

## Preface: What This Book Is and Isn't

As its title suggests, this book presumes little knowledge of Bible doctrine on the part of the reader. Those who are familiar with my other books might wonder what my goals are, or where this book fits into my other works.

### *Rationale for the Book*

When I wrote my short book *What Does God Want?*, my target audience was new believers or seekers. That book dealt with the nature of the gospel as the outworking of God's desire to have a human family from the very beginning of creation. The Bible presents this desire in story form, and so *What Does God Want?* summarized and rehearsed that story for readers, presuming little familiarity with the Bible. The last third of that book described the basics of Christian discipleship for those who want to embrace the gospel story (the "good news") and follow Christ. As it turned out, *What Does God Want?* resonated with many people who had been followers of Jesus for years. That was both a pleasant and disturbing surprise. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, but I learned the sad truth that I ought not assume even dedicated, seasoned Christians have been taught well in their local churches.

I also intended the content of *What Does God Want?* to prepare its readers for my earlier short book *Supernatural: What the Bible Teaches About the Unseen World and Why it Matters*. That book was thus (from my perspective) a short introduction to biblical theology, pitched appropriately either to readers of *What Does God Want?* or the average church attender who had some prior exposure to the Bible and its content.

The content of this new book is presented with that same circumstance in mind. I intend this new Bible doctrine book to be an informative (and challenging) systematic theological follow-up to *What Does God Want?*

### *"Biblical Theology" and "Systematic Theology"?*

Many readers will already have questions at this point. In the preceding comments I used the terms "biblical theology" and "systematic theology"—what is the difference? Some reader might even ask, What is theology? What is Bible doctrine? Are those two things the same? Further, it is anticipated that some who pick up this book will want to know why we need to know about Bible doctrine at all. Isn't following Jesus as his disciple enough? If you find yourself in this paragraph, that's a good thing.

The short-form answers to these questions are that theology is simply thinking about God. In that sense, everyone is a theologian, as everyone thinks about God, or has thoughts about God. This response in turn highlights the need for this book. Everyone might be a theologian because

they have thoughts about God, but this raises the question of whether those thoughts are coherent and accurate.

In short, this book is for readers *unfamiliar* with Christian doctrinal discussion, not those who have already made theology a hobby or profession. *First Steps in Bible Doctrine* seeks to explain what the Bible says about a range of theological topics by noting what the Bible says about those topics as concisely as possible.

### *Theology and Doctrine*

How can we know if our thoughts about God are correct? When it comes to Christian theology, thoughts about God need to conform to what the Bible says in order for one's theology to be sound. Hence "theology" and "Bible doctrine" function as tandem terms. They must be understood together.

According to Webster's Dictionary, the term "doctrine" means "teaching" or "instruction."<sup>1</sup> Given this definition and the orientation of Christian theology to the Bible, terms like "theology" and "Bible doctrine" are interchangeable, at least for our purposes. We need to know about God from the Bible because it is in the biblical story that we learn of Jesus and the plan of salvation. As we'll discover, Jesus is a significant player in Bible doctrine. Much of what the Bible teaches about God's desire, will, and activities in human affairs concerns Jesus. Therefore, it really isn't rational to say we want to follow Jesus but don't want to know about God. Every believer needs to be a proficient student of Bible doctrine. Every believer should strive to be a competent theologian. Thinking well about God is part of discipleship, too.

### *An Analogy*

Perhaps an analogy will help. We might say that everyone capable of feeding themselves is a cook, but that doesn't mean everyone is a competent cook. For some (like me) "cooking" means adding water and knowing what buttons to press on the microwave. I'm a cook in that sense, but nowhere near a capable one. Many people have far more skills in food preparation so that a label like "good cook" begins to make some sense. A smaller subset of the population devotes their lives to the culinary art and can be called "chef." Those are the true experts. So it is with theology, or doctrine. We all have thoughts about God, but have we invested serious time investigating what the Bible says about God? Everyone is a theologian of some sort, but how many are "good theologians" who have learned to think well about God, his works, and his will? We all know the difference between a cook like me and someone with years of experience and skill. The same is true for theologians. As a Christian, you'll have plenty of thoughts about God, but that doesn't mean they are accurate or sound. They need to be, else we find ourselves teaching aberrant, idiosyncratic, or even heretical thoughts about God, his character, and his works.

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

### *Goals and Limitations*

My goal, then, is to help readers become more informed and capable theologians, basically starting from scratch. To stick with my cooking analogy, if someone were to teach me how to cook well, trying to transform me into a chef drastically overshoots the target. I don't need years of training in cooking tools and gadgets, the hundreds of varieties of cheese, knowledge of every conceivable type and cut of meat, or the ability to freestyle food and flavor combinations. I need basic training that won't overwhelm me, the hopeful novice. Just move me beyond TV dinners, processed foods, and the microwave. So it is with this book. It is not written for professional theologians, pastors, or seminarians or to produce them. It is written for the theological laity, those just beginning their journey in thinking about Bible doctrine. Other books (see the bibliography) move people farther down the road.

Consequently, this book will not resemble the sorts of academic books for which I am predominantly known.<sup>2</sup> Unlike those other books, you will find no appeal to ancient Near Eastern or Second Temple Jewish contexts for the Bible. Technical terminology is either shunned or succinctly explained when necessarily encountered. There will be no detailed defense of specific positions on theological matters in an attempt to slay the dragons of other views. Footnotes will occur but will be much less frequent than my more academic books. Hebrew or Greek words may be mentioned, but no word studies will be found herein. As we explore Bible doctrine, no attempt at exegesis of any given passage will be attempted. In other words, this is not a textbook for biblical studies or hermeneutics, the science and art of interpretation. When biblical passages are cited, they are more illustrative of a doctrinal point than offered as proof texts presented to give the impression no debate can be had in a given topic.

### *Theology, not Theologies*

In this book I will restrict myself to what professional theologians call "systematic" theology. Systematic theology is the attempt to arrange what the Bible says about God into distinct topics (e.g., angels, the Trinity, baptism, the Holy Spirit, etc.). That is not the same exercise as "biblical theology," the effort to explore a theological idea through careful exploration of the Hebrew and Greek texts of a specific portion of the Bible or in its development through the Bible (e.g., the meaning of "clean and unclean" in the sacrificial system of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament; the concept of the "kingdom of God" through both the Old and New Testaments). Other theological disciplines that are outside the bounds of my goals here include:

- Historical Theology – The study of the chronological development of theological ideas through all periods of church history to the present day.
- Philosophical Theology – The study of theological ideas using the tools of philosophy alongside, or in place of, the Bible.

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<sup>2</sup> For example: *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*; *Angels: What the Bible Really Says About God's Heavenly Host*; *Demons: What the Bible Really Says About the Powers of Darkness*. (All from Lexham Press).

- Apologetics – The reasoned intellectual defense of the Christian faith using Scripture, philosophy, archaeology, history, etc.

### *Primary Source Text*

This book will not elevate any Christian denominational tradition over another. Though comparisons are inevitable for the sake of articulating what is meant or not meant in some theological category, for “first steps” in Bible doctrine, I aim to be as ecumenical, charitable, and straightforward as possible when discussing any given theological topic. I have no interest in endorsing or criticizing any mainstream Christian tradition. That said, I presume by experience that most of my readers are from a Protestant (i.e., not Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox) tradition. As a result, one of the mainstream English Bible translations (ESV) will be my biblical source text. Although the matter of the canon<sup>3</sup> falls under the theological topic of “Bibliology,” no attempt will be made to venture outside the books of the Bible found in this and a multitude of other English translations.

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<sup>3</sup> “Canon” is a term that refers to “the collection of books deemed authoritative by the church.” Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 29. The discussion about “canon” and the “canonicity” of a given ancient book is ultimately about how and why the books of the Bible came to be recognized as sacred.