

J. I. PACKER

AUTHOR OF *KNOWING GOD*

Concise  
Theology

A Guide to  
Historic Christian Beliefs

100,000 IN PRINT





*There's a difference between knowing  
God and knowing about God.  
When you truly know God, you  
have the energy to serve Him.*

# Concise Theology

A Guide to  
Historic Christian Beliefs



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## Preface

THIS BOOK SETS OUT IN SHORT COMPASS what seem to me to be the permanent essentials of Christianity, viewed as both a belief system and a way of life. Others have other ideas of how Christianity should be profiled, but this is mine. It is Reformational and evangelical, and as such, so I maintain, historic and classic mainstream.

These briefings, which were first planned for a study Bible and have now been revised, have an intentionally scriptural cast and, like other of my writings, are peppered with texts to look up. I submit that this is how it should be, for it is basic to Christianity to receive biblical teaching as God's own instruction, proceeding, as Calvin put it, via human agency from God's holy mouth. If Scripture is indeed God himself preaching and teaching, as the great body of the church has always held, then the first mark of good theology is that it seeks to echo the divine Word as faithfully as it can.

Theology is first the activity of thinking and speaking about God (theologizing), and second the product of that activity (Luther's theology, or Wesley's, or Finney's, or Wimber's, or Packer's, or whoever's). As an activity, theology is a cat's cradle of interrelated though distinct disciplines: elucidating texts (exegesis), synthesizing what they say on the things they deal with (biblical theology), seeing

how the faith was stated in the past (historical theology), formulating it for today (systematic theology), finding its implications for conduct (ethics), commending and defending it as truth and wisdom (apologetics), defining the Christian task in the world (missiology), stockpiling resources for life in Christ (spirituality) and corporate worship (liturgy), and exploring ministry (practical theology). The following chapters, sketchy as they are, range into all these areas.

Remembering that the Lord Jesus Christ called those he wanted fed *sheep* rather than *giraffes*, I have aimed to keep things as simple as possible. Archbishop William Temple was once told that he had made a complex issue very simple; he was hugely delighted, and said at once: "Lord, who made me simple, make me simpler yet." My heart goes with Temple's, and I have tried to keep my head in line with it.

As I often tell my students, theology is for doxology and devotion—that is, the praise of God and the practice of godliness. It should therefore be presented in a way that brings awareness of the divine presence. Theology is at its healthiest when it is consciously under the eye of the God of whom it speaks, and when it is singing to his glory. This, too, I have tried to bear in mind.

These short studies of great subjects feel to me, now that I have done them, rather like the lightning tours of England that enterprising bus companies run for American visitors (fifteen minutes at Stonehenge, two hours in Oxford, theatre and overnight in Stratford, an hour and a half in York, an afternoon in the Lake District—*phew!*). Each chapter is a mere sketchy note. Yet I dare to hope that my compressed material, Packer-packed as it is, might expand in readers' minds to lift their hearts Godward, in the way that a dif-

ferent form of hot air lifts balloons and their passengers skyward. We shall see.

My frequent quoting of the Westminster Confession may raise some eyebrows, since I am an Anglican and not a Presbyterian. But since the Confession was intended to amplify the Thirty-Nine Articles, and most of its framers were Anglican clergy, and since it is something of a masterpiece, “the ripest fruit of Reformation creed-making” as B. B. Warfield called it, I think I am entitled to value it as part of my Reformed Anglican heritage, and to use it as a major resource.

I gratefully acknowledge the hidden hand of my much-admired friend R. C. Sproul, from whom came the germ idea for several of these outlines. Though our styles differ, we think very much alike, and have cooperated happily in a number of projects. I find that we are sometimes referred to as the Reformed Mafia, but hard words break no bones, and on we go.

Thanks are also due to Wendell Hawley, my publisher, and LaVonne Neff, my editor, for helpfulness and patience in many forms. To work with them has been a privilege and a pleasure.

J. I. PACKER



ONE

*There's a difference between knowing  
God and knowing about God.  
When you truly know God, you  
have the energy to serve Him.*

# God Revealed as Creator



# REVELATION

## SCRIPTURE IS THE WORD OF GOD

*The tablets were the work of God;  
the writing was the writing of God,  
engraved on the tablets.*

EXODUS 32:16

✚ Christianity is the true worship and service of the true God, humankind's Creator and Redeemer. It is a religion that rests on revelation: nobody would know the truth about God, or be able to relate to him in a personal way, had not God first acted to make himself known. But God has so acted, and the sixty-six books of the Bible, thirty-nine written before Christ came and twenty-seven after, are together the record, interpretation, expression, and embodiment of his self-disclosure. God and godliness are the Bible's uniting themes.

From one standpoint, the Scriptures (*Scriptures* means "writings") are the faithful testimony of the godly to the God whom they loved and served; from another standpoint, through a unique exercise of divine overruling in their composition, they are God's own testimony and teaching in human form. The church calls these writings the Word of God because their authorship and contents are both divine.

Decisive assurance that Scripture is from God and consists entirely of his wisdom and truth comes from Jesus

Christ and his apostles, who taught in his name. Jesus, God incarnate, viewed his Bible (our Old Testament) as his heavenly Father's written instruction, which he no less than others must obey (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10; 5:19-20; 19:4-6; 26:31, 52-54; Luke 4:16-21; 16:17; 18:31-33; 22:37; 24:25-27, 45-47; John 10:35), and which he had come to fulfill (Matt. 5:17-18; 26:24; John 5:46). Paul described the Old Testament as entirely "God-breathed"—that is, a product of God's Spirit ("breath") just as the cosmos is (Ps. 33:6; Gen. 1:2)—and written to teach Christianity (2 Tim. 3:15-17; Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11). Peter affirms the divine origin of biblical teaching in 2 Peter 1:21 and 1 Peter 1:10-12, and so also by his manner of quoting does the writer to the Hebrews (Heb. 1:5-13; 3:7; 4:3; 10:5-7, 15-17; cf. Acts 4:25; 28:25-27).

Since the apostles' teaching about Christ is itself revealed truth in God-taught words (1 Cor. 2:12-13), the church rightly regards authentic apostolic writings as completing the Scriptures. Already Peter refers to Paul's letters as Scripture (2 Pet. 3:15-16), and Paul is apparently calling Luke's gospel Scripture in 1 Timothy 5:18, where he quotes the words of Luke 10:7.

The idea of written directives from God himself as a basis for godly living goes back to God's act of inscribing the Decalogue on stone tablets and then prompting Moses to write his laws and the history of his dealings with his people (Exod. 32:15-16; 34:1, 27-28; Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:9). Digesting and living by this material was always central to true devotion in Israel for both leaders and ordinary people (Josh. 1:7-8; 2 Kings 17:13; 22:8-13; 1 Chron. 22:12-13; Neh. 8; Ps. 119). The principle that all must be governed by

the Scriptures, that is, by the Old and New Testaments taken together, is equally basic to Christianity.

What Scripture says, God says; for, in a manner comparable only to the deeper mystery of the Incarnation, the Bible is both fully human and fully divine. So all its manifold contents—histories, prophecies, poems, songs, wisdom writings, sermons, statistics, letters, and whatever else—should be received as from God, and all that Bible writers teach should be revered as God's authoritative instruction. Christians should be grateful to God for the gift of his written Word, and conscientious in basing their faith and life entirely and exclusively upon it. Otherwise, we cannot ever honor or please him as he calls us to do.