The Mosaic of Christian Belief
Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity

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INTRODUCTION
The Need for a "Both-And" Theology

Numerous fine volumes expounding Christian belief have been published in recent decades and many of them are still in print and readily available to readers interested in understanding what Christianity has to say about God, humanity, salvation, the church, life after death, the end of the world and a variety of other religious subjects. Why another one? What distinguishes this volume from those already written by Christian theologians?

Unapologetic Apology for Yet Another Handbook of Christian Doctrine

While there may be nothing totally new under the sun, this handbook of Christian belief is intended to fill a perceived gap in the shelf of expositions of Christian teachings. Like most of them, it aims at being thoroughly biblical and both faithful to the Great Tradition of Christianity as well as contemporary in its restatement of what Christians have always believed. It also intends, however, to provide a mediating theological perspective within the broad tradition of evangelical Protestant Christianity. A mediating theology is one that attempts to bridge unnecessary and unfortunate gulls between perspectives and interpretations within a single religion—in this case Christianity. Such an approach values unity as well as truth and assumes that at times it is necessary for equally committed Christians to agree to disagree about secondary matters and come together on common ground. One way in which this may be accomplished is by a rediscovery and new valuing of our common Christian heritage of belief—what will here be called the Great Tradition of Christian teaching. Other terms for the same stock of commonly held Christian beliefs include “consensual Christian tradition” and “mere Christianity.” Some have used the less felicitous label “generic Christianity” for this common ground
of belief shared by most Christians down through the ages since the early church. This concept of common Christian ground of belief will be explored in the first chapter. This volume seeks to explain to uninitiated readers what that common tradition includes in terms of unity, what it allows in terms of diversity and what it excludes in terms of heresies—beliefs generally considered completely incompatible with Christianity even thought they appear from time to time wearing the “Christian” label.

While a mediating theology emphasizes unity of belief and common ground shared by different groups of Christians, another way in which a mediating approach to Christian belief may be partially achieved is by showing that within that general common area of shared Christian belief there exists room for real diversity. Too many Christians identify “authentic Christian belief” with one narrow slice of Christian thought. Part of the process of Christian maturation is recognizing legitimate diversity and even disagreement within larger unity and agreement. In spite of important differences of interpretation and opinion, for example, Christians in the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and Pentecostal traditions share a common faith—insofar as they stand within their own Christian denominational heritages and have not succumbed to radical sectarianism or liberalized theology. That is to say, for example, the Westminster Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian tradition and the Methodist Articles of Religion share much common ground even though they diverge significantly at secondary points. They are both expressions of Christian belief and not of secularism, paganism, Hinduism or Buddhism. The same could be said for many other traditions within the Great Tradition. Even historic Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism—the three broad branches of the Christian religion—share much in common when compared with other world religions, spiritual philosophies and worldviews. This book’s title is a metaphor for this mediating approach that seeks to emphasize both Christian unity and Christian diversity in terms of beliefs. A mosaic melds multiformality and rich diversity of colors with harmony and complexity into a pattern that conveys a unified image without sacrificing variety. Great Tradition Christianity holds both unity and diversity together. Christians can be and, at their best, are “of one mind” about the most important matters related to God, but they also contribute richness to that single worldview with their various perspectives. One major goal of this volume is to portray Christian belief in all its glorious harmony and rich diversity.

Equally important to the goal of presenting a mediating approach to Christian belief is this volume’s goal of expressing the best of evangelical Christianity in terms of that tradition’s beliefs. The concept evangelical is a much disputed and perhaps essentially contested one. In its broadest possible sense it is synonymous with Christian in that Christianity is gospel-centered more than law-centered. Evangelical comes from a Greek word for the gospel or good news proclaimed by the apostles following Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. The gospel is the apostolic message of full and free salvation through Jesus Christ and by God’s grace through faith in him. Thus, any church, organization or person who proclaims that gospel faithfully is evangelical.

Throughout history, however, movements have adopted the evangelical label in a more specific way to describe themselves. In Europe to this day evangelical is virtually synonymous with Protestant and designates a form of Christianity (e.g., a church or denomination) that is not Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox but stands in the reforming heritage of Martin Luther and John Calvin and the English Reformation led by Thomas Cranmer. In Great Britain evangelical was a term used to describe revivalistic movements led by John and Charles Wesley and their friend George Whitefield in the eighteenth century. In the United States evangelical and Evangelicalism have come to describe especially that form of (mostly) Protestant Christianity that crosses denominational boundaries and is generally conservative in theology, conversionist and evangelistic, biblicist, and focused on Jesus Christ as God incarnate, crucified Savior, risen Lord, and returning king. Evangelicals stand out from other Christians by their emphasis on the importance of a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ” through an experience of conversion involving repentance and faith and a daily life of discipleship to Christ that involves prayer, Scripture reading and seeking by God’s help to emulate the Savior. In the second half of the twentieth century a loose coalition of moderately conservative, evangelical Christian individuals, denominations and groups came together to support one another and promote their common evangelical ethos.¹

This volume speaks about Christian belief broadly and generally out of this evangelical tradition rooted as it is in the historic Protestant heritage. It seeks also, however, to speak on behalf of all Christian traditions including Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and non-evangelical varieties of Protestantism that remain faithful to the Great Tradition of Christian teaching and belief. As will become clear, however, it does not speak for but against those modern manifestations of Christianity that are more counterfeit than authentic. It does not assume that every thing labeled Christian is authentically Christian, and it will attempt to articulate the differences between Great Tradition Christianity in all its varieties and counterfeit Christianity that promotes a different gospel or includes a strong element of teaching and belief that is incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Great Tradition of Christianity.

Besides attempting to present Christian belief in a mediating manner from within a broadly evangelical perspective, this handbook of basic theology will strive to be irenic in spirit and tone as opposed to polemical in approach. Many books of belief are dogmatic and argumentative. Here every effort will be made to draw Christians together without sacrificing essential truths of divine revelation or the great heritage of Christian doctrine. Irenic comes from a Greek word for peace and means “of a peaceable spirit.” An irenic approach to expounding Christian beliefs is one that attempts always to understand opposing viewpoints before disagreeing, and when it is necessary to disagree does so respectfully and in love. An irenic approach to doctrine seeks common ground and values unity within diversity and diversity within unity. An irenic approach does not imply relativism or disregard for truth, but it does seek to live by the motto “in essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity.”

Even though this volume is written from an Arminian perspective (believing in human persons’ God-given free will), it seeks to treat Reformed theology (Calvinism) and all other branches of authentic Christian theology with respect and in a spirit of love. The purpose here is not to win a victory for any particular theological orientation within Christianity, but to provide a mediating exposition of common Christian belief that acknowledges and respects diverse Christian traditions and interpretations. This volume may interpret the Great Tradition of Christian belief more from an Arminian perspective than from a Reformed/Calvinist point of view, but that does not imply any antipathy or hostility to Reformed theology. In fact, this is a test case of this book’s distinctive approach to expounding Christian belief: It seeks to be fair to all the major theological orientations within Great Tradition Christianity, taking seriously their distinctive contributions, without sacrificing or hiding the author’s own particular theological orientation.

In addition to mediating, evangelical and irenic, this volume strives to present Christian belief in a non-speculative way. In this writer’s opinion and in the emphatically expressed opinions of many of his students, far too many published expositions of Christian doctrine fly too often into unwarranted speculation about matters having to do with the attributes of God and eternal inner workings of the Trinity (God in himself), the precise nature of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the reasons for and effects of Christ’s atoning death, and the details of biblical eschatology (the future return of Christ and end of the world). This writer has frequently heard college and seminary students as well as laypeople in churches’ adult forums ask impatiently, how do you know that the Holy Spirit is the “bond of love” between the Father and the Son? And, why are you so sure that Jesus could not have sinned? These and other quite traditional interpretations of biblical revelation have arisen and been taken for granted in Christian theology for hundreds of years, and yet astute and perceptive novices in theology often regard them as sheer speculation. Even the most strenuous explanations and defenses fail to satisfy this quest for justification of theological claims in something other than flights of speculative fancy. The examples regarding the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Jesus Christ (Christology) above are only two possible examples. There are many others: the precise nature of God’s eternity in relation to time, the details of the consummation of God’s plan and purpose for human history in the future, the precise location of those who have died before their resurrection and judgment, and “the furniture of heaven and temperature of hell.”

While holding opinions about such matters is perfectly normal and acceptable, can anyone really claim to know answers to such questions or have reasonable and justified models of these realities? Speculation is not necessarily wrong. There is such a phenomenon as “reverent and reasonable

Readers unfamiliar with the categories Reformed/Calvinist and free will/Arminian in Christian theology (also known as “monergist” and “synergist”) may wish to consult Alan P. F. Sell, The Great Debate: Calvinism, Arminianism, and Salvation (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1982).
speculation,” and it is probably unavoidable in any attempt to give answers to questions that go beyond what is clearly stated in Christianity’s basic sources. However, this writer—like most of his students—believes that one pitfall of much well-intentioned Christian theology has been unwarranted speculation. Granted, it helps keep theologians employed. On the other hand, it often undermines and even discredits Christianity when Christians claim to know more than it is possible to know given Christianity’s sources and norms. Unwarranted speculation appears in any affirmation that simply has no solid basis in the sources and norms with which one is working and yet claims to be something more than mere guesswork. The purpose of this book is not to provide new and unheard-of answers to difficult questions, but to describe the rough unity and colorful diversity of Christian belief. Where speculation seems to lie behind and within Christian belief, that will be duly noted and this writer will strive to avoid adding to the problem.

Finally, this presentation of Christian belief will strive for simplicity without oversimplification. Far too many introductory books of Christian doctrine and theology claim to be written for relatively educated and intellectually curious beginners (e.g., students beyond high school) but are actually written for other scholars. This is an almost irresistible temptation for authors of such books. This writer knows, for example, that other scholars and professors will examine this book and it is tempting to include subtleties, nuances, and academic digressions to avoid their criticisms. Inevitably, however, giving in to that temptation leads to confusing the uninformed readers. This volume will make every attempt to avoid use of theological jargon except when certain technical terms are crucial to understanding its content, and then they will be explained immediately in the context where they first appear. Similarly, this volume will avoid delving into subtle scholarly disputes and shades of interpretation that go beyond what any theological novice needs to know to move beyond that status into initiation in basic Christian theology. At the same time, however, oversimplification will be avoided here. Readers will be challenged to learn and stretch as they read. This book will not avoid important historical theological concepts and terms such as “hypostatic union,” but it will explain immediately (at least once) that this is a technical term in Christian theology for the doctrine of the incarnation of God in Christ by means of a union of two natures: human and divine.

These, then, are the distinguishing characteristics of this contribution to the shelf of books already published about Christian belief: mediating (both and as opposed to either-or whenever possible), evangelical, ironic in spirit and tone, non-speculative and relatively simple for the uninitiated. Each chapter will examine and expound a particular locus (issue, set of questions) of Christian theology. The scope and sequence will be traditional, progressing after introductory questions about theology’s method (sources and norms) to the loci of divine revelation, nature and attributes of God, Trinity, and so on. The final chapter will deal with Christian beliefs about the ultimate future and what Christians hope for and confidently expect at the end of world history. Each major chapter (after the first one dealing with unity and diversity that substitutes for the traditional “prolegomenon” or “foundations and methods” chapter) will follow a uniform outline: a statement of the underlying issues and questions of the doctrine, followed by a brief description of the consensuses of Christian teaching about it, followed by an exposition of the major alternative beliefs outside of the consensuses (heter- sies), followed by treatment of the main diverse interpretations of the doctrine within the broad Christian consensus and concluding with some suggestions for a unitive view that emphasizes “both-and” rather than “either-or.”

Both-And Rather Than Either-Or Theology
The perceptive peruser or mere casual reader of this volume may have noticed that so far little has been said about the nature or necessity of either belief or theology in Christianity, let alone the meaning of both-and rather than either-or as an approach to them. Careful, detailed explanation of all of that will appear in chapter one, but for persons simply trying to decide whether to buy or borrow this book to read, a preliminary description and defense of these ideas will be offered here. As much as professional theologians and theologically-minded pastors may deplore it, it is a fact that today many persons who are committed personally to Jesus Christ and to Christianity as a way of life have little use for anything approaching formal doctrine or theology. Belief is for many of them slightly more acceptable than doctrine, but theology often sends shivers down the spines of Christians who are convinced—rightly or wrongly—that much of what is wrong with Christianity, and especially Western Christianity, has arisen through formal theological reflection. A favorite slogan of many experiential Christians is “Jesus unites; doctrine divides.” The “Jesus movement” of the early 1970s has left
a profoundly anti-intellectual stamp upon much of North American Christianity and especially on the evangelical movement. So have the charismatic movements and the many independent churches and ministries that have attracted millions of people into their memberships and orbits of influence.

Some sociologists of religion have suggested that contemporary Christianity—especially in North America—is in danger of devolving into a “folk religion.” One of the characteristics of a folk religion is lack of reflection on the intellectual implications of revelatory experiences and failure to integrate these experiences with other spheres of life. Folk religions often flourish in a compartmentalized, largely privatized sphere of life such as small cell groups of people with similar experiences who network with each other so long as they find support. Feelings tend to take precedence over intellect, and clichés and slogans (often put to music) take the place of coherent and developed doctrinal affirmations. Folk religions generally resist critical reflection and formal confession of belief in favor of subjective experiences and pragmatic methods of problem-solving in the spiritual realms of existence. An example of such a folk religion in North America is the so-called New Age movement that arose around 1970 as a new manifestation of some very ancient beliefs and practices. Although a few new agers have attempted to provide this extremely diverse spiritual phenomenon with some intellectual moorings, they have been largely ignored by grassroots spiritual seekers who most certainly read books about paranormal experiences and invisible spiritual realities but by and large resist coherent explanations as too confining and dogmatic. Astrology—believed by almost all new agers—may be popular but has little or no influence on communities religious or secular.

Is Christianity becoming a folk religion somewhat like the New Age movement? Is Christian belief in, for example, petitionary prayer becoming something like new age belief in astrology? The pressures put upon Christianity by secular society to privatize its beliefs and practices militates in this direction. Impulses within Christian movements contribute to the process of reducing Christianity to a set of subjective experiences and feel-good clichés. What “feels good” and “provides comfort” is often the main criterion by which grassroots Christians decide what to believe and how to practice their spirituality. The church becomes a support group rather than the communal bearer of a tradition that values truth. This may seem like a dismal analysis of the present condition of Christianity in North America. To be sure there are many Christian churches and organizations as well as individual writers and publications that protest the trend toward folk religion. Small pockets and outposts of “confessional Christians” who value the intellectual and theological heritage of Christianity crop up and flourish here and there. Jeremiads are published decrying the problem of truncated and reduced Christianity with titles such as No Place for Truth and The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind. How much impact these have on the problem is debatable. Scholars pay attention and professors mumble qualified agreement, but the average North American Christian often misses the message altogether because his or her spiritual sustenance comes more from Christian television and small spiritual support groups than anything written or taught by scholars.

The problem with a folk religion, of course, is that it has little or no public impact and tends over time to lose its shape and become compatible with anything and everything. Folk religions are porous and fluid. Feelings—on which they thrive—are notoriously indistinguishable. Pollsters report that approximately twenty-two percent of adult Americans believe in reincarnation, and that must include many people who consider themselves committed Christians. When queried about how they reconcile belief in reincarnation with traditional Christian belief in the bodily resurrection (clearly communicated in the New Testament and defended by all major church fathers and Reformers) many such persons simply appear puzzled by the question. Anyone who has attempted to teach Christian doctrine or theology to young adult Christians has experienced this odd eclecticism in which completely incompatible notions are combined in a soup of experiential spirituality.

Out of this postmodern, relativistic cultural milieu and because of disillusionment with heated arguments over seemingly minor points of biblical and doctrinal interpretation that have divided entire denominations unnecessarily, a deep antipathy has arisen toward formal theology as intellectual reflection on an objectively given deposit of divine revelation. Even greater aversion has grown to beliefs and practices labeled traditional. Many sincere, devout Christians’ attitude toward the entire realm of doctrine and theology is active disinterest if not hostility. And yet most maturing Christians are well aware that somehow believing plays a necessary role in being Christian. Few, if any, Christians actually reject believing in favor of a wholly subjective, feeling-oriented spirituality. After all, does not the New Testament itself encourage believing and confessing such things as “Jesus is Lord”? Finding the right balance between believing and experiencing seems too difficult for many
postmodern Christians and little help is forthcoming from pulpits and lectors in their churches. On the one hand, some evangelical ministers and teachers emphasize believing as if it were the be-all and end-all of authentic Christianity. On the other hand, many more emphasize “experiencing God” or “doing what Jesus would do” as the be-all and end-all of authentic Christianity. What is an ordinary Christian to think and do?

This book aims at making a modest contribution to overcoming a part of the problem described above. Folk religion is a poor substitute for historic Christianity; formal, academic, intellectual “head knowledge” is an equally poor substitute for personal transformation through a relationship with the triune God. But the greater threat at the present moment—in this postmodern, highly individualistic and experience-oriented culture—is folk religion. This writer, like many other theologians of various Christian traditions, is profoundly disturbed by the decline these past twenty years in the average Christian’s awareness of basic Christian beliefs. This writer is also deeply impressed by the hunger many young Christians have for an exposition of Christian beliefs that respects their autonomy as persons created in God’s image and endowed by God with intellectual powers of discovery and discernment. They have inquiring minds and want to be presented with historic Christian beliefs in all their unity and diversity and given permission to decide for themselves under God and together with a faith community what they should believe. The day is gone forever when most people will accept a doctrine just because it is traditional and they are told (as in the old German saying) “Eat up, little birdsie, or die!” But a new day is here when many Christians want to know what the historic Christian faith includes in terms of beliefs about God and themselves and why there are so many varieties of interpretation within Christianity and how to handle all of that. This book is aimed at giving such critical, inquiring Christian minds something to start with: a fresh exposition of the old Christian faith in its unity and diversity. Hopefully this will provide a stepping stone out of the swamp of folk religion and onto a more intellectually rigorous path toward truth.

This is a book about doctrine and theology, which are both about beliefs. It would be appropriate here to explain what these terms mean and how they relate to each other. Belief is simply the assent of the mind to a proposition or set of propositions. A proposition is a truth claim. Not all propositions are straightforward, directly factual claims to truth. Some are metaphorical and aim at saying something about reality indirectly by making a comparison or evoking a response. One might well argue that there are other senses of belief. For example, a person might believe in another person without being able to translate that into assent to a proposition. While that is true, surely everyone recognizes that without some propositional content such as “John is a good person” believing in a person is hardly distinguishable from liking him or her. Without digressing into a philosophical discussion of the nature of belief and believing, suffice it to say here that one sense is that they involve giving assent to propositions or truth claims. Try to empty Christianity of all truth claims and it becomes a very vacuous phenomenon. There is then nothing to believe or disbelieve. Christians have always believed certain propositions and disbelieved other ones. This is embedded in the biblical witness itself and is evident from the earliest Christian writings after the New Testament where early church fathers found it necessary to summarize essential Christian beliefs in sets of propositions to which converts gave their assent.

Doctrine is a relatively complex religious belief. Of course, the term is often used as a synonym for a religious belief. But consider the common statement “I believe in the doctrine of the Trinity.” Ordinary language indicates that we often recognize a distinction between a simple belief and a doctrine, although the two go hand-in-hand in many cases. A doctrine develops out of beliefs and is a belief or set of beliefs examined, reflected upon, and affirmed as true in a formal way by an organized community of believers. “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth” begins the Apostles’ Creed. In one sense this does express a doctrine. On the other hand, it does not. The doctrine of the Trinity was developed by the early church to explain and protect the beliefs confessed in the Apostles’ Creed. It is somewhat more complex and also secondary—a step removed in terms of reflection—to the confession of belief in God the Father Almighty and his Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. An analogy might be helpful. In United States jurisprudence a person believes in and confesses religious freedom on the basis of the Constitution’s Bill of Rights. Separation of church and state is a judicial doctrine developed by judges who have to interpret and apply the First Amendment to the Constitution where that Bill of Rights—including freedom of religion—appears. It evolved through a process of reflection on the guarantee of religious freedom and is more complex than that. Yet it would be quite difficult for anyone to confess belief in religious freedom in the United States without accepting some version of separation
of church and state. Some may try, but after two hundred years it appears impossible. The doctrine of separation of church and state—although hotly debated as to its details and its application—is now part and parcel of freedom of religion in the context of American society. And yet, belief in religious freedom is one thing; belief in separation of church and state is something else—a distinction with hardly a difference.

Theology is the process of examination and reflection that leads to the construction and reconstruction of doctrines. Of course, sometimes the word theology is simply used as a synonym for doctrine as in, “our theology is thoroughly trinitarian,” or, “her theology of the end times is premillennial.” This is an informal way of speaking. More correctly and precisely, theology is the process rather than the product. The process is doctrine. Sticking to our earlier analogy, we might say that theology is similar to the process of judicial examination and judgment in United States courts when a law is challenged. Often this process leads to “doctrines” that become somewhat set in stone as authoritative precedents that later judges must take almost as seriously as the Constitution itself. Over a period of time cases coming to the Supreme Court of the United States led to the judicial doctrine of separation of church and state, which is not actually (contrary to what most people believe) clearly articulated in the Constitution itself. As late as 1819 some states used religious tests for candidacy for public office. Only members of certain approved denominations could serve in the state assemblies or legislatures. The Supreme Court gradually struck down these religious tests on the basis that they were inconsistent with the guarantee of religious liberty in the Bill of Rights. Thus evolved the doctrine of church-state separation. A similar process led the undivided early church of the Roman Empire to develop the doctrine of the trinity of God (Trinity). Theology is the process of reflecting reasonably on divine revelation and on consensus beliefs about it. The nature of theological reflection will be a subject of chapter three.

Theology gives rise to construction and reconstruction of doctrine. Doctrines are highly developed, relatively complex expressions of beliefs of tradition-communities such as the early Christian churches or later denominations. Often doctrines are developed defensively; they arise out of concern to protect certain beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, salvation and so forth from erosion, distortion or outright rejection. Sometimes Christian communities overreact to perceived heresies. (A heresy is a wrong belief—one that seriously undermines some crucial dimension of the gospel itself and must be denied and rejected.) The pendulum swings one way and then another in the process of theological reflection that leads to doctrinal construction and reconstruction. For example, many Christian theologians—especially Protestants and Eastern Orthodox—believe that the Roman Catholic Church overreacted to modernism in its ranks in the nineteenth century by making papal infallibility a dogma. (A dogma is a required doctrine which cannot be questioned without serious repercussions.) Even some progressive Catholic theologians have suggested as much. Similarly, some Protestant groups have overreacted to the perceived threat of modernism by developing a doctrine of strict biblical inerrancy. Often such overreactions give rise to opposite overreactions. Some liberal theologians who value modernity as a source and norm for Christian theology have denied not only infallibility and inerrancy but also the entire “house of authority” in Christian thought so that there is no absolute norm of truth above the individual.

The result of this pendulum swing effect of theology is “either-or” theology. In other words, people begin to accept without question a series of false alternatives: either papal infallibility or doctrinal chaos; either biblical inerrancy or relativism; either tear down the “house of authority” or live under oppression, and so on. Manifestations of either-or thinking in Christianity are everywhere. Either God is three or God is one. Either human beings are totally deprived from birth or there is no need of God’s grace for salvation. Either people are unconditionally predestined by God or salvation is not a free gift. Either grace is conveyed through sacraments or the sacraments are “merely symbolic.” Either the resurrection is physical or it is not real. On and on it goes.

What is unfortunately often unnoticed is the possibility of “both-and” in many cases of doctrinal divisions and controversies. Could it be that God is both three and one? Could it be that God is both self-limiting (in order to allow creatures room for some self-determination) and sovereign? Could it be that salvation is completely of grace alone even though humans are genuinely free and must decide freely (apart from any determination) for or against it? Could it be that sacraments such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper are more than “mere symbols” even though they do not convey grace automatically? Perhaps many of the doctrinal divisions that have arisen are due to unnecessary bifurcations—false alternatives. Either-or thinking becomes a habit. People fail to look for the combinations, the truth in both sides. What if instead Christians began to focus on synthesis rather than anal-
ysis? Instead of focusing obsessively on differences as if they could never be reconciled, what if God’s people looked long and hard for the truth in seemingly irreconcilable but equally biblically supported beliefs and doctrines? This is not to suggest that every belief has some important truth that should be discovered and combined with the truth in its opposite. For example, belief in reincarnation seems simply incompatible with what Christians have always regarded as their ultimate source and norm for belief—Jesus Christ and the inspired Word of God that testifies of him. Christ did not come back as another person. He was incarnate only once and rose from death as the same person he was before he was born and before he died. Resurrection and reincarnation cannot be combined. However, different ideas of resurrection may both contain elements of truth. In fact, this is exactly what the apostle Paul seems to be doing in 1 Corinthians 15 when he calls the resurrection body a sōma pneumatikos, a “spiritual body.” Some have claimed that Jesus’ risen body was and is fleshly in a materialistic way. That Paul denies. But he does not deny that it was and is a body and not a nonsubstantial entity like a ghost. Both-and; not either-or. Both body and spiritual; not one or the other.

Certainly the idea of looking for the element of truth in conflicting beliefs and doctrines and seeking to transcend false alternatives in syntheses of the truth in both sides is not new. The nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel advocated such an approach to philosophy and many of the nineteenth-century mediating theologians of Germany, Great Britain and North America attempted to apply his dialectical thinking of synthesis out of thesis and antithesis to problems of theology. Unfortunately, all too often Hegelian-inspired mediating theology resulted in watered down, rationalistic philosophical theologies. The nineteenth-century Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard protested against Hegelian synthesis because he believed it detracted from the majesty and mystery of God and God’s self-revelation, which could only be grasped in paradoxes. Once again a false either-or developed in theology: either theological truth is expressed in paradoxes or it is open to rationalistic synthesis that leaves little or no room for mystery. This writer does not agree with either Hegel—who seemed to believe the human mind is capable of thinking God’s thoughts after him and grasping ultimate reality in rationally coherent concepts and systems—or Kierkegaard, who overreacted to Hegel by reveling in the “absolute paradox” of Christianity such that human reason is believed to be incapable of making any progress in understanding divine revelation coherently.

One of theology’s tasks is to construct relatively coherent, workable models of the transcendent realities revealed by God in Jesus Christ and the inspired record and interpretation of him that we know as Scripture. Part of that task is to reconstruct older models insofar as they are partial and distorted due to overreaction to other models. (Here model refers not to a scale model that actually depicts a larger figure but to a disclosure model or analogue model that represents something else that cannot be literally depicted. A model of an atom is a disclosure or analogue model. The Trinity is such a model of the three-in-oneness of God as that is revealed in Jesus Christ and Scripture.) Sometimes, this writer is convinced, the very best reasonable and faithful reflection on divine revelation fails to construct or reconstruct a single model that does justice to all that is revealed about a particular reality. Many authors have pointed out that this is the case even in physics where models of light as particle-like and wave-like must be used in a complementary way without being combined. And yet in both physics and theology inquiring minds struggle to discover single models that synthesize the seemingly conflicting truths in alternative and complementary but uncombined models. Both-and theology does not automatically exclude either-or; it does not automatically rush to synthesis. But it looks at twin truths of divine revelation and seeks to do justice to both in the best way possible. Sometimes that means affirming as true two seemingly incompatible models of reality. Sometimes it means constructing new models that do more justice to the whole of what is revealed by God than older models.

Historical theology yields many examples of false either-or thinking about beliefs and falsely opposed alternative doctrines that harden into exclusive models causing unnecessary division in the Christian community. The infamous debate between Martin Luther and Catholic reformer Desiderius Erasmus over free will and divine determination is a case study. Wishing to emphasize the gratuity of grace and depravity of humans, Luther argued that the human person is a n relic ridden by either God or the devil without any self-determination in spiritual matters. Wishing to emphasize the responsibility of human beings, Erasmus argued that they are relatively free and self-determining within limits. Luther did not deny human responsibility and Erasmus did not deny human falleness and dependence on grace. In the heat of argument, however, their models of divine-human interaction and roles in salvation fell into absolute antithesis to one another with negative
results for Catholic-Protestant relations afterward. Luther’s lieutenant in the Protestant Reformation, Philipp Melanchthon, tried to work out a synthesis of Erasmian and Lutheran perspectives but failed—largely due to lack of cooperation by followers of the two Reformers. The task remains for Christian theologians to discover and, if possible, combine the truths in both models. Some will reject such a project due to unalterable commitments to one or the other model. However, it seems to many Christians that scriptural support for both models can be found and equally committed Christians believe in human self-determination and divine determination. Can the two be combined in a synthesis? Perhaps not. But at the very least both beliefs can be recognized as authentically Christian insofar as they neither violate the sovereignty of God nor the responsibility of human persons.

Why is both-and theology important? This writer’s conviction is that forced false alternatives of doctrine and their resulting divisions within the church universal undermine the credibility of Christian witness in the world. The incessant quarreling and cold indifference between God-fearing, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving Christians is scandalous to the secular world—as it should be scandalous to Christians. They also serve to convince many Christians that theology and doctrine are detrimental to Christianity. They see that under the guise of “passion for truth” many Christian theologians carry on a crusade for their own pet one-sided doctrines, and they flee from the specter of inquisitions into the equally dangerous territory of folk religion. Once again we see a false either-or at work. Subjective folk religion devoid of all rigorous doctrinal examination and affirmation is not the only alternative to rigid, one-sided, inquisitorial dogmatism. Development and affirmation of doctrines is compatible with continuing quests for new and greater light, and Christian experience of God is compatible with intellectual wrestling with theological issues.

The approach to these issues and tasks taken in this book is a very modest one. No goal of achieving synthesis of all truth is even envisioned. Rather, in each doctrinal locus the problem of false alternatives will be described, the underlying consensus of Christian belief will be expounded, the alternatives to the overwhelming consensus of the Christian church’s teaching will be explained, the legitimate diversity of opinion and interpretation within Christian thought will be explored, and some possible unitive viewpoints that have the potential for reuniting Christians (especially evangelical Protestants) will be proposed. Of course, all of this will inevitably reflect this writer’s perspective in spite of his best attempts to speak on behalf of the evangelical Christian community as a whole.

The writer’s own theological perspective is shaped by several influences, and the reader (or prospective reader) deserves to know what these are. First, the writer is a Baptist who stands within the broader evangelical free-church tradition that includes many denominations that do not call themselves “Baptist.” The writer grew up in and was spiritually and theological nurtured by Pentecostals and then later Pietists. Both emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the primary element of vital, authentic Christianity. On the other hand, the writer has come to value the wider catholic tradition that transcends any denomination and embraces the common teachings of the early church fathers, Reformers and modern conservative and evangelical theologians. The writer strives to be progressive in his evangelical approach to theology while respecting the Great Tradition of Christian teaching. He strives to be ecumenical while faithfully valuing his own tradition’s distinctives. Finally, the writer is deeply committed to the authority and freedom that is found only in Jesus Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit by faith. These few sentences do not say very much about the writer’s own perspective and approach, but hopefully they say enough to communicate something of their distinctive flavor. The writer promises to do his best to prevent his own private and confessional biases from getting in the way of expounding Christian belief faithfully, but no claim to God-like objectivity is made. Nor should such be expected from any theologian.
The previous chapter virtually equated Scripture with revelation while noting that some Christians have distinguished between them. For Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christian thinkers, Tradition (as opposed to traditions) is a vehicle of divine revelation, and Scripture is one part of that larger revelational phenomenon. Luther tended to distinguish between revelation of God in Jesus Christ and Scripture as a secondary, written revelation. In the twentieth century, Karl Barth, a leading Swiss neo-orthodox theologian, strongly distinguished between God’s revelation as self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and witness to that self-disclosure in Scripture. In other ways Christians have linked and yet distinguished revelation and Scripture. Yet nearly all Christian thinkers throughout history—unless one counts modern liberal theologians as “Christian thinkers”—have considered the canonical Scriptures to be the unique source and norm for determining proper Christian belief. On the other hand, they have at the same time usually acknowledged that Scripture is not all there is of divine revelation and that it is a form of or witness to revelation even though it is that form and witness that is uniquely relevant to and authoritative for determination of right Christian belief.
Issues and Polarities of Christian Belief About Divine Revelation
What is divine revelation? In the broadest possible sense it is any way in which God communicates himself or something about himself to others. In a narrower sense it is God’s self-disclosure to creatures for the sake of their redemptive transformation. Many definitions may be offered, but the essence of them all is that revelation is God’s message by whatever means that transcends what creatures can know by themselves. Philosophers have long talked of “man’s search for God” and many books have been written by philosophical theologians attempting to use autonomous (unaided) reason to establish God’s existence and nature.¹ In response to this project that attempts to go around divine revelation and know God apart from any divine self-disclosure, Pascal asserted that “the God of the philosophers is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” In other words, according to Pascal and many other Christians, one may discover or construct a concept of God through unaided reason, but such a “God” is never identical with the God that “people of the book” (Christians and Jews) have known and worshiped. Much debate swirls around that issue even among Christians. Some disagree very strongly with Pascal while acknowledging that at its best such a natural knowledge of God (apart from special divine revelation and using unaided reason alone) is vague and not redemptive. At best it can be a bridge between unbelief and belief.

Where and how has God revealed himself and what does that revelation do in terms of yielding knowledge of God? Christians have always assumed—as have Jewish believers—that God reveals himself. Divine revelation is one of Christianity’s given. That does not mean belief in divine revelation is arbitrary; many presuppositions are more than arbitrary. It means that the assumption of divine revelation in Scripture and tradition that is consistent with logic and shared human and Christian experience is basic to Christianity. The same kind of legitimate assuming is found in the United States Declaration of Independence: “We find these truths to be self-evident.” An assumption is something “found to be self-evident” even though it is confirmed by continuing experience and consistent with reason. That all persons are created equal is self-evident within American tradition. It is foundational—a properly basic belief that needs no proof. So it is with divine revelation. Christianity assumes it even though most Christians believe good reasons can be given for it. Apologetics is the process of providing those reasons. Beyond assuming that God has revealed himself and that this revelation is available, Christians have developed a minimal consensus tradition that forms a small but stable plot of common ground. This consensus will be explained in the next section of this chapter.

Many issues have arisen within Christian tradition that have led to diverse beliefs about divine revelation. Often a pendulum swing effect has come into play leading to Christian theologians and groups going to extremes against each other. One polarity within the broad Christian consensus tradition about divine revelation is over general (universal) revelation versus special (particular) revelation. This includes the issue of a possible natural knowledge of God based on general revelation and reason. Another polarity within Christian belief has to do with the issue of the nature of special, supernatural, particular revelation: Is it primarily personal or propositional? Finally, some Christians have assumed that revelation is completed while others have argued that revelation continues to unfold. These differences of interpretation have led to great diversity and even at times hostility within Christianity between groups of Christian teachers and their followers. Sometimes this manifests a false “either-or” mentality and the search for a “both-and” approach is badly needed.

The Christian Consensus About Divine Revelation
If there is any one belief that unites all Christians it is that Jesus Christ is God’s unique and unsurpassable self-disclosure. The apostle who wrote a letter to the Hebrews said it best in Hebrews 1:1-2: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.” One of the earliest Christian writings outside of those included in the New Testament is the anonymously written Epistle to Diognetus. The unknown second-century Christian author expressed very well the Christian consensus when he wrote of Jesus Christ (“God’s Child” and “the Word”), “what man had any knowledge of what God was, before he came!” The early church fathers’ writings


make clear that they did not reject any and all revelation of God or knowledge of God before Jesus Christ, so this question no doubt includes an element of hyperbole. Nevertheless, the church fathers and Reformers never tired of emphasizing the uniqueness and unsurpassability of the revelation of God in Christ. The great fourth-century church father and bishop Athanasius based his defense of the full deity of the Son of God who became human in Jesus Christ, against those who would demote him to a second god unequal in substance with the Father, in part on the fullness of revelation of God in him.

Luther adamantly insisted that there is no true knowledge of God apart from Jesus Christ and that whatever is true of God’s being outside of Christ is not meant for us to know. In modern theology Karl Barth has developed a thoroughly Christocentric (if not Christomonoistic) system of theology called Church Dogmatics that begins with and is thoroughly pervaded by the idea that Jesus Christ is God’s self-revelation to humanity in a unique and unsurpassable sense. Reformer John Calvin, who produced the first true Protestant systematic theology (coherent summary of beliefs), summed up this consensus well when he wrote that although God is revealed in the natural order, because of humanity’s fall into sin “no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation, or favorable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us.” The consensus of Christian belief, then, is that God is specially revealed in Jesus Christ and that this surpasses other revelations of God that may exist.

A second point of general agreement among Christians with regard to divine revelation is that God is revealed in some manner, although imperfectly and impersonally, in the natural world and history as a whole. Karl Barth seemed to deny this in a curt response to another Swiss theologian named Emil Brunner. Their famous (or infamous) debate during the 1930s had to do with whether or not God is revealed in nature—including human nature. Some have argued that Barth, in his response, Nein! (No!), rejected any general revelation of God and restricted divine self-disclosure to Jesus Christ. That is debatable. What is beyond debate is that the argument between Barth and Brunner was primarily over whether a “point of con-

tact” for the gospel may be found in human existence. In the process of rejecting such, Barth seemed to reject any knowledge of God outside of Jesus Christ and perhaps even any revelation of God outside of Jesus Christ and the Word of God that testifies to him (viz., special revelation). (In latter volumes of his Church Dogmatics Barth seemed to allow some natural knowledge of God, but he always resisted any normative role for general revelation or natural theology in Christian theological reflection.)

With the possible exception of Barth and a few other modern neo-orthodox theologians, the vast majority of Christians have always believed that God is revealed, however vaguely, in the natural order that he created, including human existence itself. The great medieval Catholic thinker Thomas Aquinas developed a “natural theology”—knowledge of God through evidences and reason alone—based on the existence and order of the world and on human conscience. He admitted that such knowledge of God is insufficient for salvation and for knowing God as loving person, but he believed (and the Catholic church accepts) that God’s existence is manifest in nature and that human reason is fully capable—in spite of sin—of grasping that. Among Protestant Reformers, John Calvin especially worked on this belief in a general revelation of God and argued in his Institutes of the Christian Religion that were it not for sin clouding humans’ minds, the revelation of God in nature would yield a true knowledge of God. Luther believed and taught that all human beings have a bare knowledge of God’s existence through nature. The early church fathers everywhere assumed such a revelation of God while at the same time asserting its inadequacy for redemption. The apostle Paul seemed to outline such a view of God’s revelation in nature in Romans 1 and the psalmist extolled the evidences of God in the heavens that declare God’s glory (Ps 19).

Everywhere and at all times Christians have agreed (with very few exceptions such as possibly Karl Barth) that there is a bare true knowledge of God—perhaps only that God exists—possible through God’s revelation in nature. The overwhelming emphasis in Christian belief about divine revelation, however, has come down on the nature of God’s higher, clearer and fuller revelation in Jesus Christ. But how do those who have lived after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension know about him? And what about those who lived before his life on earth? Christians have generally agreed that God prepared the world for his unique self-revelation in Christ through the Hebrew prophets and their writings and continued that revelation after Christ’s
departure via Christian apostles and their writings. Thus, Christians have accepted the existence of spoken and written revelation alongside of Jesus Christ insofar as it points to and centers around him. The writings of the Hebrew prophets were treated as God's Word by Jesus (who often quoted Moses, for example, as speaking on behalf of God) and the apostles. Scattered throughout the apostolic writings are references to special revelation to and through prophets and their writings (e.g., 2 Tim 3:16 and 2 Pet 1:20-21). The majority of the early church fathers quoted from Hebrew prophets as well as from apostolic writings as if all of them were vehicles of special divine revelation.

The process of determining a Christian canon (closed list) of inspired books began with the second-century Christians' response to a Christian teacher in Rome named Marcion who, among other heresies, believed the Hebrew religion—Judaism—was not a precursor to Christianity and attempted to expunge Jewish influences from Christianity. Marcion attempted to limit Christian recognition of inspired writings to only a few portions of the apostles' writings that he considered Gentile (e.g., Luke, portions of Acts and portions of ten Pauline epistles). The church responded by affirming the Hebrew canon as its own (later known as the Old Testament) and by beginning to add to it equally inspired writings of apostles (later known as the New Testament) beyond Marcion's truncated canon. Slight differences of judgment about several books held back a united Christian canon until late in the fourth century. By the end of the second century and beginning of the third century, however, one finds church fathers Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen agreeing on most candidates for inclusion in the Christians' "Testament" of inspired works. The Bible, then, came to be regarded by all Christians as a form of special divine revelation—above nature but below Jesus Christ himself.

The great twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth provided a relatively sound summation of the Christian consensus about divine revelation in his Church Dogmatics. In the first volume of this massive thirteen-volume summa of Christian thought Barth explicated a threefold, hierarchical structure of divine revelation and its main forms. To be sure, not all Christian thinkers throughout the ages or in the twentieth century would agree completely with Barth's description of divine revelation, and most would want to add to it something more about general revelation of God in nature. Barth almost totally neglects the latter. It has never played a great role in Christian belief, however, and most Christian reflection on divine revelation has focused on special revelation of God. That God is revealed in nature—including creation itself, human conscience and possibly history as a whole (universal history)—has seldom been denied and almost always assumed. But the benefit of that general revelation of God has always been questioned. Barth's explication of the threefold nature of divine revelation rightly focused on special revelation that aims at redemption.

For Barth, special revelation appears in three interrelated forms: God's Word revealed (God's personal self-disclosure in Jesus Christ), God's Word written (inspired, canonical Scripture) and God's Word preached (the gospel proclaimed by the church in all ages). While there may be room for debate between Christians about the exact nature and extent of these forms of divine revelation, and not all would agree with Barth's delineations of them, that God is specially revealed in Jesus Christ (revelation itself) and in Scripture (inspired witness to revelation itself) and in the proclamation and testimony of the faithful people of God, the church has generally accepted and agreed on. The Eastern Orthodox churches want to emphasize that its Great Tradition of worship (liturgy) is included in the third form of divine revelation and by no means less than Scripture itself. Conservative Protestants tend to emphasize the role of Scripture as God's Word often to the neglect of the third form of divine revelation. Most Pentecostals and charismaticos wish to view the third form of revelation as a continuing work of God the Holy Spirit in testifying to Jesus Christ and guiding God's people into all truth. Nevertheless, the threefold form of God's Word—divine revelation—provides significant common ground, that is, a consensual tradition, for Christians down through the ages and today.

Alternatives to Christian Belief About Divine Revelation

We have already seen that some who call themselves Christians have challenged the Christian consensus or even propelled the development and formation of that consensus. Marcion of Rome was one such person. Throughout Christian history others on the fringes of the church have raised proposals about divine revelation that have been rejected by Christians in

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general. What alternative views—heresies—would Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and most Protestants reject as beyond the pale of Christian belief?

One alternative to Christian belief in this area of divine revelation is that *divine revelation may surpass Jesus Christ and Scripture* in the sense that new revelation may supersede and replace them. As strange as it may seem, some Christians have embraced such new and allegedly superior revelations without rejecting as completely irrelevant the older, allegedly inferior revelations of God in Jesus and through the apostles. This is why Barth’s third form of divine revelation is often downplayed if not ignored in standard, conservative accounts of Christian theology. Conservative theologians often fear that including the words and deeds of the church after Jesus Christ and the apostles opens up a Pandora’s box of potential new revelations surpassing original divine revelation. In Germany in the 1930s the National Socialist Party (the Nazis) promoted German culture and even Hitler and the party as bearers of a new and higher revelation of God, and some German Christians accepted this. The response by more traditional and faithful Christians was the “Barthian Declaration” of the Confessing Church movement that declared Jesus Christ as sole Lord for Christians and rejected any belief in a new savior and lord or a superceding revelation of God in culture. The Unification Church of Rev. Sun Myung Moon of Korea believes in a “Lord of the Second Advent” who will appear from Asia and deliver a more complete revelation and salvation than Jesus brought. The book *The Divine Principle* is believed by many Unificationists to be a more complete and surpassing revelation than that of the canonical Bible. Many sects and cults on the fringes of Christianity have produced or identified new revelations that stand in contrast to original revelation given by God in Jesus and through the prophets and apostles.

Another alternative to historic, concessional Christian belief is that *general, universal revelation—because it is available to reason apart from faith—is greater than special divine revelation*. This heresy usually takes the form of a claim that special divine revelation in Jesus Christ, Scripture, and the preaching of the church merely re-presents what is generally revealed and available to universal reason. Some philosophical theologians have held this view of divine revelation. Most notable among them is the German idealist philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who believed that the best of philosophy (human thought and culture) is divine revelation, and that reason itself—without any special, supernatural aid or faith—can discover whatever is of any importance communicated through the symbols of special revelation. For him, Jesus Christ was merely the re-presentation within history of a rational truth that is timeless and universal—the union of God (Absolute Spirit) and humanity.

The death of Jesus on the cross is re-presentation in concrete, historical form of a “speculative Good Friday” as God’s eternal self-identification and self-actualization on the “cross” of creation. To a lesser extent, or in a less radical way, many philosophically-minded Christian thinkers have repeated Hegel’s basic perspective on divine revelation. There exists a revelation of “The Real” everywhere, certain self-proclaimed religious pluralists argue, and every religion has its own form of it. Jesus Christ and Scripture are simply Christianity’s apprehension of that noumenal (beyond the senses), idealistic and transcendental “Real” which is God or the divine. All major religions have their own, equally valid apprehensions of it.

A third and final alternative to Christian belief about divine revelation suggests that *the highest and best form of divine revelation is completely interior and mystical*. Some Christians have rejected objective, outer divine revelation as ultimate and embraced a personal (i.e., individual) revelation of God in an “inner light” or “existential awareness” as greater than the historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ and Scripture. Such Christians do not reject Jesus Christ or Scripture, but they tend to listen for Christ within and read Scripture for the purpose of hearing God speak to them personally through it. On the more liberal theological side this approach to divine revelation emphasizes the “Christ of faith” over the “Jesus of history.” Twentieth-century German theologian and New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann tended to reduce divine revelation to a new self-understanding in encounter with Christ through the message of the cross. He taught that for Christian existence the Christ of faith who is known inwardly by faith is more important than the historical Jesus. Of course, even Bultmann would not drive too wide a wedge between them. For him, the Christ of faith is connected with the word of the cross preached in the church about the self-sacrificing death of the Jesus of history. Nevertheless, the focus on revelation as the subjective encounter-experience is widely interpreted by more tradi-

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tional Christians as lessening the importance of the objective revelation of God outside the faith of the individual.

On the more conservative theological side this approach to divine revelation emphasizes the "inner light of Christ" within each person and encourages Christians to listen to that more than to the "dead letter" of a book (the Bible). Finding historical examples of this mystical approach is somewhat difficult as most of the people who hold this view of divine revelation do not write about it, but one possible historical example is the early Quaker or Friends movement. George Fox and other Quakers of the seventeenth century tended to locate revelation within the heart of every individual, and belief in this "inner light" of Christ became a distinctive teaching of Quakerism. Many Quakers or Friends in the twentieth century have adopted a more traditional Christian view of divine revelation without giving up the idea that Christ illumines Christian minds and hearts in a special way.

The Christian churches and their leaders and theologians have rejected these three views of divine revelation as too far from the center of Christianity to be considered orthodox. Each one has its own unique danger and denies something believed by most Christians to be essential to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the essence of the Christian identity. The idea that new divine revelations may supersede even Jesus Christ and surpass even canonical Scripture denies the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God's self-revelation in person and opens the door to all kinds of new messiahs and incarnations. If such claims and expectations were allowed at all, it would be impossible to maintain any stable identity of Christianity or message of the gospel. Where such openness to new revelation surpassing Jesus Christ and Scripture has been taken seriously, Christianity has been transformed into a cult.

The idea that general revelation grasped by reason is greater than special revelation and in some way rules over it or judges it fails to take seriously enough the noetic effects of sin (the falleness of the human intellect) and undermines the very necessity of Jesus Christ and Scripture. If general revelation is greater than special revelation, then it is difficult to see why special revelation is necessary. This approach also tends to focus attention more on a generic religiosity and a spirituality transcending the gospel of Christ than on that gospel. Christianity, then, is in danger of becoming merely a symbolic re-presentation of philosophy just as Hegel believed.

Belief that the highest form of revelation is individual and inward very seriously undermines the objectivity of God's Word in divine revelation. If there is no higher, dearer and more authoritative revelation than one's inner experiences or inner light, then each person is free to establish his or her own Christian beliefs that best fit his or her inward spiritual feelings or messages. There is no escape, then, from folk religion and no outward test by which to judge inner revelations. Relativism is the dangerous and nearly inevitable outcome of such a view of divine revelation. That is not to denigrate experience of God and of Jesus Christ within one's own heart and mind. In fact, this truth does not detract from the reality of God speaking inwardly. It only says that these messages and experiences of God cannot be acknowledged as the highest source and norm for proper Christian belief. Unless something transcends inner experience it becomes the ultimate authority and then everyone is free to believe whatever seems right in his or her own heart. The consequence of that would be chaos.

Diverse Christian Beliefs About Divine Revelation

The minimal Christian consensus regarding divine revelation leaves much room for diversity of interpretation and opinion and, in fact, orthodox Christianity does include within itself great variety of belief on the subject. Three areas of discussion, disagreement and even debate are worthy of consideration here. First, Christians who agree about the core doctrine of divine revelation often disagree vigorously about natural knowledge of God. Second, within modern Christian theology significant debate has swirled around the nature of special revelation as primarily personal or primarily propositional. Third, differing beliefs about continuing revelation—especially the "gift of prophecy"—give rise to divisions and sometimes arguments.

Some Christians and churches believe very strongly in rational, philosophical knowledge of God that does not draw on special revelation or faith but relies solely on the evidences of God in nature and reason. The Roman Catholic Church officially holds as doctrine that God can be known as Creator in this way. In order to know God as redeemer, the church affirms, one must possess a special revelation and have faith in it. The great medieval Archbishop of Canterbury Anselm developed purely rational arguments for many Christian beliefs and taught that God's existence and nature can be proven logically. He developed what came to be known as the "ontological argument" for the existence of God and deduced from God's necessary existence many of God's necessary attributes. According to Anselm, the Bible says that "the fool says in his heart, "There is no God" (Ps 14:1) because denial of
God's existence is a logical fallacy. The definition of God is “the being greater than which none can be conceived,” and since existing outside the mind in reality is greater than existing only in the mind, anyone who says “the being greater than which none can be conceived does not exist except as an idea in my own mind” contradicts himself. Thus, God's existence is part of the very definition of God (and only of the definition of God), and so long as a person can hold the right thought of God in his or her mind, proving God's existence to that person is simple.

Two centuries later Catholic thinker Thomas Aquinas developed other arguments for the existence of God that relied less on pure logic and more on evidences of nature. According to Thomas, there are five ways of proving God's existence and all begin with observation of the world or human existence. The best known of these is the “cosmological argument,” which deduces God's necessary existence from the contingent (nonnecessary) existence of the cosmos. This is popularly known as the “first cause argument” because it attempts to prove that in order for the finite, contingent world of causes and effects to exist at all, it must have an uncaused, first cause as its source.

Various forms of natural theology have flourished among Christians since the second-century church fathers known as the Apologists used evidence, reason and philosophy to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christianity. Anselm and Thomas are just two of the best known and most influential theologians in Christian history to rely heavily on general revelation and reason to construct a natural theology. Neither one believed that general revelation and unaided reason are capable of yielding redemptive knowledge of God; both believed in divine special revelation as the remedy for the ignorance of God brought about by sin. However, like most other rational theologians who emphasize natural theology, they viewed it as a kind of vestibule through which one could gradually introduce open-minded inquirers to the higher revelation of God in Christ and Scripture. In modern theology certain Protestant theologians such as Wolfhart Pannenberg have used anthropology (in the broad, philosophical sense of the study of human existence) as a tool of natural or “fundamental” theology. Twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich looked to and used existentialist philosophy as a tool for leading persons into awareness of special revelation.

Many Christian theologians have been quite uncomfortable with emphasis on general revelation and natural theology. Karl Barth, for example, recognized no positive, true knowledge of God outside of Jesus Christ and argued that to look for revelation of God elsewhere is to move toward idolatry. Many Protestant theologians have affirmed a bare knowledge of God through general revelation while denying any “natural knowledge of God” in the sense of a true knowledge of who God is and what God is like through nature alone. Luther and Calvin both expressed grave reservations about any positive role for general revelation or natural theology, and Calvin averred that even though God is revealed in nature, sin has so blinded fallen humans that unless they encounter God through Christ and the Scriptures they will only construct idols from that revelation. There is, then, no true knowledge of God gained from nature, and natural theology should play no normative role in constructing or reconstructing Christian belief. So, on the one hand, Catholic theology and some Protestant thinkers regard universal revelation of God in nature in a very positive light, while on the other hand, many Protestant Reformers and theologians set universal revelation aside as of little or no value and focus all attention on God’s particular revelation in Jesus Christ, Scripture and (possibly) the church’s proclamation of the Word of God.

The second major flash point of controversy and cause of diversity over divine revelation among Christians has to do with the nature of revelation as primarily personal or primarily propositional. Although this debate has ancient antecedents it is primarily modern. Many twentieth-century Christian theologians argue that divine revelation is God's self-communication and not communication of information about God. Scottish Protestant theologian John Baillie explained revelation as the “mighty acts of God in history” in The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought, a book that drew heavily on the theological approaches of Barth and Brunner. According to Baillie, “the revelation of which the Bible speaks is always such as has place within a personal relationship. It is not the revelation of an object to a subject, but a revelation from subject to subject, a revelation of mind to mind.” The manner or mode of this revelation as self-disclosure is event and not proposition. Baillie,

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like Barth and Brunner, admits that there are propositional statements that are rightly drawn from divine revelation; there are propositions appropriate to divine revelation, but there are no "revealed propositions." Behind this view of revelation lie commitments to God's transcendence above and beyond all human language and the desire to affirm the personal nature of God and the redemptive purpose of revelation. Ultimately, the theologians who view revelation as personal (i.e., having the nature of event within relationship) wish to retrieve a supposed relational ontology (philosophy of being that places highest value on persons and their relationships) of the Bible. Some critics regard this as an influence of existential philosophy within theology.

Against the view of revelation as exclusively personal or eventful is the idea of revelation as primarily propositional. In other words, according to many conservative Protestant theologians, in revelation God communicates information about himself in factual statements or in language the meaning of which can be expressed in factual statements. One of the best known proponents of such a view is conservative twentieth-century evangelical thinker Carl F. H. Henry, who criticized Barth's, Brunner's and Baille's views of revelation as inevitably leading to a diminution of doctrine. How does one derive doctrine from nonpropositional revelation? Perhaps the most consistently propositional view of divine revelation is that proposed by British evangelical theologian and philosopher Paul Helm in *The Divine Revelation*. A major thesis of Helm's is that "actions without propositions are dumb." In other words, Helm argues, if God's self-disclosure or revelation were exclusively personal, eventful and not at all communicative of information there would be no way to know anything objectively true about God. Revelation is communication of meaning or it does not really reveal anything, and meaning is a function of factual truth claims (propositions).

Neither Helm nor Henry deny that God acts or that God's acts have something to do with divine revelation, but they agree that apart from divinely communicated interpretation those acts would be useless for yielding knowledge of God. "Revelation," then, is a pattern of act plus interpretation, and that interpretation must be given by God or we have no reason to think it is true. In spite of their inclusion of "event" and "act" in the pattern of divine revelation, Henry and Helm seem to place the most value on the divinely communicated propositional content of revelation. The main purpose of revelation, so it would seem, is to communicate correct doctrine so that we humans will think the right thoughts about God.

The third and final main subject of disagreement among orthodox Christians with regard to divine revelation relates to its nature as complete or continuing. Whether revelation is primarily personal event or communication of information, the question still arises whether there is any more of it or whether it stopped sometime in the past. We have already seen that all orthodox Christians agree that there is a certain complete and unsurpassable quality to revelation in Jesus Christ and Scripture. But what about Barth's third form of revelation—the preaching of the church? Might God have new truths to communicate through prophecy? All orthodox Christians agree that if such continuing revelation exists it must be measured by Jesus Christ and Scripture. But what about truths that are not already communicated there? Does prophecy within the church exist today and, if so, do prophetic messages count as divine revelation? Some Christians believe that all true divine revelation is summed up in Jesus Christ, Scripture and the faithful proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the church. These "cessationists" believe the completion of the canon of Scripture brought to an end the "utterance gifts of the Spirit" mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 such as prophecy, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, word of wisdom and word of knowledge. Prophecies were meant only for the infancy of the early church when it had no inspired collection of authoritative Christian Scriptures.

Most Pentecostal and charismatic Christians, on the other hand, believe that God may and sometimes does continue to communicate non-doctrinal truths through prophetic messages in the church. Pentecostal-charismatic healing evangelist and educator Oral Roberts encouraged such openness to new revelation from God throughout the second half of the twentieth century, as did many other similar evangelists and preachers. Evangelical theologian Wayne A. Grudem reopened the subject with his volume on prophecy titled *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Crossway, 2009). More conservative Protestants have generally feared that any belief in or practice of continuing revelations from God might lead into cultish aberrations such as the unusual beliefs held by certain sects on the fringes of Christianity that are based largely on "new prophecies" delivered by modern religious leaders breaking out of the mainstream of traditional Christianity.

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These three controversial subjects related to divine revelation provide much diversity within Christianity. Some particularly narrow-minded Christian leaders and thinkers may object to including persons who hold opposite views from their own on these topics within orthodox Christianity. However, Christian men and women who embrace the Great Tradition of Christian belief and teaching about God, Christ, salvation and so on, stand on different sides of these debates. The Swiss theologians Barth and Brunner vehemently disagreed about the possibility of natural knowledge of God and possibly even about general revelation itself. And yet they agreed about the major doctrines of Christianity such as the deity and humanity of Christ and salvation by grace alone. They were both Reformed evangelical theologians in spite of their disagreement about universal revelation. John Baillie and many other modern Protestants who reject propositional revelation agree with the church fathers and Reformers and conservative evangelical and Catholic Christian thinkers about the great beliefs of the consensual tradition. Wayne Grudem, who promotes belief in continuing revelation through modern-day prophecies, is a staunch defender of classical Christian doctrines as are the cessationists, who disagree with him about that particular subject.

A Unitive Christian Vision of Divine Revelation

Perhaps the divisions between equally classical Christians over divine revelation are examples of false polarities—unnecessary either-or thinking. As is often the case, those who emphatically emphasize one side to the exclusion of the other are overreacting to a danger out of fear of what might happen if that view is taken to an extreme. For example, Barth worried much that any openness to natural knowledge of God—however minimal—might lead to “culture Christianity,” a religion that is not so much Christian as it is a prop for a particular culture’s values. He worked out his mature theology in the context of the Nazification of the German churches in the 1930s. Even the volumes of his Church Dogmatics written after that were influenced by what Barth thought he observed then and there: a tendency to use openness to revelation of God outside of Jesus Christ and Scripture to support a false religion under the guise of “German Christianity.” In reaction to this, Barth threw the baby of general revelation and natural knowledge of God’s existence out with the bathwater of “culture Protestantism.” On the other hand, some proponents of natural theology (sometimes called “foundational” or “fundamental theology”) tend to spend so much time and energy exploring common ground between Christianity and non-Christian philosophies that, in spite of good intentions, secular sources and reasoning come to play a normative role in their Christian reflections.

What if we assume that divine revelation is both-and rather than either-or? That is, what if we assume that a universal, general revelation of God does exist and is available for everyone everywhere at all times (as Paul seems to say in Romans 1) and that our controlling source and norm for Christian belief is God’s particular, special revelation in Jesus Christ, Scripture and the preaching of the church? For example, even though there is no natural knowledge of God in the sense of a positive content of true belief about God drawn from nature and reason alone (as Paul also seems to argue in Romans 1), perhaps we could say that a reasonable examination of nature always raises certain questions of transcendence—questions about God and life after death, etc.—that find their most satisfying answers in particular divine revelation. There do seem to be certain perennial, transcultural issues and concerns that we might label life’s ultimate questions. What is our purpose for living? What is “the good life”? Is there some life beyond bodily death? Where did the universe come from? Why does it exist? These and many other questions may be seen by Christians as arising out of universal revelation and pointing toward particular revelation of God.

The answers, Christians say, are found in God’s Word in person (Jesus Christ) and in inspired Scripture. The church’s preaching draws out those answers and fits them to the questions. The danger in such a “method of correlation,” of course, is allowing the questions to control the answers. This is what Paul Tillich seemed to do. But another danger is rejecting the questions and the questioners in favor of an exclusive focus on the answers. But what are answers without questions? To some critics, that seemed to be Karl Barth’s error. The both-and perspective, then, with regard to divine revelation, may be to view universal revelation as consisting of questions about existence (naturally arising out of nature as God’s handiwork) and particular revelation as God’s special communication that provides the answers to those questions. Of course, our Christian beliefs are shaped more by the answers than by the questions.

A similar reconciling process may be applied to the division between personal and propositional accounts of divine revelation. In its extreme forms, at least, these are false alternatives. Even Christian thinkers who have gained notoriety for promoting ideas of revelation as exclusively personal (i.e., hav-
ing the character of act or event within relationship of self-disclosure) or exclusively propositional (i.e., having the character of communication of factual information) almost always pay some lip service to the necessity of the other aspect as well. Once again, these extremes are surely overreactions to perceptions of dangers lying in too much stress on the opposite view. The pendulum swings. What if we view divine revelation as both personal and propositional in a more balanced way? Evangelical Protestant theologian Bernard Ramm raised this suggestion in writings such as Special Revelation and the Word of God, where he wrote, “the disjunction presented so frequently in modern theology between revelation as either ‘information’ or ‘encounter’ is false. . . . The structure of special revelation calls for a hard event and a hard word of interpretation.” Without revealed interpretations in language, in other words, the revealing events would be unrevealing.

Finally, and once again, the either-or problem of false alternatives appears in the division between finished revelation and continuing revelation. So long as we give primacy and normativity to original revelation in Jesus Christ and Scripture, there is no great danger (although there may be some risk which is not bad) in acknowledging a certain kind of continuing revelation. While God does not reveal new truths of a doctrinal nature that are necessary for salvation or even for sound Christian discipleship, God may and probably does speak today. What sense does it make to argue that God does not speak through anything like prophets and prophecies (whatever they may be labeled now) if we believe that God will reveal himself in a new way (not as someone else) in the future? In other words, even cessationists believe that God will make a new appearance in the consummation of history when Christ returns. God will “speak” and “appear” in a way that is not now happening. What principle, then, forbids belief that God may speak and appear (metaphorically speaking) through special utterances, messages and miracles now? There does not seem to be any good reason to say that such cannot happen. On the other hand, there does seem to be very good reason for disbelieving any new revelations that contradict or surpass the truths of salvation so adequately revealed in original divine revelation.

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