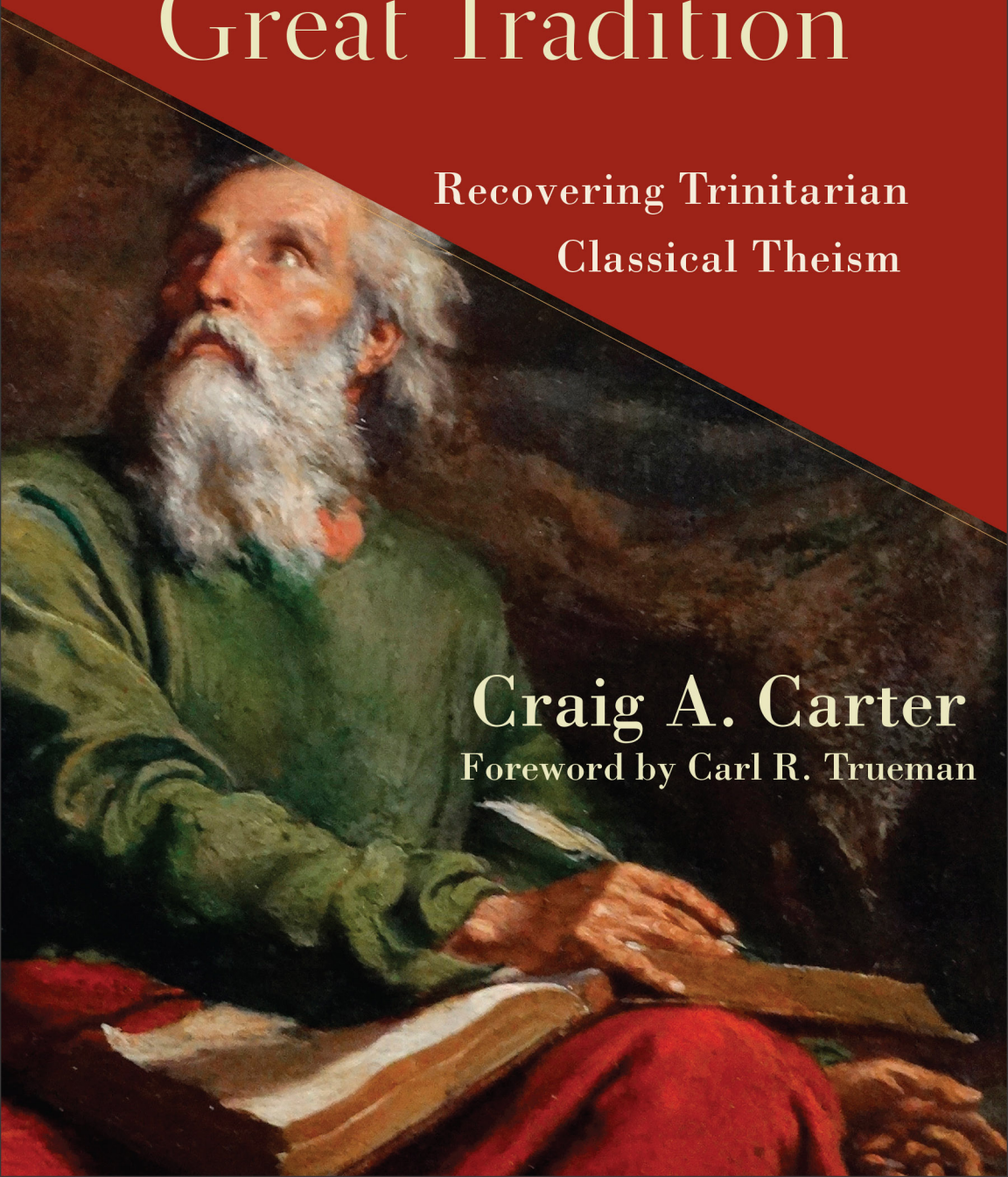


Contemplating God *With the* Great Tradition

Recovering Trinitarian
Classical Theism

Craig A. Carter
Foreword by Carl R. Trueman



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Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Foreword

Recent years have witnessed an unexpected but most welcome development within the ranks of conservative Protestant theology: the recovery of the classical doctrine of God as expressed in the early church creeds and the great confessions of the magisterial Reformation. For some generations, particularly evangelical Protestant theology has been dominated by biblical scholars who pursue the theological endeavor on the basis of biblical exegesis with little or no engagement with the theological tradition of the church. While this is perhaps understandable, given the Protestant commitment to “Scripture alone” as the norming norm of theology, it has also proved highly problematic in at least two ways: (1) ironically, it has served to detach evangelical Protestant thought from the orthodox Protestant tradition, and (2) it has done so because (again ironically) it has unwittingly adopted the antimetaphysical stance of the dominant Kantian trajectories of Western thought since the Enlightenment.

One example of this trend is the redemptive-historical method of interpretation that is now the default in many Reformed and evangelical circles. Building on the important truth that the Bible tells one basic soteriological story culminating in Christ, this approach has done sterling service in saving the Old Testament from both dispensationalism and a reductive moralism. But in focusing on the redemptive storyline, it has also tended to prioritize the narrative economy of God’s actions over the eternal ontology of his being and has thereby collapsed the transcendent into the immanent. It is not that the redemptive-historical approach is incorrect; rather, it is that it does not say enough and tends to ignore questions of metaphysics and ontology that (ironically) the Bible’s own narrative itself raises.

This lack is often reflected in the default piety that always worships God for what he has done and rarely or never worships him for who he is. Of

course, the former is vital—the Psalms are replete with praise for God’s acts of creation, providence, and salvation. But they also contain references to his intrinsic holiness and glory. Our piety—and therefore the theology on which our piety rests and that motivates it—must also give due weight to God’s glorious, holy, praiseworthy being. It was, after all, exposure to God in his thrice holiness in the temple and not any specific act of God that drove an awestruck Isaiah to the ground in worship.

In this context, the recent renaissance of interest in the classical, creedal doctrine of God is to be welcomed. This is the teaching that has generated beautiful liturgies, fortified the church, and nurtured Christians for centuries. And yet many Christians are likely still perplexed by classical theism. They may be unfamiliar with J. P. Gabler and Adolf von Harnack, but they still share their suspicion that the abstruse and abstract language of Nicene trinitarianism and such ideas as immutability and impassibility subvert the reading of Scripture in order to buttress a doctrine of God that owes more to pagan philosophy than God’s self-revelation.

In such a context, Craig Carter is doing sterling service for the church. In his earlier volume, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, he made a compelling case for today’s church to move beyond the narrow interests of the guild of contemporary evangelical biblical scholarship and seek once again to reconnect with how the church itself has read and understood the Bible over the centuries. In the present volume, Carter builds on *Interpreting Scripture* but presses in a more theological and methodological direction, seeking to demonstrate how classical theism is both demanded by the Bible’s teaching and a constitutive element in how we read the Bible.

His proposal of a first and second exegesis is persuasive: the initial findings of biblical interpretation are used to establish theological syntheses that are then fed back into a further reading of the text. It does justice both to the concern that our doctrine of God be drawn from the Bible but also to the fact that who God is in himself should then refine and enrich our understanding of what the Bible says. Paying particular attention to the Trinity and to the book of Isaiah, Craig makes a compelling case (in line with the catholic, premodern approach of the church to such matters) that this approach is consistent with the Bible and a means of confronting us with the glorious and transcendent God who, though revealed in the economy of creation and salvation, yet transcends that economy and is indeed worthy of worship for his very being. And Craig also underscores that this kind of approach is born and conducted and terminates upon adoration of and devotion to the Triune God, who needs nothing to be glorious and complete and yet has condescended to create finite creatures for joyous communion with him.

This is a book for Protestants—especially us Reformed Protestants who have perhaps placed too exclusive a focus on redemptive history—to read, ponder, and apply.

Carl R Trueman
Grove City College

Prologue

How My Mind Has Changed

The story of how this book came to be written goes back to my doctoral studies under John Webster at the University of Toronto School of Theology in the early 1990s. John was still in his Barth phase at that time; he was publishing a lot on Barth and getting famous in the process. I chose to study Barth as the major theologian for my program and John Howard Yoder as my thesis topic. Yoder was a Mennonite who had studied under Barth in Basel and written a book on Barth's ethics of war. Yoder also had been an acquaintance of my favorite seminary professor, J. K. Zeman, who had attended Barth's seminar in Basel with Yoder in the late 1950s. I began to study Yoder in 1992, and by 1999 I had completed my thesis, which was then published as *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Ethics of John Howard Yoder*.¹ I followed it up with a book titled *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Approach*, in which I argued for a Barthian-Anabaptist approach to social ethics.² However, by the time that book was in print, I was experiencing doubts on multiple levels about both Barth and Yoder, doubts that only grew in seriousness as time went on.

From 1992–2004 I was heavily involved in academic administration, serving as vice president and academic dean at two small Christian universities. Finally, in 2004–5 I had a full-year sabbatical, after which I began to teach full-time. As I thought about my next writing project, I envisioned writing a book on the doctrine of God in which I would argue for a relational understanding of God as the basis for social ethics. Having obtained a contract, I went off to do research. I had been reading Colin Gunton, John Zizioulas,

1. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001.

2. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007.

Stanley Grenz, Miroslav Volf, and J. Denny Weaver, and I gradually got deeper into revisionist views of God. As time went on, however, I began to become alarmed by the things I was reading.

It gradually dawned on me that this revisionist road led logically to some form of theological liberalism. I had more or less swallowed a relational view of how God interacts with the world, which sees a two-way influence between God and the world, with both affecting each other. I had also accepted the idea that the relational understanding of God's essence was rooted in the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity as expounded by the Cappadocian fathers. The idea was that the essence of God is relationality, or love between the members of the godhead, which presupposed a concept of three persons, each with a will and each in a relationship to the other two. Thus social trinitarianism grounded relational theism. I wanted to write a book about how this understanding of God provides a basis for social ethics. For a time, it seemed to me that all this was a profound way of rooting the doctrines of the church and the kingdom of God in the very nature of God himself. But up to this point, I had never thought that doing so meant deviating from Nicene orthodoxy.

As my doubts developed, however, I began to see that for many theologians, the logic of viewing God in this way led to a denial of God's wrath and the doctrine of final judgment. That changed the whole gospel message. Are people really lost? Do they need to repent and believe in order to be saved? Is salvation a matter of heaven or hell, or is it a matter of social justice here and now? Even if you say it is both, is that really where the logic leads in the end? The love of God is viewed by many as incompatible with God's justice and wrath against sin. Of course, there are many cultural pressures calling the whole idea of original sin into question, so it is popular to say that God is love and then define love as little more than liberal tolerance. But that is the path to moralistic therapeutic Deism and the end of Christianity.³

The idea of pacifism was being used by some to redefine the concept of God as "the nonviolent God,"⁴ and once that was accomplished, then anthropology, sin, judgment, atonement, salvation, the mission of the church, and

3. This term was coined by C. Smith and Denton in their book, *Soul Searching*. The book describes the religious beliefs of American teens based on wide-ranging and extensive research. Moralistic therapeutic Deism, the dominant belief system of today's youth, can be summarized in five points: (1) a god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth; (2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions; (3) the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself; (4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem; (5) good people go to heaven when they die.

4. J. Weaver, *Nonviolent God*.

the nature of the kingdom of God were all negatively affected.⁵ One good thing to come out of all my reflections and growing doubts, however, was that I came to see how thoroughly the doctrine of God influences all other doctrines. My fascination with the Nicene doctrine of God only grew, even as my relational concept of God crumbled.

In my earlier work, I had argued that Yoder's concept of following Jesus in the way of peace was simply the ethical implication of an orthodox confession of Jesus as divine, and I had also argued that pacifism was rooted in the Nicene doctrine of God. But now I began to wonder if the revisionist view of God really was compatible with historic, Nicene orthodoxy. Obviously, I was aware of the many heretical concepts of God proliferating in liberal Protestantism today. Maybe the most radical forms of relational theism were not arbitrary deviations from orthodoxy but merely a further step down the same road I and many other evangelicals were traveling. Was not the openness of God theology a logical development of what I was reading? Was I on the way to becoming a process theologian? That seemed preposterous, yet I could not help wondering if I was just being temperamentally conservative rather than rigorously logical, and this concerned me deeply. I'm afraid I have never been enough of a postmodernist to carry logical contradictions around in my head without experiencing severe cognitive dissonance. Having been a student of Clark Pinnock in the early 1980s, I was well aware that drastic theological changes usually occur gradually in stages rather than all at once.

At this point, I began to read the fourth-century fathers for myself, which was a life-changing experience. Reading the primary sources carefully is dangerous when all you want to do is to get your book done and use the sources to justify your own preconceptions. The safest course is to refrain from reading anything written before the twentieth century. (To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, a young revisionist cannot be too careful about his reading.)

Eventually I came to the conclusion that the twentieth-century revisionist theologians who were advocating various forms of relational theism and subjecting classical theism to withering critique were themselves snared in highly questionable modernist philosophical assumptions and were in danger of losing touch with the classical orthodox tradition and the biblical roots of that tradition. This was quite ironic, since the revisionists typically used Scripture to refute and revise the tradition. But to me it began to seem as if modern hermeneutics was controlled by certain philosophical assumptions that derive from Kantian and Hegelian metaphysics.

5. For an example of the slide into liberalism and the loss of contact with true, Nicene orthodoxy, see McLaren, *New Kind of Christianity*.

Eventually I realized that *everyone* utilizes metaphysical assumptions in exegesis and that the choice is not between metaphysics or not but rather between unconsciously assumed metaphysics and critically revised metaphysics. It is, after all, highly arbitrary to assume that Hellenization is bad but Hegelianization is just fine. It began to look as if the modern revisionists were far more uncritical of the dominant metaphysical assumptions of their culture than the fathers had been of the dominant metaphysical assumptions of their culture. As I read the fathers—especially Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Augustine—and patristic scholars such as Khaled Anatolios, Lewis Ayres, John Behr, Paul Gavriluk, Robert Wilken, and Frances Young, I gradually came to the conclusion that the fourth-century fathers had utilized certain metaphysical concepts in a careful and critical manner, in some cases redefining words and in other cases making precise distinctions, in order to restate the biblical message in ways that preserved the meaning of the Bible and defended that meaning against heresy. I marveled at the care they took in handling the concepts with which they dealt and at how clear their thinking was.

My world was turned upside down, but I gradually came to realize that it was now actually right side up. Many scholars have noted that the supposed corruption of early Christian theology by Greek philosophical ideas is a theory that has run its course and been found to be untenable. But I would go further and say that the nineteenth-century German liberals who invented and promoted this theory were in fact engaged in a kind of projection, insofar as they were accusing the church fathers of doing in their historical context exactly the sort of thing the modern liberal Protestants were doing in their historical context. It is actually liberal theology that has imported unrevised pagan metaphysics into theology. Modernity rejects the theological metaphysics of Nicaea and replaces these ideas with pagan metaphysical ideas that were considered and rejected by the church fathers. While Aristotle was being ushered out the front door, Epicurus and Zeno were sneaking in the back door.

What I have come to call “the liberal project” is the attempt to revise Christian doctrines one by one so as to make them fit into the metaphysics of modernity. The liberal project has two branches, each with a conservative expression and a liberal expression. One branch is the modern project of *historical criticism* stemming from Spinoza; it takes a radical form in liberal higher criticism in the Enlightenment and eventually ends up in Bultmann’s program of demythologization and the Jesus Seminar. It also comes in a conservative version, in which basically conservative scholars seek to work within the constraints of historicism. The other branch of the liberal project is *revisionist theology* stemming from Schleiermacher, and it takes a radical form in process theology and Hegelian panentheism. It also comes in a conservative

version in the form of what Brian Davies terms “theistic personalism”⁶ and the various revisions of classical theism described by James E. Dolezal as “theistic mutualism.”⁷ Both Spinoza and Schleiermacher were pantheists, and the entire liberal project is oriented toward reconceiving God in a way that leaves behind genuine biblical transcendence as a figment of Greek metaphysics. The liberal project leads to a neopagan view of God and to the return of ancient mythology in place of a biblical metaphysics.

In a culture dominated by pagan metaphysics, the cosmos is all that exists. Carl Sagan enunciates the quintessentially modern confession of faith (disguised as science) at the beginning of his book when he says, “The cosmos is all there is or ever was or ever will be.”⁸ In such a worldview, it is possible to speak of God as identical with the whole of the cosmos, and so we find pantheism all over the world in various cultures, from India to Greece to the modern West. It is also possible to speak of God as a being within the cosmos, and the possibilities range from the extremely powerful disembodied Mind of Deism to the anthropomorphic figures of the Greco-Roman pantheon or the gods of Norse mythology. These gods can be superhumans or divinized humans, or they can be personifications of the forces of nature. In some cases, they are believed to exist literally, and in other cases they may be thought of as metaphors for natural forces.

Many pagan societies contain a majority of uneducated people who believe in literal gods and also an educated elite that takes a pantheistic view but may participate in the popular religion to avoid controversy.⁹ But what we never see—not in the ancient Near Eastern context in which the Old Testament was written, not in the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament, and not in the great non-Christian cultures like China and India—is a view of God as the transcendent Creator of all things, who is in the process of guiding history to its appointed destiny in Christ. In fact, the concept of linear history *itself*

6. Theistic personalism is the view that God is a being among beings within the cosmos, a person like us only greater in magnitude, power, wisdom, etc. See Davies, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 9–16. We will discuss this idea at length later in this book.

7. Theistic mutualism is the idea that God and the world change each other as a result of a mutual relation in which they participate. In “hard theistic mutualism,” change is forced on God by the world; in “soft theistic mutualism,” God sovereignly chooses to allow the world to change him in some way. In both cases, the impassibility of God is denied, and immutability is either denied or redefined in an incoherent manner. See Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 1. Dolezal conflates theistic personalism and theistic mutualism, whereas I see them as closely related but distinguishable. We will discuss these matters thoroughly as we go along.

8. Sagan, *Cosmos*, 1.

9. That was the situation Augustine encountered with many Platonist philosophers of his day and he is highly critical of them for engaging in polytheistic worship when they clearly knew better. See Augustine, *City of God* 8.13 (1/6, 257–58).

arises only out of biblical revelation and depends for its coherence on belief in a transcendent Creator. The uniqueness of the biblical doctrine of God was becoming more and more obvious to me, as was the gap between this orthodox view of God and the relational god of contemporary revisionist theology.

Relational theisms such as process theology and pantheism represent a drift toward pantheism, and the various forms of social trinitarianism and theistic personalism represent a drift toward polytheism. The pressure on Christian theologians to move in these directions is not really coming from the Bible. It is coming from the desire to articulate a doctrine of God that makes sense to a culture in which the concept of divine transcendence has been rejected as unscientific. The choice, it seems to me, is between a Nicene doctrine of God that affirms the transcendence of God and a modern doctrine of God that leaves transcendence behind. But part of the problem we face is that, in order to affirm transcendence, one has to accept the existence of irreducible mystery in our doctrine of God, which seems hard for many modern theologians, including many evangelicals, to do.

The orthodox Nicene tradition generated a doctrine of God in which the three persons (*hypostases*) share one being (*ousia*) and constitute one God. The mystery of God means that the immanent (or eternal) Trinity is incomprehensible to human reason and that what is revealed in the economy (that is, in history) is all true so far as it goes but does not reveal all of God's eternal being. How could it? How could the finite comprehend the infinite? The distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity is absolutely crucial if we wish to avoid idolatry. There is only one God—the holy Trinity—but our minds cannot grasp all that God is. Theology is contemplation of the Triune One who creates the cosmos, speaks and acts as the sovereign Lord of history, and who alone is to be worshiped. Contemplative theology thus leads to worship.

In the process of puzzling over how to restate the meaning of biblical texts in order to convey as clearly as possible the truth about the one whom we worship, it is necessary to engage with certain metaphysical ideas. This is especially so when we attempt to clarify how God relates to the creation. *Creatio ex nihilo* becomes a crucial doctrine with centrally important metaphysical implications for the creator-creature distinction.

The fathers saw theology as a spiritual discipline leading to sanctification, not as a game of solving puzzles or as a way of mastering knowledge of God. For them, “all truth is God's truth,”¹⁰ so they were unafraid to engage their culture in dialogue. They engaged in dialogue with the best of Greek philosophy

10. A. Holmes, *Idea of a Christian College*, 25.

in their day and formulated a set of metaphysical doctrines that can be called Christian Platonism, which functioned as the metaphysical framework in which biblical exegesis was done. Christian Platonism is not simply a matter of redefining Christianity in terms of Neoplatonism; actually, Neoplatonism is one kind of Platonism, and Christian Platonism is a rival kind. Historically, Christian Platonism eventually superseded Neoplatonism.

Christian Platonism is a label that can be applied to the theological metaphysics that grows out of fourth-century pro-Nicene theology and becomes integral to classical Christian orthodoxy. Augustinianism is the seminal source of Christian Platonism in the West, and Thomism is one form of Augustinianism. The specific form of Christian Platonism I find most compelling is the “Reformed Thomism” exemplified by Reformed scholastics like Francis Turretin, Puritans like John Owen, and in our day the later John Webster.

Reformed Thomism is a form of Augustinian theology developed during the Protestant Reformation that views the doctrine of God outlined by Thomas Aquinas in the first forty-three questions of the *Summa Theologica* as an exemplary expression of the trinitarian classical theism at the heart of classic Nicene orthodoxy. Reformed Thomism affirms the Reformation *solas*¹¹ and views them as a needed correction of medieval errors, especially in soteriology, ecclesiology, and sacramental theology. Reformed Thomism understands the *solas* to be more firmly grounded in the Nicene doctrine of God than were the medieval deviations that the *solas* were designed to oppose. To preserve orthodoxy, Reformed Thomism finds it necessary to grapple with certain metaphysical doctrines, such as *creatio ex nihilo*, as it contemplates the being of God and all things in relation to God. Ultimately, *creatio ex nihilo* is the foundation and source of the great gospel truth “grace alone.” Reformed Thomism embraces mystery and analogical language for God and rejects rationalism and univocal language for God. Reformed Thomism distinguishes conceptually between the immanent and economic Trinity, while affirming that there is only one God in three persons both in eternity and in God’s own self-revelation in history. Reformed Thomists affirm the major Reformation confessions, such as the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Belgic Confession. Baptists who embrace Reformed Thomism affirm the Second London Confession of Faith of 1689.

John Webster, especially in his later writings, has been very influential in modeling how to do Reformed Thomism in the contemporary situation.¹²

11. *Sola gratia* (grace alone), *Sola fide* (faith alone), *Sola Christus* (Christ alone), *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *Soli Deo gloria* (glory of God alone).

12. See Scott Swain’s comments about Webster: “John is the supreme contemporary exemplar of dogmatic theology in a (shall we call it?) Reformed and Thomistic key, and an encouragement

Reformed Thomism is currently enjoying something of a renaissance in writers such as Michael Allen and Scott Swain,¹³ Richard Muller,¹⁴ Carl Trueman,¹⁵ J. V. Fesko,¹⁶ James Dolezal,¹⁷ Steven J. Duby,¹⁸ and those influenced by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, the Davenant Institute, the Greystone Theological Institute, the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies, and other like-minded organizations that seem to be springing up on a regular basis these days.

Contemporary interest in Reformed Thomism is an example of *ressourcement* in an age of grave cultural decline. It is a natural response to the crisis of late modernity in which postmodern relativism has dissolved all metaphysics into the will to power. The corrosive influence of neo-Marxist and postmodern ideas have led to the collapse of natural theology and the natural moral law and now threaten the concept of natural scientific law itself. It seems to me that these developments completely discredit the modern critique of pre-modern classical metaphysics because modernity has utterly failed to sustain any viable alternative to classical metaphysics. Nihilism cannot support a flourishing culture.

As modernity collapses, it is critically important that we recover classical orthodoxy. However, late modern metaphysics makes impossible the kind of biblical interpretation that generates classical orthodoxy, because late-modern thought arbitrarily rejects out of hand the metaphysics of Nicaea. So the problem of modernity is actually a metaphysical crisis as well as a doctrinal and hermeneutical problem, and these three things are so intertwined that they need to be tackled together. Reformed Thomism is a logical, coherent, biblically based school of thought, which has the potential to generate the fresh and vital kind of theology that needs to be done in what we could term the post-postmodern or postcritical era now dawning.

The pro-Nicene theology of the fourth century emerged on the basis of a certain type of biblical interpretation. The modernist rejection of the metaphysical framework or “sacramental ontology”¹⁹ in which this way of reading

to many of us who aspire to fulfill the theologian’s vocation faithfully and intelligently” (*God of the Gospel*, 7).

13. See Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*.

14. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*.

15. See Trueman, *Creedal Imperative*.

16. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*.

17. In addition to Dolezal’s *All That Is in God*, mentioned above, see also his *God without Parts*.

18. Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, and his *God in Himself*.

19. This term is used by Hans Boersma in a series of important books to describe essentially the same thing that I call “Christian Platonism.” See esp. Boersma, *Nouvelle Theologie*; Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*; and Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*.

Scripture flourished has led many modern thinkers to assume that we cannot read the Bible that way anymore. As I worked my way through these issues, I found the question of hermeneutics becoming more and more complex and also, at the same time, more and more important. I realized that it would be insufficient merely to demonstrate that modern doctrines of God—like Moltmann’s dynamic panentheism, for example—were incompatible with Nicaea. This is true and easily done; one can look at Stephen Holmes’s work, for example, to see things spelled out rather clearly.²⁰ But what is to be said in response to the claim that patristic exegesis was inferior to modern exegesis and therefore that Nicaea has to be revised according to newer, better ways of interpreting of the Bible?

The surprising answer is that modern historical criticism actually is inferior to premodern exegesis, not superior to it.²¹ The church has always understood the Bible to have a spiritual sense in addition to the literal sense, which is an extension of the literal sense and not a contradiction of it. But I found myself having to go deeper into the hermeneutical question to make that case, and eventually I had to admit that I was writing two different books. So I separated out the material on hermeneutics as a separate book.²² Having made the best argument I could for the hermeneutical approach of the Great Tradition, I have now tried to put that approach into practice in the theological interpretation of Scripture done in the present book. This book is thus based on the previous one in that it seeks to do theology in the way the previous book recommended as the classic approach to doing theology.

I am currently involved in writing a major commentary on Isaiah for the International Theological Commentary series (T&T Clark). In it I attempt to interpret this centrally important biblical book using the classical approach to biblical interpretation that has been used throughout church history by theologians in the Great Tradition. My book on hermeneutics and this one on the doctrine of God are meant to support and prepare the way for the highest form of theology, which is done in the form of commentary on Scripture. The modern separation of exegesis and hermeneutics from doctrine is a recent innovation and a serious weakness of modern theology. The way forward is to break down the hyper-specialization that weakens our attempts to hear God speaking clearly in his Word.

Lewis Ayres’s *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*²³ has been extremely important to me, and I have used

20. S. Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*.

21. See the seminal article by Steinmetz, “Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis.”

22. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*.

23. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

it several times in a seminar I offer on fourth-century theology. One reason it is so important is that Ayres sees so clearly how wide the gap is between fourth- and twentieth-century theology, and he shows convincingly how poorly modern theologians understand pro-Nicene theology. It is dangerous for Christian theologians to be orthodox in the sense of wishing to confess the trinitarian theology of Nicaea and yet be so historically illiterate and so philosophically ignorant that they do not understand why the fathers in this formative period said what they said, with whom they were debating, and what issues were at stake. Knowing only the form of the words of the creed is not exactly of no value whatsoever, but it is inadequate. In such a situation, one is at risk of not understanding when or how contemporary thought goes off the rails and leaves orthodoxy behind. This is the perilous condition of much of what remains of Christian orthodox theology today.

I admit to having been part of the problem. I am painfully aware of how little I understood the fourth-century debates over the doctrine of God until the past fifteen years. In addition to my own laziness, I also blame deficiencies in my education. The designers of my seminary curriculum obviously thought that the study of patristic theology and exegesis was totally unimportant. My doctoral program at Toronto required a course in liberation theology but none in patristic theology! That pretty much sums up in a nutshell what is wrong with the modern academy. I can only be thankful that I did get an honors BA in the history of philosophy in which we read nothing but primary sources, and this has been the most useful part of my education. But there is no future for orthodox theology unless pastors and professors make it a priority to understand the classical tradition of Nicene orthodoxy. This is part of what motivates me to write this book.

As I become increasingly aware of the distance between Nicene orthodoxy and much of contemporary evangelical theology, I realize my need for deeper roots in a living tradition. Thomas Oden argued that if members of various denominational traditions were each to burrow down to the roots of their own traditions, they would find themselves closer to one another as a result. This is because the various Christian traditions converge the further back in time we go.²⁴ Instead of looking for the lowest common denominator in the present, he recommends looking for the oldest and most fundamental traditions as a strategy for true ecumenism. But trying to go all the way back to the

24. Thomas Oden is the author of many books that have influenced me. But let me mention three: *After Modernity . . . What?; Requiem*; and *Rebirth of Orthodoxy*. His greatest contribution, however, was his vision for, and general editorship of, the Ancient Christian Commentary Series published by InterVarsity Press. This was a monumental accomplishment, for which he will always be remembered with gratitude.

Bible while ignoring the patristic, medieval, and Reformation periods is not effective. If we wish to be orthodox and not merely repeat ancient heresies, we need to know historical theology. I have, therefore, gone deeper into my own Baptist roots and studied the seventeenth-century Reformed Baptist tradition in England. The Second London Confession of 1689 shapes my identity as a confessional Protestant. I also am privileged to have held the office of Theologian in Residence in my local Baptist church for over a decade now, in addition to serving as professor of theology in an evangelical university. So I am accountable to a local church and not just to the academy. My theological work is not that of a freelance thinker. Instead, it is a part of a living tradition of classical orthodoxy that stretches back to the New Testament apostles, who proclaimed that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. I have gone from wanting to revise classical orthodoxy to joyfully and wholeheartedly celebrating it; in this book I aim to defend it.

Part One

Defining
Trinitarian
Classical
Theism

One

Classical Orthodoxy and the Rise of Relational Theism

Because God is simple, he is absolutely and not merely contingently other than the world. . . . The otherness of God is not an instance of correlativity or complementarity. . . . Creatures are not related to God as to a thing of a different genus, but as to something outside of and prior to all genera.

John Webster¹

For the past decade, I have been contemplating the meaning of two curious facts about the history of Christian theology. The first is that prior to the Enlightenment, virtually no Christian theologian thought that there was any tension, let alone a contraction, between the immutability and impassibility of God, on the one hand, and the fact that God has acted in history to judge and save, on the other. The second is that by the late nineteenth century the problem of how to reconcile divine immutability and impassibility with what the Bible says about God's actions in history had become a pressing question, and in the twentieth century there was a virtual stampede of Christian theologians from many different traditions seeking to qualify, modify, or even deny outright the immutability and impassibility of God in the name of being "biblical." Nobody thought it was a problem until suddenly everybody

1. Webster, "*Non ex Aequo*," 120.

thought it was a problem. How did this change occur? Why did it occur? What does it mean for the future of orthodox Christianity?

Classical Theism versus Relational Theism

Classical theism is the historic orthodox doctrine of God, and it says that God is the simple, immutable, eternal, self-existent First Cause of the cosmos. God creates the world and acts on it, but the world cannot change God in any way. Relational theism is a term that we can apply to a number of different doctrines of God, all of which affirm that God changes the world and the world changes God. Surely it is obvious that these two conceptions of God are as different as day and night. We are talking about two different concepts of what God is.

On the one hand, there is the transcendent Creator, whose being is qualitatively different from created being and who is unknowable in his unique being except by means of his own gracious self-revelation and then only insofar as the limited capacity of the human creature allows. As John Webster says in the quotation that heads this chapter, God is not part of the world, and this means not only that God is not a being within this world but also that God does not exist *alongside* the world as the complement to the world. God and the world do not stand on some common plane that allows them to be in a relationship with each other as two creatures stand in relation to each other. God is totally other than the world in his divine being. Historic orthodoxy, including both Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Christianity in both its Roman Catholic and Protestant forms, has viewed divine simplicity as a way of stating the radical otherness of God rather than as a univocal statement about the nature of divine being. It is a signifier of mystery, not a rational definition. The famous denial of “real relations” between God and creation by Thomas Aquinas means not that God cannot act on the world but only that the world cannot act on God. God brings about change in the world, but the world does not bring about change in God. He writes, “Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to Him.”² This

2. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 13, art. 7 (1:66). See Davies (*Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 75–79) for a discussion of what Thomas means here. Davies shows that Thomas’s point is the same as that of Webster in the above quotation: God is utterly other than the world and not in any way limited by, conditioned by, or otherwise changed or affected by the

is an affirmation that the relationship is not between two entities of similar being but between the immutable and perfect self-existent God, on the one hand, and the world of change and imperfection that is itself wholly dependent on God, on the other.

The modern era, however, has witnessed a sustained challenge to the traditional view of God as simple, immutable, impassible, and outside of time. This challenge has taken a number of different forms, some relatively radical and others relatively conservative with regard to the classical tradition. On the radical end of the spectrum we see the weak, pleading, cajoling God of process theism, who, as part of the cosmos himself (or itself?), is incapable of directing history by his power to its appointed end. This God changes along with the world and interacts with it in such a way that God changes the world and the world changes God. Process theologians think that the omnipotence of God must be denied lest God be responsible for evil. For example, Catherine Keller, speaking of what she terms “the contradiction growing in the heart of monotheism,” says, “If the God of justice is to be counted all-powerful, that God must be held accountable for all injustice.”³ The God of the various forms of relational theism cannot prevent evil, but he/it can and does suffer along with the creation. In his dynamic panentheism, for example, Jürgen Moltmann views “the suffering of Christ as the suffering of the passionate God.”⁴ Divine love is redefined as God’s voluntary suffering along with the creation. This suffering god can thus rightly be said to be, in more than one sense, pathetic.

On the (relatively) conservative end of the spectrum, we see many less-radical proposals, which nevertheless are reacting to the same basic problem of the supposed incompatibility of divine immutability with divine action in history. Brian Davies has coined the term “theistic personalism” to describe those who reject classical theism and view God as a “being among beings,” that is, a person like us only greater, older, wiser, more powerful, and immortal—a sort of disembodied mind similar to Descartes’s conception of himself, only greater than us by degree. Davies cites Richard Swinburne, who defines God as “a person without a body.”⁵ Swinburne believes that God is within time⁶ and that the Trinity is a “collective” of three “individuals, whose

world. This is an idea that is central to Eastern and Western and Roman Catholic and Protestant theology down through the entire history of theology. If it seems unfamiliar and esoteric today, that is merely an indication of how out of touch contemporary theology is with its own roots.

3. Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 127.

4. Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 22.

5. Davies, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 9ff.

6. Swinburne, *Christian God*, 131–32.

unity consists in the fact that each of them are members of a genus (kind) named ‘divine.’”⁷ This “social trinitarianism” was rejected by the pro-Nicene fathers of the fourth century, who were responsible for developing the Nicene doctrine of God, but it is making a big comeback today.⁸ A slightly less radical proposal, but one that arises from similar concerns, is the open theism of Clark Pinnock and others. In this theology, God waits to see what creatures do and then responds because God has made “a kind of covenant of non-coercion with creatures,” which means that there are “certain metaphysical constraints that God cannot avoid.”⁹ In open theism the limits on God’s power are seen as self-imposed and voluntary on his part, which makes this view much closer to orthodoxy than process theology. Pinnock calls his view “a species of free will theism” that is in opposition to “the strong immutability central to the Thomistic model.”¹⁰ James E. Dolezal discusses a number of conservative Calvinist theologians who have moved in the direction of what he calls “theistic mutualism” in order to meet the objection that an immutable and impassible God is incapable of having a real relationship with us. As an example, he cites Bruce Ware, who Dolezal believes has conceded too much ground in responding to the open theists. Ware, Dolezal argues, concedes the main point that ontological change occurs in the being of God and wishes only to insist that the cause of this change is the sovereign will of God.¹¹ It seems that many conservative evangelical and Reformed theologians feel a great deal of pressure to make similar concessions to relational theism in the current climate.

Relational theism takes many forms, resulting in models of God that vary considerably from each other. But if we look closely, we can see that all of them spring from the same source—namely, the supposed contradiction between the transcendent God of classical theism and the biblical God who speaks and acts in history to judge and to save. In surveying the proposed solutions to the problem, one gets the feeling that some theologians would have difficulty refuting the devastating assessment that they have destroyed God in order to save him. By this I mean that the solution to the problem is worse than the problem itself. Weakening the radical otherness and transcendence of God in order to bring God closer to us and ensure that we have a “real” relationship with him fails in the stated goal of making possible a

7. Swinburne, *Christian God*, 180–81.

8. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*. See chap. 14, which expounds Gregory of Nyssa’s rejection of social trinitarianism.

9. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 137.

10. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, x, xi.

11. Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 27–28. See Ware, “Modified Calvinist Doctrine of God,” 85–92.

relationship between the transcendent God and human beings precisely to the extent that, by denying God's simplicity and immutability, God becomes a being different from what he actually is. Having thus created a god in our own image capable of functioning alongside us within the cosmos, we certainly are capable of having a two-way relationship with him, but we still do not have a relationship with the one true God of the Bible and of historic Christian orthodoxy. It is not with God but with an idol that we now enjoy a relationship. Rather than coming close to the God of the Bible, we have merely become idol-worshippers.

The crucial difference between the classical doctrine of God and modern relational theism has to do with the distinction between God and the world. Both classical theism and relational theism assert that God speaks and acts in history to judge and save. Where they differ is in their respective understandings of the nature of the God who does these things. In the quotation at the head of this chapter, John Webster speaks of how God differs from the world. In classical theism there is a strong emphasis on the otherness of God; God is not seen as an extension of the world in any way, and the world is not seen as an extension of God in any way. The being of the world and the being of God are not continuous but radically different. God alone is creator of all that is not God. This contrasts with all forms of pagan religion and many types of Greek philosophy, in which the being of God and the being of the cosmos are continuous.

One crucial way of expressing this difference has been to speak of God as acting causally on the world while denying that the world acts causally on God. This is because God is creator and the world is creation. The being of the world is contingent on God in a way that the being of God is not contingent on the world. This asymmetrical relationship is crucial to the preservation of God's uniqueness. Classical theism speaks of God's aseity, which means that he is self-existent and thus dependent only on his own being. But creation is contingent on God, which means that it is totally dependent on God both for its origin and also for its continuation in existence. In modern relational theism, the simplicity and aseity of God are denied, and God is seen as existing in a relationship to creation similar to the kind of relationship one creature has with another. Quite often as well, God is understood to be in time with us and therefore participating in the ongoing change that characterizes creatures. Characteristic of all relations between creatures is the mutual influence of creatures on each other, resulting in change on both sides. But in God the relation is one way only: God causes and changes creatures, but creatures do not cause or change God. Why not? Because God's being is unique to himself and unlike our own. When relational theism affirms two-way relations of

causality and change between God and creatures, it eliminates the uniqueness of God and brings him down to the level of a creature. The dispute between classical theism and relational theism is not about details or obscure points of metaphysics; at stake is nothing less than the creator-creature distinction. To get this issue wrong is to fall into idolatry.

In this book, I want to explain as simply and clearly as possible how and why this sea change in our understanding of the nature of God occurred and why relational theism is a dead end intellectually, spiritually, and culturally. I want to demonstrate the superiority of the historic, classic, orthodox, Nicene view of God as the true teaching of Holy Scripture. Those who hold to one version or another of the new relational understanding of God view themselves as “progressives” and see their views as surpassing the older understandings of God in much the same way as modern science surpasses primitive superstitions about how the world works. However, from my perspective, something like the opposite actually is true. The modern relational view of God is merely a reversion to the pagan mythology that existed in the world before Abraham; there is nothing progressive about it.

It is the divine self-revelation to Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ that constitutes the only true progress that has ever been made in the human understanding of God. On nearly every page the Old Testament testifies to how radical that revelation of God as the transcendent Creator was and how difficult it was for the children of Israel to detach themselves from the grip of pagan mythological thinking long enough for the new revelation of the transcendent Creator to establish itself and take root among them. The Christian church has also struggled mightily throughout history to absorb and preserve the astonishing revelation contained in Holy Scripture. In the fourth century, the Arian crisis led to the church nearly losing the biblical thread and reverting back to paganism, but in God’s providence the church was able to hold on to the scriptural revelation of God as the transcendent Creator and articulate that understanding in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381. Today we are living through a period of struggle similar in magnitude to the one that occurred in the fourth century. The modern period has seen a major challenge to the orthodox understanding of God, one that the church currently is coping with hesitantly and clumsily.

One complicating factor today is the great apostasy within the world center of Christianity, namely Western Europe, which has occurred over the past three centuries. It may well turn out to be the case that the classically orthodox faith will not survive much longer in Europe except as the faith of a persecuted minority but will instead flourish and take root in the growing

churches of the global South. Since Europe has been the place where the church has done much of its best thinking over the past millennium, this means that the global church lacks the in-depth theological resources that would be helpful in this crisis. However, the fact that the Holy Spirit moves in power in the growing churches of the global South more than makes up for the lack of great universities and well-educated theologians. Once Europe itself lacked these resources, but the work of Spirit-filled gospel preaching caused the church to reflect more deeply on its faith and resulted in the growth and flourishing of colleges, seminaries, and universities. This process is already happening in our day in the global South, and in due course the intellectual center of world Christianity will likely shift to Africa and other parts of the global South. What happened in terms of intellectual life in Europe between, say, the tenth and nineteenth centuries was not something baked into the genes of the European races; rather, it was a culture created and nourished by the gospel. Wherever the gospel goes, Christian culture grows. Race is as irrelevant as geography to this historical process. The future of Nicene orthodoxy is in Africa and Asia, not in Europe and North America (unless a massive revival breaks out in those places). Before signing up to massive revisions in doctrine, theologians facing the challenge of relational theism ought to consider the nature of our social situation and take into account the fact that we live in a culture that is systematically rejecting the gospel.

Most Western theology in the twenty-first century, apart from conservative and orthodox exceptions, has embraced various forms of relational theism. In so doing, vast swaths of the Roman church and most of the historic Protestant denominations have cut themselves off from their own confessional roots. This is the painful reality that this book seeks to lay bare. The obvious question that arises from this bleak diagnosis is what this fact means for the church, for the gospel, and for Western culture. What does it mean that most academic theology done today in Western universities and in the leading seminaries of the historic denominations is based on some sort of relational theism? To answer this question, we first need to gain greater clarity on how relational theism differs from classical orthodoxy. I believe that most people, including conservative evangelical scholars, have only a dim awareness of the seriousness of the issues involved in this historic theological shift. We need to understand what classical theism is and how it relates to biblical trinitarian theology. We also need to understand how deeply biblical the roots of classical orthodoxy really are. The main purpose of this book is to explain the true nature of our situation so that we understand what is at stake in the challenge that relational theism poses to classical theism.

Contemplating God with the Nicene Fathers

There are three problems with a lot of contemporary theology that we would do well to avoid. First, modern theology tends to discuss the doctrine of the Trinity separately from the doctrine of the attributes of God. This is a problem because the doctrine of the Trinity can float free of its moorings in the nature of God and can take on pagan, unbiblical baggage without anyone realizing it. Second, modern theology often is far too impatient with mystery and much too quick to declare a contradiction when, in fact, it is only confronting a paradox. Just because things become complex does not necessarily mean we are doing anything wrong. Third, modern theology tries to jump over the history of theology and interpret the Bible in modern terms without realizing when it is just repeating old mistakes all over again. In this book, I hope to avoid these three pitfalls by paying sustained attention to the key century from the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 to the death of Augustine in AD 430. This is the formative period when the classical Christian doctrine of God took shape and was expressed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381, which is more popularly known as the Nicene Creed.

The best way to think of the classically orthodox definition of God is to see it as the union of classical theism and trinitarian theology. Classical theism and biblical trinitarianism came together during the fourth century in the context of the Arian debates. This period of controversy was the context for the genesis of the Nicene doctrine of God, which is the heart of classical orthodoxy as expressed in the Nicene Creed. Fourth-century pro-Nicene theology combined a commitment to divine immutability and simplicity, on the one hand, with a trinitarian account of how God operates in history, on the other. Combining these two understandings of God was an intentional strategy designed to do justice to Scripture. The Nicene fathers believed that they needed to be concerned both with what was termed “theology” and also with what was termed the “economy.” So they spoke of what we would call the ontological or immanent Trinity as well as the economic Trinity. These terms refer to God in his own eternal being (the ontological Trinity) and to God in his revelatory actions in history (the economic Trinity). There is only one Triune God, but to be clear about our meaning, we speak of him in different ways.

Our most important knowledge of God comes from his self-revelation in the economy, that is, in history. God acts in history (e.g., the exodus, the resurrection of Christ), and he inspires his prophets to explain the significance of those acts (the testimony of Scripture). But fourth-century pro-Nicene theologians sought to go beyond descriptions of God’s actions in history and make statements about the nature of God in himself; that is, they sought to

make statements about the eternal being of God on the basis of revelation. It is not enough to speak only of God's actions in history. Why not? Because we seek absolute truth about God, not merely an account of how he has acted so far. By this I mean that theology seeks to rest our faith on the very being of God, not merely on the account of his acts. Some theologians talk as if it were more biblical to speak only of the economy, and they dismiss the hard work of relating the economy to theology as unnecessary speculation. In patristic and scholastic theology, speculative theology is a good thing, but in modern theology, the term has acquired a pejorative connotation. We need to recover the premodern sense of speculative theology and see why it is spiritually beneficial. Scripture is our model here.

Modern theologians often mistakenly think that they are imitating the Bible itself when they focus only on God's acts in history. But the Bible itself grapples with the relationship between God's self-revelation in history and God's eternal being in himself. The prophets of Israel were well aware of the natural fear we have that, given the intractable evil of the human heart, God might one day decide that enough is enough and that the messy experiment with human beings should come to an end. In other words, the confidence that God will continue to be gracious to us needs to be grounded in something more than the *will* of God; if God's promises are to be taken as absolutely certain, our confidence must be grounded in the *being* of God. Can we trust God to keep his promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 that a descendent of David will sit on the throne of David forever? This was Isaiah's problem. The problem of the book of Isaiah is encapsulated in the uniquely Isaianic phrase "the Holy One of Israel." Israel's God is holy and therefore must separate himself from all sin and punish it. Israel, however, is unholy and therefore must go into exile and suffer punishment for sin. But if exile is coming and the city of Jerusalem, the temple, and the throne of David must all fall, how can God's promise to David be kept? The extreme pressure of the problem arises from the fact that a holy God has made an unconditional promise to an unholy people. Isaiah sees that the holiness of God is a matter of the being of God, not just the will of God. Is grace also a matter of the being of God or merely a matter of God's will? All the prophets felt the burden of this problem, and their preoccupation was therefore with the nature of Israel's God, not merely with his actions up to that point in history.

This is why the book of Psalms resounds with exclamations about the very being and nature of God:

Praise the LORD!

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever! (Ps. 106:1)

“The LORD is good” (Ps. 100:5). That is the bedrock conviction on which the faith of Israel rested. In Psalm 106 the psalmist recounts the checkered history of the people of Israel, a history marred by continuous sin (v. 6), forgetfulness (vv. 7, 13), idolatry (v. 19), lack of faith (v. 24), and immorality (v. 28). More than once during this sorry history, the psalmist recalls that the LORD was tempted to destroy and abandon his people (vv. 23, 26), and the LORD’s anger burned against them (vv. 29, 32). Instead of destroying the inhabitants of Canaan as they were commanded to do (v. 34), God’s people mixed with the nations and learned to worship idols (vv. 35–36), even to the point of joining in with the pagans in the abominable practice of child sacrifice (vv. 37–39). The LORD’s anger against his people led to their being oppressed by the nations (vv. 41–42), but the LORD always delivered them. The psalmist is sure that it was the steadfast love of the LORD, not any sort of merit on the part of Israel, that caused the LORD to act in mercy. From the perspective of the exile, the psalmist musters up the nerve to call on the LORD to “gather us from among the nations that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise” (v. 47). On what basis does the psalmist dare to ask this? Certainly not the merit of the people of Israel; rather, it is because of who God is. The psalm ends by affirming the LORD, the God of Israel, who is unchanging “from everlasting to everlasting” (v. 48). What, primarily and most importantly, is he eternally? He is good. The goodness of God is the foundation of faith.¹²

From a human point of view, it would be easy to lose heart and give in to despair in the face of Israel’s continual apostasy—from the golden calf at the foot of Sinai to the worship of Assyrian gods in the Jerusalem temple under Ahaz—and it was necessary to ground hope in something other than history. Is there a basis in the nature of God for our hope of grace and redemption? The question of the nature of God was central to the faith of the Old Testament, and it remained central to New Testament theology and to the faith of the early church. It is one thing to say that God has acted mercifully in the past (in the economy); it is another to say that God is characterized by steadfast love (*hesed*) in his very being (ontology). Viewed from this perspective, the doctrine of immutability takes on a whole different complexion. What might have been perceived as a matter of abstract speculation is suddenly revealed to be a crucial matter of faith. For fourth-century pro-Nicene theologians, the debates we study today as the Arian crisis and the formation of Nicene trinitarianism were as much an issue of personal faith versus unbelief as they

12. For an edifying elaboration of the truth that the goodness of God is the preeminent claim of the Psalter about God, see C. Holmes, *Lord Is Good*.

were a complex philosophical problem. They were not merely one or the other but both at the same time.

Thus one of the main topics of contemplation for the pro-Nicene theologians of the fourth century was how the utterly simple, unchanging, eternal, perfect God could be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How could the Son be simple and immutable while also becoming man? The Arians gave up trying; they suggested that we view the Father as the eternal, simple, unchanging, perfect one and then see the Son and Spirit as the ones who act in history. Thus they placed the Son and Spirit outside the simplicity of God. The pro-Nicene fathers considered this to be a denial of their essential deity and therefore to be heretical and blasphemous. One of the major contributions the Cappadocian fathers made to Nicene orthodoxy was to work out an account of the Trinity in which all three persons are understood as partaking of the divine simplicity.¹³ A potential conflict was introduced into the Triune God by the Arians that threatened the unity of the divine being unless some way could be found to include the three persons of the Trinity within the divine simplicity. This required sustained reflection both on what simplicity is and what it is not. The eternal being of God, which is the being of Father, Son, and Spirit, is simple.¹⁴

The doctrines of immutability and impassibility say that God does not change in his essence. These doctrines, however, are not stand-alone doctrines; they actually are part of an intricate web of beliefs that make up what is often called “classical theism” or “the classical doctrine of God.” Classical theism refers to what can be known about God by reason working on general revelation. By philosophical reasoning about nature, we can know that God necessarily must exist as the First Cause of the universe and that God is simple, immutable, eternal, and self-existent. But we cannot know that this God has acted so as to create, judge, become incarnate, and redeem the fallen creation except by special revelation. Special revelation comes to us today in Holy Scripture. Although some attributes of God, such as immutability and eternity, can be known by natural theology, other attributes of God, such as love and mercy, can be known only by special revelation. The Nicene doctrine of the Trinity was formulated to affirm that the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—has the attributes of simplicity, eternity, aseity, perfection, and immutability. The fathers were convinced that Scripture teaches both of these sets of attributes—that is, both the philosophical attributes and the personal

13. For the best recent account of how they did this, see Radde-Gallwitz, *Transformation of Divine Simplicity*.

14. I will discuss this issue in more depth in chap. 7.

attributes. Contemplation of the Spirit-interpreted acts of God in history, as found in Scripture, led the pro-Nicene theologians of the fourth century to conclude that we can have absolutely certain, though not comprehensive, knowledge of the eternal nature of God. The economic Trinity reveals the ontological Trinity truly, though not exhaustively.

So the best way to understand the formation of the Nicene doctrine of God is to see it as bringing together what would later be called “classical theism” (derived both from general revelation and from special revelation) with trinitarian theology (known only from Holy Scripture) to allow the full meaning of the truths of general revelation to be understood more fully *in the light of* special revelation. Today the so-called god of the philosophers often is denigrated as being incompatible with the personal God of the Bible, and classical theism is considered unimportant at best and harmful to the biblical doctrine of God at worst. Theological speculation about the immanent Trinity and the being of God in itself is thought to be utterly unrelated to the Christian life and irrelevant to preaching. After all, it is said, how many sermons have you heard on the doctrine of divine simplicity? My hope is that, having read this book, you will see why the early church fathers, medieval scholastics, Protestant Reformers, and post-Reformation scholastics and Puritans thought that the issue of classical theism is vitally important to worship, spirituality, and Christian confidence in God. It is actually the basis of our hope of eternal salvation. We may not preach divine simplicity every Sunday, but divine simplicity undergirds the gospel we do preach every Sunday, and the truth of classical theism, coupled with biblical trinitarian theology, makes it possible to confess the gospel as absolutely and eternally true.

The Decline of Classical Orthodoxy in Modernity

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of Europe’s elites turned away from special revelation and from the Christian faith itself. There was a growing conviction that there is a contradiction between what reason can know about God and what is taught in the Bible about God. To put it as concisely as possible: if God is immutable, he does not act in history; on the other hand, if he acts in history, he is not immutable. So why did the church teach that God can at the same time be immutable and also act in history? Why then was this sort of contradiction, along with the rest of historic orthodoxy, so widely held for over a millennium by so many thinkers? The answer the advocates of Enlightenment came up with was that no rational person would ever have believed this kind of contradiction except for the pressure applied

to philosophers and theologians by the institutional church. This is the origin of the Enlightenment drive to overturn the authority of the church in the name of reason. This crusade began to make serious inroads into Western cultural consciousness in the nineteenth century and burst into dominance in the twentieth century.

In the nineteenth century, we see the rise of the myth of the romantic hero. This is the individual who challenges the establishment, the single heroic thinker who refuses to bow to political pressure to conform but who instead rebels in the name of free thought and reason. We also see a widespread tendency—beginning in the nineteenth century and mushrooming in the twentieth century—to view the pursuit of truth as incompatible with the constraints of any sort of creed or doctrinal authority. The scientist must be an iconoclast who challenges dominant ideas in the culture. Finally, we also see the rise of the myth of warfare between science and theology, in which progress in intellectual thought is held back by the forces of reactionary churchmen bent on stifling challenges to established ways of thinking. Christianity was increasingly portrayed as self-contradictory, anti-reason, and politically reactionary. Human progress was said to require the triumph of reason over superstition, education over ignorance, and science over theology. Revelation came to be seen as an impediment to reason instead of being complementary to reason.

During the period of the Enlightenment, the three problems in modern theology that we noted in the previous section began to affect theology. First, the tendency to pit the God who speaks and acts in Scripture against the immutable and simple God of classical theism resulted in the separation of the attributes of God from the Trinity. Initially, this brought about the eclipse of the doctrine of the Trinity between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the rise of Deism. Then when the doctrine of the Trinity was brought back to the forefront of theological thought in the twentieth century, it was done in a way that separated it from classical theism. As a result, the so-called twentieth-century revival of trinitarian theology was more a massive revision of the classical doctrine of God than a revival of it. We will discuss problems with the twentieth-century doctrine of God in more detail in chapter 9, but for now it is important to note that what the fourth-century fathers did by uniting the simple, immutable God with the biblical God who speaks and acts in history was ignored by twentieth-century theologians.

Twentieth-century theology, for the most part, tended to be preoccupied with the economic Trinity while ignoring the immanent Trinity. There was a desire for a doctrine of God based entirely on biblical themes, but what came to prominence was a doctrine of God that lost its grip on divine transcendence,

thereby losing what is most distinctively and uniquely biblical in the process. The lesson from this is that if we want to be truly biblical, we need to pay attention to the relationship between our concept of God's self-revelation in history and God's eternal being in himself. Toward the end of the twentieth century, and in the early part of the twenty-first century, a movement led by John Webster emerged that called for theology to refocus on the being of the immanent Trinity, that is, on the attributes of the Triune God.

Second, there is a much lower tolerance for mystery and paradox in modernity than in historic orthodoxy. Here the moderns are closer in spirit to the Arians of the fourth century than to the Nicene fathers. As in the Arian controversy of the fourth century, orthodoxy is today seen as obscurantist and overly complicated, whereas the heretical alternative is seen as rational, clear, and reasonable. It needs to be pointed out, however, that the common assumption that our doctrine of God should be easily understandable is badly flawed. We can expect rational clarity if all we want is a God who is a larger version of ourselves, that is, a God who differs from creatures only by degree and not in kind. But if God is essentially different from us in kind, not just in degree, then his being necessarily must be mysterious to us and beyond the rational capacity of the creature to grasp. The great problem then becomes how even to speak about God at all. How can human language be adequate to express the mystery that is the transcendent Creator? Paradox and limits on our understanding should be expected. Worship, not rational comprehension, of God is the end of such theology. A rationally comprehensible God will inevitably turn out to be either identical with the cosmos as a whole or a being within the cosmos with us. Either way we end up worshiping the creature instead of the Creator.

Third, modern theology has lost its living connection to fourth-century Nicene theology. Lewis Ayres writes, "In many ways the argument of my last chapter is not that modern Trinitarianism has engaged with pro-Nicene theology badly, but that it has barely engaged it at all. As a result the legacy of Nicaea remains paradoxically the unnoticed ghost at the modern Trinitarian feast."¹⁵ We can see how true this is in various ways. The study of patristics has not been regarded as essential preparation either for systematic theologians or for pastors, and this creates problems in understanding and passing on classical orthodoxy. The decline in the study of Greek philosophy by theologians also renders them unable to comprehend what the fourth-century debates were all about. But on a deeper level, the Enlightenment insistence that we not "read in" the theology of the ecumenical creeds as we exegete

15. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 7.

Scripture has been internalized to such a degree even by confessing orthodox theologians that exegesis has been done within the framework of modern metaphysical assumptions that are very different from (and incompatible with) those with which the fourth-century fathers worked. This has led to attempts to combine trinitarian theology with various metaphysical systems that are not just different from the ones employed by pro-Nicene theology of the fourth century but are actually contradictory to the ones used in the fourth century. In some cases, twentieth-century theologians actually employ the very metaphysical doctrines that the fourth-century fathers explicitly and consciously rejected as they sought to refute Arianism.

Holding together classical theism and trinitarian theology requires tolerance for mystery and sustained attentiveness to the nuances of the philosophical and theological debates of the fourth century. Classical theism without trinitarian theology gives us the god of the philosophers, that is, the remote and impersonal god of Deism, who does not speak or act and who, crucially, cannot save us. But trinitarian theology without classical theism results in a God who is part of the cosmos with us, differing from creatures only by degree and not by nature. Such a god is no more able to save us than the Deist god. The so-called trinitarian revival of the twentieth century was not a revival of Nicene orthodoxy.¹⁶ The reason twentieth-century theology failed to revive Nicene orthodoxy was that it was an attempt to have a Nicene doctrine of the Trinity without classical theism. Many forms of relational theism attempt to pass themselves off as biblical by affirming the doctrine of the Trinity, but they reject classical theism. The result of that experiment was an entirely new thing in the history of theology, something never seen before, namely, pagan trinitarianism.

When relational theism replaces classical theism, the result is a reversion into the pagan mythology that was in the world before God called Abraham out of Ur and began to reveal himself to him and his descendants. It is the combining of pantheism and polytheism, with the added wrinkle that the number of deities worshiped is limited to three instead of an unspecified number. Many ancient cultures have combined pantheism and polytheism in this way; one need only think of Hinduism, for example. What this means is that, strange as it may sound, modernity has more in common with the mythological worldview of the ancient Near East than it has with the God revealed in Scripture and the biblical doctrine of God enshrined in Nicene orthodoxy.

16. For a good treatment of this point, see S. Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*. I will come back to this book and to this point in chap. 9.