

‘Tony Lane is a masterful teacher. From his comprehensive understanding of the history of doctrine he distinguishes the essentials of orthodoxy from debatable secondary matters. He has a knack of writing epigrammatic sentences that instantly clarify an issue. He has a gift for accurately apt illustrations. Just when things might be getting a little dull, he throws in a joke or even a cartoon. Ideal for anyone who wants to understand the basics.’

*Richard Bauckham, Emeritus Professor of New Testament Studies  
University of St Andrews, Scotland*

‘Engaging in style, evangelical in spirit, ecumenical in atmosphere, and eclectic in its use of resources, *Exploring Christian Doctrine* presents in concise and readable form some of the ripe fruit of Tony Lane’s career-long ministry as a teacher of theology. In a well-conceived format, he lays out the big questions, offers his own perspective (always indicating the alternatives in the major issues) and on occasion, tantalizingly, leaves the reader to work through the issues independently. *Exploring Christian Doctrine* will delight students looking for a textbook that is clear and informative, never overbearing but always challenging.’

*Sinclair B. Ferguson, Professor of Systematic Theology  
Redeemer Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas*

‘What does the Church believe? What does the Church’s faith have to do with prayer and worship, and life in the everyday world? Why don’t all churches believe the same thing? In this useful primer, Tony Lane addresses these basic questions and more, demonstrating again and again how the evangelical faith is grounded in Scripture and related to the Church’s grand tradition. He charts his own path, to be sure, but all along the way he also shows why faithful Christians can look at some issues from different perspectives. Students, especially, will find this a welcome guide.’

*Joel B. Green, Associate Dean for the Center for Advanced  
Theological Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary, California*

‘Tony Lane’s survey of Christian belief is accessible and engaging. Alive to historical debates and to contemporary challenges, his focus nonetheless remains on offering a clear and thorough account of the essential points of Christian doctrine from a broadly evangelical perspective. The structure of the book will help readers to engage and to go deeper where

they wish. Anyone wanting to understand what Christians believe and why will find this an extremely helpful guide.'

*Steve Holmes, Senior Lecturer in Theology  
University of St Andrews, Scotland*

'This is a simply outstanding introduction to doctrine; I know nothing like it. The product of decades of classroom experience, it is rooted in the Bible, answers a barrage of questions and objections, and is enlivened by cartoons and humour. If you think doctrine is dull and boring, think again.'

*Robert Letham, Director of Research and Senior Tutor in Systematic  
and Historical Theology, Wales Evangelical School of Theology*

'This book does exactly what its title promises: it conducts beginning students of broadly evangelical theology on a search for buried treasure (the wealth of Christian tradition) and "risen" treasure (the wisdom and knowledge hid in Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:3)) by traversing the length and breadth of Christian doctrine. As with all successful journeys, this one comes with a map, compass and, most importantly, a knowledgeable and trustworthy guide. The book's structure is appetizingly laid out in a series of initial questions, positions taken, objections raised, errors to avoid and Lane's own succinct answers – all framed by credal and confessional bounds and set within the context of worship. As with all good travel, this exploration is also educational, broadening the mind, and Lane works hard to ensure that the traveller will not return home unchanged: in addition to the "answers", Lane suggests practical applications. This is only fitting, for the ultimate purpose of doctrine is to serve discipleship and doxology.'

*Kevin J. Vanhooser, Research Professor of Systematic Theology  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Illinois*

# EXPLORING CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Anthony N. S. Lane (DD, University of Oxford) is Professor of Historical Theology at London School of Theology. He is the author of a number of books, including *A Concise History of Christian Thought* (previously *The Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought*), *The Lion Christian Classics Collection*, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* and *Justification by Faith in Catholic–Protestant Dialogue*. This book is based on an introductory Christian Doctrine module that he has taught for many years. He is married and has two children and two grandchildren.



# EXPLORING CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

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Tony Lane



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# INTRODUCTION

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## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK?

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This book originated as a series of lectures for a first-year undergraduate Christian Doctrine Survey module. It is designed to be used by students at that level, either on their own or as a textbook for a whole cohort. It is also written to be accessible to the educated lay person who has had no formal theological training.

In writing the book I have sought to achieve a number of objectives:

- 1 to provide a basic account of Christian beliefs – the primary objective;
- 2 to give, as appropriate, a very brief account of the history of particular doctrines, showing how doctrines have developed historically and need to be understood contextually;
- 3 to illustrate particular doctrines with key historical texts, especially credal statements;
- 4 to show how different groups differ over particular doctrines;
- 5 to point to the interconnections between different doctrines, such as the person and work of Christ;

- 6 to show how particular doctrines relate to the contemporary scene – both Church and culture.

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## SPECIAL FEATURES

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Each chapter contains a number of different types of material:

- **Aims of this chapter:** questions that the chapter sets out to answer.
- **What do you think? The question:** a question that can be considered there and then by the individual reading the book or by the group using it together.
- **What do you think? My answer:** having posed the question, later in the chapter I offer my own answer to it, deliberately not called ‘*The answer*’.
- **Sceptic’s corner:** a common objection, with my answer.
- **Credal statement(s):** extract(s) from a creed, confession or similar document, some of these being contemporary.<sup>1</sup>
- **Error(s) to avoid:** way(s) in which the doctrine has been misunderstood *or*, more rarely:
- **Tension to hold:** two sides of the truth which need to be held in tension.

- **Speculation:** occasionally I have indulged in speculation.
- **Worship:** an extract from a hymn, a worship song or a liturgy, which relates to the topic.
- **Prayer:** usually from a historical source, especially the collects of the Anglican *Common Worship*, most of which originated in the Book of Common Prayer as it evolved from 1549 to 1666.

The inclusion of these last two items is deliberate, for two reasons. There is an ancient principle which is summarized in the Latin slogan *lex orandi lex credendi*, literally translated ‘the law of prayer [is] the law of belief.’ In other words, how we worship affects (sometimes effects) how we believe. It is probably true that most Christians learn as much from the liturgy, hymns or songs that they repeatedly hear, say or sing as they do from all of the sermons that they sleep through. This can be a good or a bad thing, depending on how good the material is. Worship is far too important to be left to musicians.

The second reason for including these items is that the purpose of theology is not just to inform us about God but to lead us to encounter him as the object of our worship. The \*Athanasian Creed defines the Catholic faith as ‘that we *worship* one God in trinity and trinity in unity’. \*Calvin described the gospel as:

a doctrine not of the tongue but of life. It is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart.  
(*Institutes* 3:6:4)

\*Bernard of Clairvaux described five different reasons for the pursuit of knowledge. To seek it for its own sake is curiosity; to seek it for fame is vanity; to seek it to gain money or honours is profiteering; to seek it to benefit oneself is prudence; to seek it to be of service to others is love (*Sermons on Song of Songs* 36:3). There is a legitimate role for all five motives – students can rightly be concerned about obtaining good grades and finding a good job after their studies. But to study theology without the desire to benefit oneself and others is to miss the point of it.

For these reasons, I have also included practical application within the book. To present theology as if it were purely about abstract ideas and not about truths that should lead to worship and to discipleship is to misrepresent it. It is possible, of course, to study theology (and to read this book) as a purely academic exercise, as an outside observer, but those who do so should always bear in mind that this is not the prime purpose of the discipline. Someone who is tone deaf could analyse a symphony mathematically but would be missing the most important feature of the symphony.

- **Question(s) to answer:** one or more questions which should be answered in *no more than 100 words*. Sometimes people are asked to set out their views at length, with the opportunity to prepare in advance – e.g. when giving a talk. On other occasions, we may be asked a question for which an answer is expected on the spot. The questioner will not be satisfied with the offer of a 2,000-word essay in a month – what is required is a brief answer there and then. These 100-word answers are preparation for that situation. For convenience these

questions are all listed together at the end of the book.

- **Resources:** further reading on the topic. The word ‘Resources’ indicates that this is not a ‘reading list’ of items that the reader is expected to read. It is a list of useful resources should you want to go deeper into any of the topics at a later date. I have also referred in many places to my own writings on different topics. This is not because I think my own writings are necessarily the best available (at least I am not prepared to admit to thinking that!) but because they serve to explain more fully points that I am trying to make in a brief concise account.
- **Technical terms:** theology has acquired a certain number of technical terms and there is a glossary at the end of this book offering a brief definition of those that have been used.

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### CROSS-REFERENCES IN THE TEXT

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- There are many references in the text to figures from the past and most of these are described in my *Concise History of Christian Thought*,<sup>2</sup> which previously went through four editions as *The Lion [Concise] Book of Christian Thought*.<sup>3</sup> Where such a figure (or council or creed) is mentioned an asterisk (\*) indicates that they can be found in this work. This is done only for the first mention in each chapter. The Nicene Creed is found under ‘Council of Constantinople (381)’; Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa are found under ‘Cappadocian Fathers’; the Westminster Catechisms are found under ‘Westminster Confession of Faith’.<sup>4</sup>
- The *\*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (= CCC), published in 1994, offers a succinct summary of authoritative Roman Catholic teaching.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the book

I give references to this so that those readers interested in knowing the Roman Catholic position on any topic can easily access it. There is much in the *Catechism* that can be affirmed by all orthodox Christians and I have from time to time cited it under ‘Credal statement(s)’.

- One unusual feature of this book is that most of the time I *quote* biblical passages rather than simply give references. There are two reasons for this. First, the degree of biblical literacy is considerably less than it once was and one cannot assume when mentioning Romans 8:28, e.g., that most readers will know what is being referred to. Second, the reality is that it is very rare for people to look up a reference to see what it says.<sup>6</sup> I have chosen to use the English Standard Version of the Bible (ESV) because it manages to keep closer to the original than almost any other translation while remaining readable.

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### APPROACH

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This book takes an orderly, structured approach to Christian doctrine rather than offering a ‘system’. The contents page indicates the basic structure. After some introductory chapters the book is based on the framework of ‘Creation’ – ‘Sin and evil’ – ‘Redemption’ – ‘Future glory’. Getting the framework right is very important, just as the foundations are important for a house. In that sense this is an orderly, structured account. On the other hand, I am opposed to the ‘big idea’ approach, the idea that there is a single ‘central dogma’ or ‘controlling principle’ for theology. For example, (some) Lutherans see the doctrine of justification by faith in this way; (some) Calvinists see doctrine of the sovereignty of God similarly; \*Karl Barth explicitly made

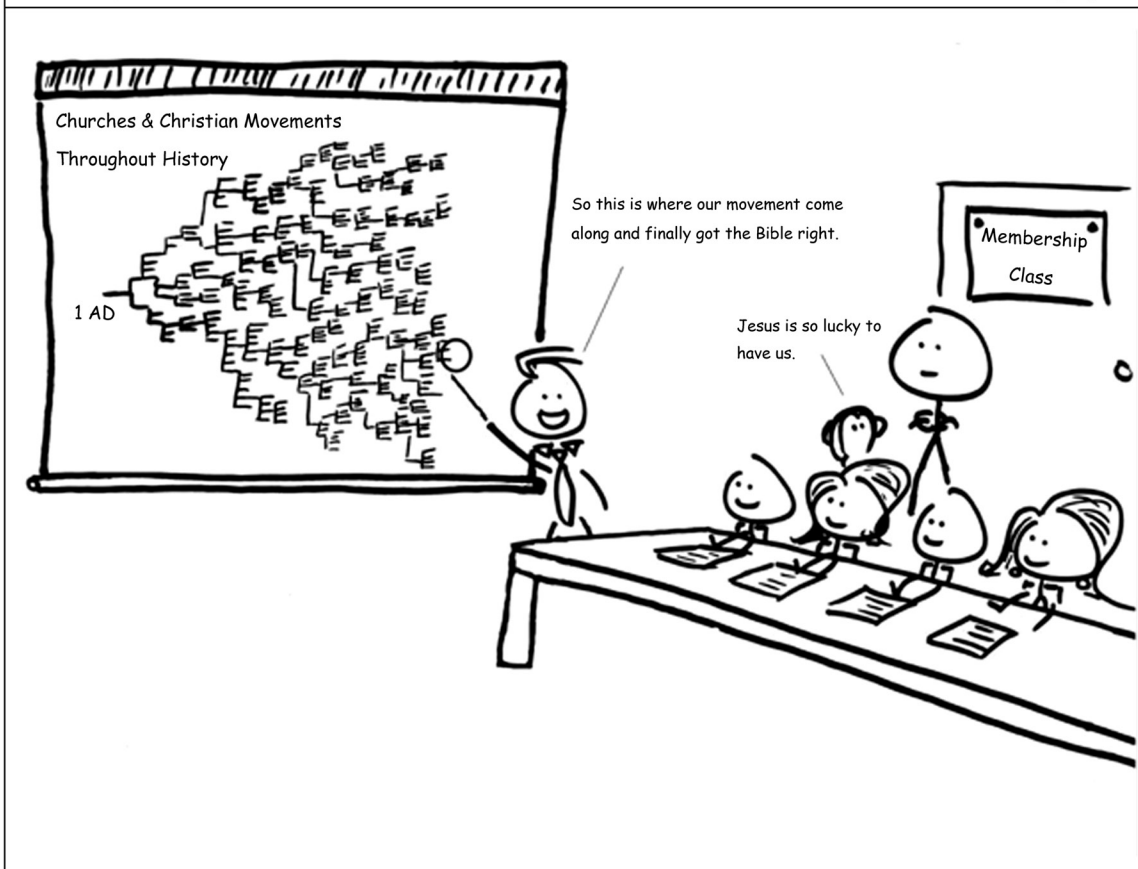
Christology the controlling principle for his theology; some today try to fit all doctrine into the category of ‘relationships’ or of ‘narrative’. These different perspectives all shed light on theology. For example, much of the Bible is in the form of narrative and interpreting it from that perspective can be helpful – but does not, however, have much light to shed on the book of Proverbs. When one particular doctrine or approach or principle is set up as the key to the whole of the Bible or to the whole of Christian doctrine it always ends up bringing distortion.

\*Augustine described the task of theology as ‘faith seeking understanding’, drawing on the Greek Septuagint translation (the one used by the New Testament writers) of Isaiah 7:9: ‘If you do not believe, neither shall you understand.’ \*Anselm picked up on this theme, entitling one of his works *Faith Seeking Understanding*. This book likewise aims to make sense of theology, to help us to understand it. It will not succeed totally in this task, for two reasons. Paul states that here and now we only ‘see in a mirror dimly’ (1 Cor. 13:12), for more on which see Chapter 3. We can hardly expect to understand God fully if he is the eternal Creator and we are his creatures. Indeed, Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal, points out that we cannot expect fully to understand even the created order: ‘Some aspects of reality – a unified theory of physics or a full understanding of consciousness – might elude us simply because they’re beyond human brains, just as surely as Einstein’s ideas would baffle a chimpanzee.’<sup>7</sup> Apart from the doctrine of God there are other aspects of Christian teaching that I cannot claim to have explained fully, both for the reason just given and because of my own personal

shortcomings. The fact that I cannot offer a totally watertight system does not cause me to doubt my faith. Atheism has far more serious shortcomings. It fails to offer any ultimate meaning to life and undercuts the rational process itself, as will be argued in Chapter 4. It also undercuts human dignity by teaching that human beings are merely the accidental outcome of a blind process of evolution, as will be argued in Chapter 6.

My stance can be described as ‘eclectic’ rather than ‘confessional’. I write as an Evangelical Christian, but I draw upon a wide range of Christian traditions – Reformed, Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, etc. – without being tied to any specific one. I do not regard one of these as right and all the others as wrong, but all of them as more or less accurate portrayals of the truth, for more on which, see Chapter 3. The credal statements tend especially to be Reformed, but that is because they have produced so many! For the same reason, many of the prayers are Anglican. The eclectic nature of the work can be seen from the frequency of citation. The authors most cited are (in descending order): Augustine (early Catholic), Calvin (Reformed), \*Luther (Lutheran), the \*Wesleys (Methodist), C. S. Lewis (Anglican), \*Irenaeus (early Catholic), \*Moltmann (modern Reformed) and Barth (modern Reformed). The documents most cited are (in descending order): *Common Worship* (Anglican), \**Westminster Confession of Faith* (Reformed), the Book of Common Prayer (Anglican), *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Roman Catholic),<sup>8</sup> \*the Nicene Creed (early Catholic), the \**Chalcedonian Definition* (early Catholic) and the \*Second Vatican Council (Roman Catholic).

I write as an Evangelical but this does not stop me from occasionally being critical of



Evangelical traditions in places where I think they have strayed from Scripture, Scripture rather than Evangelical tradition being my norm. I have sought to be Bible-based, which is why there are so many scriptural quotations. I hope that this book will be of interest and value to those who would not consider themselves to be Evangelical, as well as those who do.

The challenge of theology is not just to get the doctrines right but also to get them in the right proportion. A portrait might portray the hands and the head completely accurately, but if the former are twice the size of the latter the result is distortion. For

example, there is just one passage in the Bible (Rev. 20:1–7) that refers explicitly to a Millennium, a 1,000-year rule of Christ on earth. Despite this, there are some Christian groups for whom this is a major preoccupation and a test of orthodoxy. That is to lose all sense of proportion. Again, as we shall argue in Chapter 12, one aspect of the work of Christ is Penal Substitution, the idea that Christ on the cross bore our punishment. For some people, however, this has become not just one aspect of what Christ has done but the sum total of it.<sup>9</sup> This is a failure to hold the doctrine in the right proportion. As Colin Gunton put it, “To seek “balance”

as a primary end in theology is to court boredom, if not disaster; yet imbalance can also be catastrophic.<sup>10</sup>

Studies of Christian doctrine mostly focus on points that are disputed and sometimes the impression can be given that Christians disagree on everything. That is not true. There is a considerable amount of common ground, which is generally accepted, but the greatest attention is given to those *relatively* few areas that are disputed. Politicians agree that there should be income tax and that it should be higher for higher earners, but all the debate is focused on the border disputes of just *how* high this or that rate should be. Theology likewise focuses on areas of dispute. One of the benefits of heresy is that it forces the Church to sort out her beliefs, as with the doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century. G. A. Boyd and P. R. Eddy's *Across the Spectrum* offers a helpful account of where Evangelicals differ on a range of doctrines.<sup>11</sup> I have provided cross-references to this in the notes.

Also to be mentioned are the series of 'Four Views' books in which four (sometimes two, three or five) different views are expounded and critiqued in turn by their opponents. The pioneering volume was R. G. Clouse's *The Meaning of the Millennium*, published in 1977 by IVP (USA). Since then many others have been published by IVP, by Zondervan (generally of a lesser quality) and more recently by B & H Publishing and others. Usually they provide an excellent introduction to a controversy. At the last count there were over 70 such volumes. The relevant ones are given in the list of resources at the end of each chapter.

There are places in the book where I express my views clearly and forthrightly –

on the deity of Christ, for example. There are others where I set out the rival views side by side, sometimes in such a way that the discerning reader can see where my sympathies lie, sometimes not. My aim has been to steer a middle course between telling people what to believe on every issue and sitting on every fence. I hope readers will think that I have struck a reasonable balance in this. Also, while I am firmly convinced about core beliefs like the love of God or the resurrection of Christ, there are other disputed areas where I find it harder to make up my mind. The study of theology can bring greater conviction in some areas but in other areas it can serve to strip away unfounded dogmatism.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This book is based upon a Christian Doctrine Survey module that I have taught to first-year students at London School of Theology since 2006. As it has moved from lecture notes to a full-blown book I have received assistance from a variety of my students:

- Ian LaRiviere kindly gave me an electronic copy of his excellent notes, which formed the basis for writing up the chapters. He also proof-read the finished product with painstaking care.
- Helena Cantrell and Ruth Gookey each contributed substantially to the writing up of the text as their second-year practical placement.
- Kirsty Gardner, when taking the module, checked my written copy and helpfully made a note of all the places where I embellished it during the lectures.
- Charlie Comerford and Sophia Davies each supplied me with a list of thought-

provoking questions, comments and objections, which have left their mark on the final product in many ways.

I am very grateful to these six for those specific tasks, especially to Ian, Helena and Ruth. The book also owes a lot to the stimulus provided by the eight cohorts who have taken the module from 2006 to 2013. Accordingly, this book is dedicated to all of them. I hope that those who complained that I didn't answer all their questions will be more satisfied by the book!

I am also grateful to my former colleague Bob Letham for reading the whole and making helpful comments. Also to a number of colleagues who have provided assistance on specific points, including David Peacock, Conrad Gempf, Jean-Marc Heimerdinger, Steve Motyer, Steve Walton and Rob Cook.

Naturally, none of the above is to be held responsible for the remaining defects of the book.

Since the scope of the book, like the module, is 'God, the universe and everything', I have derived ideas from a wide range of sources too numerous to mention or even to remember. During the final six months I have more often than not returned from church with ideas of something to add or to change or of a fresh way to state something.

In the process of delivering the lectures and of interaction with my assistants there was continuing banter between myself as a cat-lover and some of them as (for some strange reason) dog-lovers. I have left some of this in the volume to lighten what can at times be a heavy subject.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

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- \* A person, document or gathering featured in my *Concise History of Christian Thought*.
- ATS G. A. Boyd and P. R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002 and 2009). Chapter numbers change so ch. m/n means Chapter m in the first, Chapter n in the second edition. The second edition adds an Appendix.
- CCC n Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph n.

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## NOTES

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- 1 For a small library of historic creeds and other statements of faith, see J. H. Leith *Creeds of the Churches*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982, third edn. For a collection of Evangelical statements, see J. I. Packer and T. Oden *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2004.
- 2 *A Concise History of Christian Thought*. London: T & T Clark (Continuum) and Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.
- 3 *The Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought*. Tring: Lion, 1984, revised reprint 1986; *The Lion Book of Christian Thought*. Oxford and Batavia, Illinois: Lion, 1992; *The Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought*. Oxford: Lion, 1996; *The Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought*. Oxford: Lion, 2002. There have been other American editions as well as translations into about a dozen other languages.
- 4 For a similar work, which focuses on 100 classical texts, see my *Lion Christian Classics Collection*. Oxford: Lion, 2004.
- 5 There are various printed and online editions, such as <[http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM)>.

- 6 In my experience faulty references on lecture handouts can remain unchallenged for many years.
- 7 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1286257/Limitations-human-brain-mean-understand-secrets-universe.html>>.
- 8 Not counting all of the references to it in brackets on every issue.
- 9 A good test here is to look at the content of the hymns and songs about the work of Christ that are sung in church.
- 10 C. Gunton *Act and Being*. London: SCM Press, 2002, 20.
- 11 G. A. Boyd and P. R. Eddy *Across the Spectrum*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002 and 2009.

P a r t A

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# **METHOD**

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# KNOWING GOD

## Aims of this chapter

In this chapter we look at the sources of theology, asking:

- How can we know God?
- How much of God can we know from nature and reason?
- Do we need tradition or is the Bible all that we need?
- What is the value of tradition?
- What is the role of the Holy Spirit in doing theology?

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## THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND OF OURSELVES

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\*Calvin starts his *Institutes* with an oft-quoted statement:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. (*Institutes* 1:1:1)

He goes on to state that knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves are interlinked. We know God not as someone remote and irrelevant but as he relates to us. Likewise,

we cannot know ourselves properly except as related to God – as created, fallen, redeemed and destined for glory. This book is structured around these four points.

Secular science and psychology can teach us a lot about ourselves. So can literature and I personally have benefited greatly from the profound insights into human nature found in C. P. Snow's novels, in particular his 'Strangers and Brothers' series. We can and should learn from all that is true in secular thought, but we need to place it within the framework of a Christian perspective. Biology and brain science can teach us much about ourselves, but without the understanding that we are created in God's image such knowledge is partial and one-sided. To understand ourselves properly we need to see ourselves as related to God.

So how *do* we know God? First, we must consider whether/to what extent God can be known from nature and reason alone.

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## NATURAL THEOLOGY (CCC 27–49)

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Natural Theology refers to what can be known about God outside of Judaeo-

- **Speculation:** occasionally I have indulged in speculation.
- **Worship:** an extract from a hymn, a worship song or a liturgy, which relates to the topic.
- **Prayer:** usually from a historical source, especially the collects of the Anglican *Common Worship*, most of which originated in the Book of Common Prayer as it evolved from 1549 to 1666.

The inclusion of these last two items is deliberate, for two reasons. There is an ancient principle which is summarized in the Latin slogan *lex orandi lex credendi*, literally translated ‘the law of prayer [is] the law of belief.’ In other words, how we worship affects (sometimes effects) how we believe. It is probably true that most Christians learn as much from the liturgy, hymns or songs that they repeatedly hear, say or sing as they do from all of the sermons that they sleep through. This can be a good or a bad thing, depending on how good the material is. Worship is far too important to be left to musicians.

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a doctrine not of the tongue but of life. It is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart.  
(*Institutes* 3:6:4)

\*Bernard of Clairvaux described five different reasons for the pursuit of knowledge. To seek it for its own sake is curiosity; to seek it for fame is vanity; to seek it to gain money or honours is profiteering; to seek it to benefit oneself is prudence; to seek it to be of service to others is love (*Sermons on Song of Songs* 36:3). There is a legitimate role for all five motives – students can rightly be concerned about obtaining good grades and finding a good job after their studies. But to study theology without the desire to benefit oneself and others is to miss the point of it.

For these reasons, I have also included practical application within the book. To present theology as if it were purely about abstract ideas and not about truths that should lead to worship and to discipleship is to misrepresent it. It is possible, of course, to study theology (and to read this book) as a purely academic exercise, as an outside observer, but those who do so should always bear in mind that this is not the prime purpose of the discipline. Someone who is tone deaf could analyse a symphony mathematically but would be missing the most important feature of the symphony.

- **Question(s) to answer:** one or more questions which should be answered in *no more than 100 words*. Sometimes people are asked to set out their views at length, with the opportunity to prepare in advance – e.g. when giving a talk. On other occasions, we may be asked a question for which an answer is expected on the spot. The questioner will not be satisfied with the offer of a 2,000-word essay in a month – what is required is a brief answer there and then. These 100-word answers are preparation for that situation. For convenience these