocated from the stories of this fading age to our identity in Christ and begin to understand the implications of this new script, our discipleship will be little more than moralism. Merely imitating Christ's example is different from being united to Christ through faith, bearing the fruit of his resurrection life. It is the creed that gives rise to praise and therefore to informed and heartfelt love, service, and witness to our neighbors in the world. Doctrine severed from practice is dead; practice severed from doctrine is just another form of self-salvation and self-improvement. A disciple of Christ is a student of theology. Although the biblical concept of discipleship surely means more than study, it does not mean less. The common practice of following a rabbi (meaning “teacher”) in order to receive formal and informal daily instruction was the pattern of Jesus' ministry. Our English word *disciple*, in fact, comes from the Latin noun *discipulus*, meaning “student.”

Only after we have understood and experienced this astonishing gospel do we find the proper motivation for our *discipleship* in the world. Thus, Paul writes,

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, *by the mercies of God*, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Ro 12:1–2, emphasis added)

For the previous eleven chapters, Paul had explored the treacherous valley of our condemnation in Adam and the breathtaking heights of salvation in Christ. All throughout, doctrinal arguments were punctuated with doxological exclamation. Only now—in view of God's mercies—the call to discipleship becomes our “reasonable service” (KJV) of worship, and not mere duty. We can now offer ourselves not as dead sacrifices of atonement but as *living sacrifices* of thanksgiving. We cannot claim interest in God or the Bible while regarding doctrine as insignificant. The New Testament view of a disciple was not first of all a way of life that Jesus called the disciples to imitate but a unique messianic ministry that he called them

to understand through his teaching and deeds. They were called, first and foremost, to be *witnesses*—pointing away from themselves to the Word made flesh for our salvation.

E. PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: GOD'S NEW ROLE FOR US IN HIS PLAY

This movement back and forth between the narrative drama, doctrine, doxology, and discipleship is evident throughout the New Testament epistles. It is also apparent in the Psalms—the hymnal of the Bible, where often we discover the dramatic account of God's mighty acts despite human sin, provoking the psalmist to grateful praise and then to the response of faith and obedience. This does not mean we always move in a straight line from drama to discipleship. Sometimes something that happens in our experience opens us up to a truth we had never really understood, and sometimes our practice shapes and misshapes our doctrinal convictions. Often, a half-learned doctrine or half-remembered episode in the redemptive drama becomes more fully realized in prayer and praise, especially in moments of crisis or delightful wonder. The traffic moves in all directions, back and forth, in between these coordinates, so that our faith is anchored in the work of the triune God and is reaching out to our neighbors in love.

Typically, periods of reformation in both individuals and the church corporately arise from rediscovering this sweeping pattern from biblical drama to doctrine to doxology to discipleship. Periods of decline usually work their way in reverse. First, *we begin to question the reliability of the narrative*. How can we find our own stories in the unfolding drama of God's miraculous intervention in history for sinners when our world seems to be governed by nothing more than natural or humanly devised processes and causes? The doctrines may be true, but their historical narrative becomes questionable. Second, *the doctrines come under criticism as people recognize that the doctrines depend on the narrative*. No one believes that Jesus rose from the dead because of any universal law of nature, reason, or morality. It is not a deliverance of universal religious experience. Therefore, if Christ was not actually raised bodily on the third day, then there is no basis for speculating about a "doctrine of resurrection." Third, *worship loses its rationale*. We may still express our inner experience or piety (at least for a while), but eventually this leads to burnout because it is self-referential. Our hearts are stirred by truth, not by vacuous exercises. Finally, *we become disciples more of the culture than of Christ*. Instead of being transformed by the renewing of our minds, we become conformed to the pattern of our non-Christian neighbors (Ro 12:1–2). In a last gasp for religious authenticity, the church tries to defend Judeo-Christian morality (discipleship), but it is a desperate

attempt. The battle has already been lost at the earlier stages. Without the creeds, the deeds surrender to vague moralism.

As individual believers and as churches, we are always prone to fall away unless we are brought back by the Spirit to the Word. Therefore, we always need a theology grounded in that Word in dependence on the Spirit. The study of Christian doctrine is always an indispensable enterprise for the faith and practice of the whole church—not only for academics or even pastors, but for the whole communion of saints. Everyone who confesses the creed should always be growing in his or her understanding of its depth and implications.

The alternative to this growth in the knowledge and grace of Christ is not pious experience or good works but gradual assimilation to the powers of this passing evil age. The biblical drama plots our character “in Adam” by our natural birth in this present evil age. Nevertheless, “According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1Pe 1:3–5). Once strangers to God’s promises, we are now rewritten into God’s script. We should never lose our astonishment at the good news that in Christ even Gentiles can hear the divine playwright declare,

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1Pe 2:9–10)

The key markers in this plot are not premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity but before and after Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Because Christ has been raised as the firstfruits of the new creation, we are living in “these last days” (2Ti 3:1; Heb 1:2; Jas 5:3; cf. 1Pe 1:5) before “the last day” when Jesus returns in glory and judgment (Jn 6:40; 12:48). The Spirit creates the church at the intersection of “this age” and “the age to come” (Mt 12:32; 24:3; 1Co 2:6; Gal 1:4). It is therefore this unfolding drama that orients us as new characters who know where we have been, where we are, and where we are going.

Nobody has to be taught the world’s story; we are born with it, as fallen children of Adam. However, we have to be taught *out of it* by persistent pastors and teachers who know that we prefer by nature to think differently of God and ourselves than the Scriptures require. “But understand this,” Paul warned Timothy, “that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good,

treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” (2Ti 3:1–5). It is the constant renewing of the mind by God’s Word that reorients us away from this fading age with its aimless plot, its “empty words” (Eph 5:6) and “philosophy and empty deceit” (Col 2:8), toward the everlasting inheritance in Christ.

This happens first of all in the regular gathering of God’s people—the casting call that transfers us from death to life through preaching and sacrament. We cannot take this new identity for granted, however. We must be renewed in this inheritance constantly, since our default setting is always the script that governs the idolatries of this present age. Furthermore, just as we were created by God as inherently covenantal creatures—in relationship with God and each other, and redemption restores this extroverted identity—theology is done best in community and conversation rather than in lonely isolation. Theology is always done for and by the church. Therefore, I have included discussion questions at the end of each chapter in the hope that they will encourage fruitful and lively interaction on the matters that concern us all.

II. WHY *SYSTEMATIC* THEOLOGY?

Every discipline or field of inquiry tries to draw together particulars into an integrated whole while allowing the whole to be determined by its parts. Systematic theology is like the box top of a jigsaw puzzle, and every believer is a theologian in the sense of putting the pieces together. If we fail to recognize there is a box top (i.e., a unified whole) to Scripture, we will have only a pile of pieces. Simplistic slogans, formulas, and catchphrases will not suffice in conveying the richness of the Scriptures.

Furthermore, to dismiss the importance of a systematic understanding of the faith is to deny, at least by implication, that the Bible is a *canon*—that is, a collection of varied texts that are united by their divine source (the Father’s speaking), their content (the Son’s work of redemption), and their power to generate the world of which they speak (the Spirit’s work of inspiration, illumination, and regeneration). To assume that we cannot derive from Scripture a systematic teaching about God, creation, humanity, Christ’s person and work, the application of redemption, the church, and our future hope is at least implicitly to assume that the Bible itself is self-contradictory or at least insufficient for providing a unified faith and practice.

Yet if we ignore the pattern that has been provided for us from Scripture itself, we will try to force the pieces to fit our preconceptions. We all have presuppositions when we come to a given biblical passage, doctrine, or practice. So we have

a working systematic theology, whether we want to or not. By acknowledging that we do already have certain assumptions about the whole teaching of Scripture, we are better able to evaluate and critique them. Our goal at least must be to go back and forth between the whole and the parts. Just as the whole provides a context for understanding the parts, the parts can challenge our understanding of the whole. In other words, the system can change—which is exactly what happens in theological as well as social, political, and scientific revolutions.¹¹

Drawing together the drama, the doctrine, the doxology, and the discipleship that recasts us as new characters in God’s play, systematic theology works closely with its sister disciplines. Systematic theology relies on careful exegesis of Scripture, harvesting the fruit of the labors of *Old Testament* and *New Testament studies*. It also depends on *historical theology* and *church history* for its understanding of the way the church has interpreted God’s Word, both faithfully and unfaithfully, in an effort to follow its wisdom and avoid its follies.¹² No more than other disciplines can theology advance by starting from scratch with each new era or profound thinker. We are always standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, taking for granted many conclusions that we have learned from a larger consensus. We are heirs of truth and error, clarity and confusion, faithfulness and folly. Only by engaging the past can we acquire the resources for interpreting Scripture in our own time and place.

Systematic theology also looks to *practical theology* (sometimes called pastoral theology), ethics, and apologetics in order to keep its reflection closely tied to the concrete welfare of Christ’s body and mission in the world.

However, perhaps the closest subdiscipline to systematic theology is *biblical theology*. Like a topographical map, biblical theology draws all of the strands together to help us see the organic development of revelation and redemption from election to glorification. We see the high peaks, low valleys, rivers, and plains that lead from promise to fulfillment. Biblical theology rivets our attention to the historical development of various themes, pointing up discontinuities as well as continuities—the “many times” and “many ways” in which “God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days . . . by his Son” (Heb 1:1–2). There we discern not only the fresh stages of redemption in history but the eschatological, vertical disruption of history by God’s descent. With each new era of redemptive history, we discern the “new thing” that God has done toward the furtherance of his purposes in Jesus Christ. We recognize Yahweh as our God, yet more fully known in Christ and by the Spirit as the triune God. As the plot unfolds, we can trace the growth of the

11. See, for example, Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996).

12. In many Protestant systems (and faculties of divinity),

there is also a subdiscipline known as symbolics or confessional theology, which focuses specifically on the creeds, confessions, and catechisms of a particular tradition or denomination.

church from the first human family to the nation of Israel and now to the uttermost parts of the earth.¹³

Yet it is systematic theology that puts all of these themes together in order to show their logical connections. Princeton's early twentieth-century biblical theologian Geerhardus Vos nicely explained this harmony between systematic theology and biblical theology, which is really what we mean when we speak of doctrine and narrative: "In Biblical Theology the principle is one of historical, in Systematic Theology it is one of logical construction. Biblical Theology draws a *line* of development. Systematic Theology draws a *circle*."¹⁴ For example, the doctrine of the Trinity did not fall from heaven all at once but was revealed progressively as God's plan unfolded in history. Biblical theology follows that organic development, while systematic theology pulls together these insights in a formal dogma and relates the Trinity to other doctrines in Scripture. If biblical theology is a topographical map, systematic theology is more like a street map, pointing out the logical connection between various doctrines spread throughout Scripture. Without biblical theology, systematic theology easily surrenders the dynamism of revelation to timeless truths; without systematic theology, biblical theology surrenders the Bible's internal coherence—the relation of the parts to the whole.

By "system" or "systematic," we should not imagine a comprehensive chart that maps God's inner being, leaving no question unanswered. On the contrary, as in the natural sciences, the more that we understand God's truth, the more we are struck by the mystery. Instead of the image of a speculative system, we should think in more organic terms, like an ecosystem in which diversity and interdependent unity are equally important. To assume that the Bible itself gives us a system of doctrine and practice is simply to acknowledge its organic unity as a single canon: the interdependence and coherence of its various teachings.

There is also a difference between systematic theology and *dogmatics*, the latter engaging in a deeper analysis of Christian doctrines than a systematic summary can provide. I have followed this distinction in my own work. While this present volume seeks to offer a summary of Christian doctrine in its systematic relations, I have written a four-volume series in dogmatics in which I explore particular topics in greater detail, with more exegesis as well as engagement with alternative views.¹⁵ My goal was to focus on specific topics in contemporary theology. I had a specific agenda, namely, to reflect on the potential of *covenant* not as a central dogma but

13. Like systematic theology, biblical theology takes different forms. The biblical theology movement associated with Oscar Cullmann, Gerhard von Rad, and G. E. Wright, for example, is more influenced by higher-critical assumptions than the biblical theology of Geerhardus Vos, Herman Ridderbos, and others.

14. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 16.

15. The series is published by Westminster John Knox and includes *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (2004); *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (2005); *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (2007); *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (2008).

as a framework that belongs to the integral structure of the Bible itself. However, a systematic theology is quite different. It is more disciplined in the sense that all of the major topics of theology must be covered and displayed in their relations. It is my goal in this present summary of Christian teaching to bring to bear all of these subdisciplines (biblical, historical, pastoral, and dogmatic theology).

III. BACK TO THE SOURCES!

We often speak of various theological schools—Franciscans and Dominicans, Calvinists and Arminians, Barthians and Baptists. There is nothing wrong with specifying particular circles of interpretation. In fact, honesty requires that we acknowledge our own confessional commitments instead of pretending that we are coming to the scriptures without prejudices. Nevertheless, theologians do not (at least, should not) write for schools but for the church and should therefore aim at “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), which binds the whole family of Christ together in a common hope.

I am writing from the perspective of a Reformed Christian living in North America. I do not presume to speak *for* all Christians from a supposedly unbiased “view from nowhere,” but I do hope to speak *to* all Christians from a Reformed perspective concerning the faith we hold in common. To put it differently, I do not believe there is any such thing as a “Reformed faith,” any more than there is a “Lutheran faith” or “Baptist faith.” There is *one faith*—the Christian faith—and this volume is an attempt to explore that faith as it is summarized in the confessions of Reformed Christianity.

Although there were important gains in the medieval period, Renaissance humanism recovered an interest in history and the original languages. *Ad fontes!* (“Back to the sources!”) was the cry. Out of this movement the Reformation was born, returning to the original Hebrew and Greek texts of Scripture instead of relying on the Latin Vulgate and the commentaries. Since the church is created and sustained by the Word, it is not surprising that whenever the church returns to its original wells, fresh periods of reformation and renewal occur.

Like any science, theology is not free to determine its own content and shape but is constrained by reality. No less than genetics or astronomy, theology involves subjectivity (i.e., the act of interpreting from one’s own background and presuppositions) while aiming at objective reality. The data (in this case, Scripture) can always overturn a theory or even an entire paradigm. In all disciplines, including theology, periods of discovery (or rediscovery) are usually followed by periods of refinement and systematization. The Copernican revolution in science generated a new paradigm, but its details were worked out over successive generations. As the theory had

to stand up to impressive challenges, it ended up being vindicated, even though it had to be refined and adjusted in light of the available data and objections along the way.

Similarly, the Reformation produced the era of Protestant orthodoxy (also known as Protestant scholasticism). It was this age that refined the Reformation's insights and produced our evangelical confessions and catechisms, liturgies, church orders, and hymns. Older churches were reformed and newer churches were started. In fact, out of this confessional era, Protestant missions found its beginning. It was also an era of remarkable achievements in biblical scholarship and pastoral theology. Protestant orthodoxy was an ecumenical project, seeking refinement not only in criticism of other traditions but by drawing on the best of the East and the West as well as ancient, medieval, and contemporary theologies. In other words, it was an era not only of reformation but also of consolidation: going back to the original Scriptures and integrating the best of the past with the insights of the Reformation. Even when taking a polemical (i.e., critical) stance, these theologians were much more familiar with other Christian traditions than we tend to be today. Even when they were arguing, they were at least talking with those within and outside of their own confessional tradition, and wherever possible they stressed the continuity of the Christian faith instead of attempting radical revolutions and innovations.

Although he often stood in a critical relation to Reformed orthodoxy, Karl Barth expressed his debt to these theologians for introducing him to the richness and depth of the church's dogmatic reflection—in sharp contrast with Friedrich Schleiermacher and liberal theology. As Barth began to prepare his Göttingen lectures, he expressed wonder at how his training could have skipped over the rich heritage of Protestant orthodoxy. Neo-Protestantism (i.e., liberalism) sought to “push through” this period in ever-new proposals that were really little more than “a new mixture of Enlightenment and Pietism.” However, Barth realized, “Success can come only if we have previously learned to read the Reformers as the Church's teachers and, with them, Scripture as the document for the Church's existence and nature, and therefrom to ask what Church science might be. That precisely may be learned, nay must be, from the early orthodox theologians.”¹⁶

At a time when even certain streams of evangelical theology seem unaware of this important resource, Barth's caution to his own students is as valid today as it was in the early twentieth century: “Even though you may later decide to go along with the great Schleiermachian revolution which characterizes almost all modern dogmatics, my urgent recommendation is that you should know what you are doing when you take this course, having first learned and considered the unreconstructed

16. Karl Barth, “Foreword” to Heinrich Heppe's *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources* (trans. G. T. Thomson; London: Allen & Unwin, 1950), vi–vii.

dogmatics of the older writers.”¹⁷ By his own recollection, exposure to the Reformed scholastics gave Barth resources for reconceiving theology in a more God-centered and biblically grounded fashion.¹⁸ Even the liberal existentialist theologian Paul Tillich felt compelled to defend Protestant scholasticism from the caricatures he encountered among American theologians.¹⁹ Of course, these older systems were often polemical—defending one tradition over against others. However, in doing so, they were typically more conscious of the whole history of diverse biblical interpretations than we are today. Walking into the expansive hallways of these older systems, one discovers the insights of the ancient Christian East, the great Latin theologians of the ancient and medieval West, and the different rooms inhabited by various churches and traditions. One also discovers new treasures, mined by careful exegesis and more recent scholarship from a variety of disciplines.

There are no golden ages, and even if we might desire it, we cannot simply repeat the work of those who have gone before us. In fact, if we follow their example, we will be open to new insights from God’s Word, always reforming our systems to conform to that rule. “Back to the sources!” in our day means a return not simply to these older systems but to the fountain of Scripture and the rich, deep, and broad streams of ecumenical reflection from which they so liberally drank.

This volume attempts to draw a circle (the street map) by closely attending to the broad and sweeping landscape of biblical theology (the topographical map). The goal is doctrine that can be not only understood, clarified, and articulated but also preached, experienced, and lived as “community theater” in the world today. So let us attend together to the greatest drama ever staged—to a script whose performance draws us in, not as the original characters themselves (as the masters of modernity would have it)—yet also no longer merely as spectators (like unscripted players)—but as a growing cast of pilgrims making their way together behind their royal Redeemer in a procession to the City of God.

17. Karl Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:21.

18. See Barth’s “Letter to Brunner, January 26, 1924,” cited in Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 332.

19. Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 276–77. “Orthodoxy,” he explained, “is greater and more serious than what is called fundamentalism in America.” Whereas fundamentalism is a reactionary movement with little depth or awareness of the resources of catholic Christianity, “classical Orthodoxy had a great theology. We could also call it Protestant scholasticism.” He continued, “When I speak of Orthodoxy, I refer to the way in which the Reformation established itself as an ecclesiasti-

cal form of life and thought after the dynamic movement of the Reformation came to an end. It is the systematization and consolidation of the ideas of the Reformation. . . . Hence, we should deal with this period in a much more serious way than is usually done in America. In Germany, and generally in European theological faculties—France, Switzerland, Sweden, etc.—every student of theology was supposed to learn by heart the doctrines of at least one classical theologian of the post-Reformation period of Orthodoxy. . . . We should know these doctrines, because they form the classical system of Protestant thought. It is an unheard-of state of things when Protestant churches of today do not even know the classical expression of their own foundations in the dogmatics of Orthodoxy. . . . All theology of today is dependent in some way on the classical systems of Orthodoxy.”