

THE  
DOCTRINE  
OF  
GOD

GERALD BRAY

CONTOURS *of*  
CHRISTIAN  
THEOLOGY

---

GERALD BRAY  
*General Editor*

---

INTERVARSITY PRESS  
DOWNERS GROVE, ILLINOIS 60515

## Contents

Series Preface	7
Introduction	9
1 Our Knowledge of God	13
2 The Nature of God	53
3 One God in Trinity	111
4 The Persons and the Nature of God	153
5 The Primacy of the Persons in God	197
6 Constructing an Evangelical Theology Today	225
Notes	253
For Further Reading	269
Index of Subjects	273
Index of Names	277

## Introduction

This book on the doctrine of God forms volume 1 of the series *Contours of Christian Theology*. So vast a subject is obviously too demanding for a single volume, and inevitably much of the discussion in these pages has had to be curtailed, and some topics have been virtually omitted altogether, in order to keep within the dimensions of the series as a whole.

One of the major difficulties with the subject is that, broadly speaking, there are two quite distinct aspects to it, both of which demand our attention. The first of these may be called the doctrine of God's nature, which covers all aspects of his being in relation to things outside himself. These include such questions as the proofs for his existence, election and predestination, creation and providence, and so on. As these matters will be dealt with more fully in other volumes in this series, it was thought best to refer to them here only in passing, and leave the major treatment to those volumes.

This has allowed more space to be devoted to the second aspect of the doctrine of God, which is his personal, trinitarian subsistence. The present volume goes into this

subject in some detail, and tries to connect the evangelical understanding of the doctrine to the wider Christian tradition. Readers will doubtless notice that an unusually large amount of space has been devoted to the Eastern Orthodox understanding of the Trinity, which may be explained as follows. First, it is of intrinsic interest and importance, although it has been sadly neglected by the Western world until recent years. Second, it has some curious points of affinity with the evangelical outlook which need to be pointed out, especially in these days of ecumenical contact and discussion. Third, one of the stated aims of the series is to explore new ground in contemporary theological discussion, and the rise of interest in Eastern Orthodoxy since 1945 has been nothing less than phenomenal. This does not mean that the approach taken here is naive or uncritical; on the contrary, it seeks merely to do justice to a tradition which has been unjustly neglected for too long, and to explain in what ways evangelical Christians may accept as well as dissent from it.

It should also be said that although the present volume is a defence of evangelical theology, as this is generally understood by conservatives in the English-speaking world, it is far from being uncritically dogmatic in its presentation of that position. Indeed, one of its main aims is to point out that evangelical theology has long neglected certain areas of discussion and has suffered as a result. At the same time, objections to other forms of Christianity have not been concealed, and at times they may have been pressed in a way which may seem to be unfair to adherents of a different point of view. If this is so I wish to apologize for any misrepresentation of an opposing position, and would welcome correction on this score. At the same time I would also ask potential objectors to consider the ways in which they may have misunderstood the evangelical position as presented in this book, and to recognize that I have taken a critical position with regard to it whenever I have felt it necessary to do so. This is particularly evident in the last chapter, which is intended as a plea to evangelicals to return to serious theology at a time when experiential forms of religion threaten to snuff it out altogether.

In preparing this manuscript for publication much time

and many hands have been needed. Particular thanks must go to Mrs Alison Wilkinson (*née* Jones), who typed various portions of the text, and to the Rev. David Kingdon of IVP. In addition, I would like to thank those who read the manuscript in draft for IVP and made many valuable suggestions. Of my students, I must make special mention of the Rev. Graham Wintle and the Rev. Ambrose Mason, who together offered some acute observations on the chapter dealing with Calvin, and also to the Rev. Roderick Doulton, who is responsible for a number of alterations in content and presentation. Thanks are also due to the General Theological Seminary in New York for offering me generous sabbatical leave, during which the final portions of the manuscript were completed.

Finally, to all readers I recommend that this book be read and understood as an introduction to the study of Holy Scripture, from which all true doctrine must be derived, and to the Christian tradition, which through the ages has sought to be faithful to the record of God's revelation of himself to the world. As I lay the fruit of my own study and research before the Christian public, it is my hope that those who read this book may find themselves drawn more deeply into this study and be more willing to offer praise to God himself.

*Gerald Bray*

# 1

---

## OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Is it possible to know God? Opinion polls occasionally tell us that a large majority of people believe in God, or at least in some kind of supreme being, or supernatural force. But when the same people are questioned on the finer points of Christian belief, far fewer are prepared to go along with what the church has traditionally taught. For most people, it would seem that belief in God has little to do with organized religion or with the 'official' Christian faith. On the other hand, we are also familiar with small groups of committed believers who are prepared to press their version of belief in God as if it were the only possible option. One difficulty with them is that there are many such groups, and that their ideas are usually quite different. They cannot all be right, but how are we to distinguish the true from the false? Is it not easier to conclude either that all are wrong, or that some may be right, but we cannot be sure which? Those who take the first option may call themselves atheists, whilst those who take the second may prefer to be called agnostics, but in the end it makes little practical difference. Whoever God is, and whatever he may be like, he is essentially unknowable, and speculating about him is a waste of time.