

“Knowing God as He is, in all the fullness He will allow us, is the church’s highest priority and greatest privilege today. Scott Oliphint’s powerful exposition of the majesty of mystery is a much-needed and bracing antidote to the casual, buddy-buddy theology that is so common in our times.”

Os Guinness

Author of *The Call*

“At first when we hear that God is mysterious, we think: he’s unknowable. What Scott Oliphint argues in this extraordinary book is just the opposite. Divine mystery, as he proves from Scripture, provides the only real hope that we can know God. It is just his greatness that makes him accessible to us. God is indeed way beyond our imagination. But in his love he has ‘stooped to conquer.’ Indeed, unless mystery pervades all of life we are left with a gray, purposeless existence. This book is far from a cold theological study. It sings! When we put it down, we want to say not ‘what a great text,’ but ‘what a great and worthy God.’”

Dr William Edgar

Professor of Apologetics

Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“Nothing is more important about our knowledge of God than recognizing that it begins with his incomprehensibility and remains bounded by that recognition. Reflecting the results of a major area of Oliphint’s interest in his lecturing and writing over many years, a key concern of this book is to speak about the mystery surrounding God and his activity in a way that honors the way that God himself speaks to us in Scripture. Its careful, often penetrating handling of this sublime mystery is enhanced by a worshipful tone throughout. An instructive and edifying read for those wanting to grow in their knowledge of God.”

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.

Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus

Westminster Theological Seminary

THE MAJESTY OF MYSTERY

CELEBRATING THE GLORY
OF AN INCOMPREHENSIBLE GOD

K. SCOTT OLIPHINT



The Majesty of Mystery: Celebrating the Glory of an Incomprehensible God

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Contents

Preface.....	xi
CHAPTER 1.....	2
Mystery: Our Lifeblood	
CHAPTER 2	16
The Majesty of the Mystery of the Depth of God	
CHAPTER 3	34
The Majesty of the Mystery of the Three-in-One	
CHAPTER 4	54
The Majesty of the Mystery of the Incarnation	
CHAPTER 5	80
The Majesty of the Mystery of God's Relationship to His People	
CHAPTER 6	112
The Majesty of the Mystery of God's Decree and Desire	
CHAPTER 7	144
The Majesty of the Mystery of God's Providence and Our Choices	
CHAPTER 8	172
The Majesty of the Mystery of Prayer	
CHAPTER 9	188
The Majesty of the Mystery of Our Eternal Joy	
Conclusion.....	205
Appendix.....	208
Selections from the <i>Westminster Confession of Faith</i>	
Bibliography	221
Subject/Author Index	225
Scripture Index	230

Preface

For many years, I have taught a seminary course on “The Doctrine of God.” Routinely, as students grapple with God’s incomprehensibility and His self-revelation to us in Christ, many begin to recognize the reality of the God we worship. Nothing will motivate worship more than a glimpse of the glory of our incomprehensible God.

My experiences teaching that course have led to this book, which explores the relationship between God’s character and our worship. Since God’s character is inexhaustible, it is the mysteries of His character and ways that should form the foundation for our worship of Him. I am hoping this discussion will be helpful to anyone in the church who is struggling, or has struggled, with some of these deep and abiding mysteries.

One inevitable source of mystery and paradox for us involves the very reality of knowing God and acting in covenant with Him. Throughout the book, I refer to this relationship in gender-specific terms—that is, as a relationship between God and “man.” Although such usage has fallen out of favor in much biblical and theological writing, I continue to find it helpful and appropriate, for three reasons:

- (1) Until forty or so years ago, the word “man,” when used generically, was understood to represent both genders. This usage is rooted in the biblical narrative of God determining to create “man,” male and female (Gen 1:26; the Hebrew word for “man” is *adam*).
- (2) The use of the term “man” in this rich biblical sense tacitly acknowledges that Adam *personally* represents each and every human being, covenantally speaking. Regardless of gender, all people are children of Adam; there are no “sons of Adam and daughters of Eve.”
- (3) “Humanity” is an abstraction by definition, referring only to our common nature. In that sense, ironically, “humanity” is not nearly as inclusive as it seems; it does not represent either gender or any

particular individual. In my opinion, this abstract language, even if used in the interests of inclusion, serves in its own small way to further enable the deep and distressing gender confusion rampant in so many cultures around the world. God did not create humanity in the abstract; He created Adam as the covenant representative of all men (male and female), and he created Eve from Adam.

I am convinced that the church can better serve the cause of the gospel by returning to biblical language (and its underlying rationale) in this matter. The editors of Lexham Press were kind enough to leave this style decision to me.

Thanks to Brannon Ellis, David Bomar, and the Lexham team for their work and encouragement throughout the editorial process. It has been a joy to work with them. Thanks also to my wife, Peggy, for patiently reading through each chapter and offering good suggestions along the way. Thanks finally to the students at Westminster Theological Seminary for their constant encouragement.

K. Scott Oliphint, August 2016
Westminster Theological Seminary
Philadelphia, PA

CHAPTER 1

Mystery:
Our Lifeblood

**Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics.
... In truth, the knowledge that God
has revealed of himself in nature
and Scripture far surpasses human
imagination and understanding. In that
sense it is all mystery with which the
science of dogmatics is concerned, for
it does not deal with finite creatures,
but from beginning to end looks past
all creatures and focuses on the eternal
and infinite One himself.**

—Herman Bavinck

Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation

Have you ever wondered how God can be Three-in-One? Have you been uneasy trying to explain that the One in whom you've put your trust has two completely different natures? Have you thought about your affirmation that God is eternal in light of His activity in time and in history? Are you tempted to think that if God is in complete control we cannot be responsible for what we do? Does your confession of God's sovereignty conflict with your understanding of prayer? Does it make more sense to you to deny that God is sovereign?

If any of these questions has crossed your mind, you are typical of most Christians. You don't have to be a Christian for too long to begin to see some tensions in what Scripture requires us to affirm. But we also recognize that, even as we affirm certain things, we aren't capable of thinking about them in the way that we think about so many other things in the world. These are matters that create intellectual tension for us; they seem to conflict in some ways. As I hope to show in this book, this is as it should be. In revealing Himself and His ways in the world to us, God is pointing us to our own limits as creatures. He is reminding us that He is God and we are not.

How, then, do we respond to this reminder? In the course of this book, I hope to spell out what some of these mysteries in Scripture are. I also want to show a proper way for us to see them that should enhance the way we live as Christians—including, especially, the way we worship. Specifically, in light of what Scripture calls us to believe, I will highlight the central reason why we should praise and adore God *for the mysteries* He reveals to us.

BEGINNING WITH MYSTERY

Nothing should motivate true Christian worship more than the majestic mystery of God. Things that we understand, that we can wrap our minds around, are rarely objects of our worship. We may seek to control them. We may try to manipulate them. We may want to change

them. But we will not worship them, not really. If what we are seeking is true worship, it is the riches of the mystery of God and His ways in the world that will produce and motivate worship *in us and to Him*.

Christian worship, as well as Christian theology, *begins* with mystery. Mystery is not something that functions simply as a *conclusion* to our thinking about God. It is not that we learn and think and reason as much as we can and then admit in the end that there is some mystery left over. Instead, we *begin* by acknowledging the mystery of God and His ways. We *begin* with the happy recognition that God and His activities are ultimately incomprehensible to us. When we begin with that recognition, we can begin to understand God properly and so worship Him in light of who He is and what He has done.

In his monumental work of theology, Herman Bavinck says that “mystery is the lifeblood of theology.”¹ “Lifeblood” is a particularly apt metaphor here. Whenever certain kinds of illnesses arise in the body, one of the primary ways that doctors begin their diagnosis is through an analysis of the blood. Our blood speaks volumes about what is actually going on with specific organs, muscles, and nerves inside of us. Because all aspects of our bodies need blood to flow through them properly, the effect of blood on our bodies and our bodies on our blood is a central diagnostic tool in medicine. If there is no blood, there is no real life (Lev 17:11). What permeates our bodies, and brings life to them, is the blood.

So also, what gives life to all dimensions of our Christian thinking and living is the “lifeblood” of the mystery of God’s character and His working in the world. If we think that mystery is no part, or only a “leftover” part, of our understanding of Christian truth, then what we think is Christian truth can actually be a dry, “bloodless” idea, with no real life remaining in it.

Suppose, to carry the metaphor further, we pick up one of the latest Christian books that deals with the topic of salvation. As we begin to read it, we notice that there is something wrong with the way the author is thinking about his topic. Suppose, for example, that he wants us to believe that the faith that we have is self-generated; we produce it, and God responds to it. How do we begin to diagnose what exactly the problem is with this view?

1. *Ibid.*, 29.

We might begin by looking into what God actually says about salvation, in all of its multifaceted beauty and complexity. As we do that, one of the first things we could ask in this circumstance is whether, and how, the biblical notion of mystery fits into the author's thinking about salvation. Is it possible, we could ask, that the reason he wants to argue that our faith is from ourselves (and not from God) is because if it were not from us it would not be our responsibility to have and exercise it? It has to be only and completely *our* faith, *self-generated*, he maintains, or we could make no sense of the biblical command to have faith, or believe in, Jesus Christ.

But is that how Scripture views our faith (just to cite one example, see Ephesians 2:8)? Could it be that Scripture affirms *both* that the faith that we have is ours and our responsibility to have, and at the same time that we cannot have it unless and until God changes our hearts and gives us that faith? Could it be that the view set forth in our imaginary book has yet to give due credit to the "lifeblood" of biblical thinking? We might then want to explore whether our own view of faith undermines the biblical truth of the mystery of God's salvation to us.

In other words, because—as we shall see—there is mystery at every point of our Christian thinking and living, it is important to give a proper, biblical account of that mystery as we think through the various truths of Scripture. If mystery is absent from our considerations of biblical truth, it may be that we will need to reconsider those truths in light of the "lifeblood" of theology. It might just be that the reason we have come to believe certain things about God, or about Scripture, or about salvation, or about anything else in Scripture, is because we are less than comfortable with a robust, majestic, biblical view of the mystery of God and His ways.

THE RATIONALIST REFLEX

But if mystery is indeed the "lifeblood" of biblical truth, what would make us wary of mystery in our attempt to understand that truth? There are many answers to this question, but chief among them, at least historically, is that we have a natural (i.e., sinful) tendency to ensure that everything that we believe is easily and obviously palatable to anyone at any time.

We can see this clearly in the history of ideas. For example, John Locke, a 17th-century philosopher, wrote a small book titled *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. In that work, Locke set out to discover just exactly which truths in Scripture could be grasped fully by the human mind. He argued that only “reasonable” truths were worthy of belief. He was deeply concerned to cull out all mystery in Scripture, since our usual ways of thinking could not contain such things. Consequently, Locke’s view of Christianity was “bloodless”; it had no life left in it. For him, Christianity could teach only what was comprehensible to limited (and sinful) minds like ours. Thus, Locke created a dull, empty, minimalist religion. Locke’s “rational” religion was a far cry from the glorious and majestic mysteries of the truth of our Christian faith.

What is ironic about Locke’s book is that he was trying to combat the Deism of his day. Deism believed in a god, but it was not a god who was present in the world. Around the same time as Locke published his work, John Toland, a deist, published a work with the long and formidable title *Christianity not Mysterious: Or, a Treatise showing, That there is nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor above it: And that no Christian Doctrine can be properly call’d A Mystery*. Toland’s deism was set forth so that we would have no more difficulty in conceiving of God than conceiving of anything else in the world. Toland’s view, for example, was that we should view God’s character in the same way that we view human characteristics. It must all be reasonable to us; nothing could be left to mystery.

Locke wanted to combat this view, but his own response to Toland was too similar to the view he wanted to reject. For both Locke and Toland, our beliefs were restricted to only those things that could be comprehended by the human mind. For Locke, Toland, and others, Christianity *could not* be mysterious. If it were, it could not be “adequately” understood, and if it could not be adequately understood, they thought, it should not be believed.

These ideas undermine the glories of Christianity at its root; they make the human mind the sole judge of what is true. If the mind is the judge, only what is able to be contained by our typical ways of thinking can be affirmed by us as true. As with Locke, the depths of the riches of God’s ways are drained dry, and nothing but a shallow pool of superficial affirmations remains.

This view of things is light-years away from the “lifeblood” of Christianity. We are called to love the Lord with all of our minds, but we are not meant to seek to *contain* Him with our minds. If we approach our Bibles as Locke did, seeking to expunge anything that goes against our natural ways of thinking, then we will, in the process, lose the heart and soul of the Christian faith. This is a price not worth paying; its cost requires that we miss the glorious mystery of God’s triune majesty.

MYSTICISM OR MYSTERY?

When it comes to biblical mysteries, the temptation that most Christians face is the one we just discussed—i.e., to favor our own thinking, to trust our own minds. If we do this, however, we exclude the rich mysteries of the Christian faith.

But there is another, though not as pervasive, tendency that also could be a temptation. Trusting our own way of thinking buries the biblical notion of mystery, but so does its opposite. The mystery that is the lifeblood of Christian truth is not compatible with a trust in our own minds, but neither is it compatible with a *denial* of the use of our minds, sometimes called “mysticism.” Mysticism, in the way we’re using the term here, seeks to promote and praise a *total lack* of understanding and of thinking. It prizes the ineffable above all and sees reason and thinking as obstacles to true faith.

A somewhat obscure example of this can be seen in the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart. As a mystic, Eckhart determined that a *lack* of understanding was the best way to relate to God. For example, in Eckhart’s sermon on Matthew 5:3 (“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”) we see an example of a distorted view of mystery.

Eckhart’s sermon had three points. He focused on a poverty of the soul, which he called a “stilling.” His first point was that there must be a stilling of the will if we are to be poor in spirit. His second point was that there must be a stilling of the *intellect*, so that our goal would be to have no conceptual knowledge of God at all. In attempting to make that point, he says:

Why I pray God to rid me of God is because conditionless being is above God and above distinction: it was therein

I was myself, therein I willed myself and knew myself to make this man and in this sense I am my own cause, both of my nature which is eternal and of my nature which is temporal. For this am I born, and as to my birth which is eternal I can never die. In my eternal mode of birth I have always been, am now, and shall eternally remain. That which I am in time shall die and come to naught, for it is of the day and passes with the day. In my birth all things were born, and I was the cause of mine own self and all things, and had I willed it I had never been, nor any thing, and if I had not been then God had not been either. To understand this is not necessary.²

Any reader or hearer of this sermon would be happy to hear the last sentence—“to understand this is not necessary.” Not only is understanding this sermon not *necessary*, it may not even be possible! But what Eckhart has in mind in that last statement is that it is *better* not to understand with the mind what he is attempting to communicate. To the extent that you *do* understand, you miss the real import of who God is. The way to “know” God, in other words, is by *not* knowing him (or it).

This is a view that sees understanding and intellectual effort, particularly with respect to God and His character and ways, as detrimental to a proper relationship to God. The best way to know God, the mystic would say, is to affirm that we cannot in any way really understand who he is. All that is left for us is an “experience” of God.

Are there parallels to this kind of temptation in Christianity today? Perhaps. I remember when the phrase “let go and let God” was a mantra for some Christians. The idea was not simply to cease trying to earn salvation—which would be a good thing. The phrase was meant to emphasize that it is best for Christians to take a docile, experiential attitude toward their faith. The more intensely you try to understand or obey God, the less you rely on Him.

There is nothing wrong with relying on God, or with recognizing the importance of experience in our Christian lives. But if experience

2. Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, trans. C. de B. Evans, 2 vols. (London: John M. Watkins, 1924), 1:220.

is our primary way to God, or if it begins to take the place of our efforts to understand what God has said in His Word, we are moving toward a mystical view of Christianity.

Here is the paradox: A true, biblical view of mystery has its roots not in a lack of understanding, but in the teaching of Scripture. As a matter of fact, it is just the teaching of Scripture that gives us the biblical *truth* of that which we hold to be mysterious. A biblical view of mystery, in other words, is full of truth. It is truth that has real and glorious content. That content includes truths that we must affirm as well as falsehoods that we must deny, statements that are necessarily a part of a biblical understanding of mystery as well as exclamations that point us to its truth. So mystery, if we understand it biblically, is infused through and through with the truth that is found in the Word of God. Mystery is the lifeblood of the truth that we have in God's revelation; it flows through every truth that God gives us.

A MANY-SIDED THING

But perhaps we are not tempted by rationalistic deism or by mysticism. Maybe the views of Locke or Toland or Eckhart do not appeal to us. There is, however, a more insidious and subtle problem among many Christians today. It is a problem that has reached epidemic proportions in our culture and has seeped into the church, although we might not have noticed. The problem has its focus in the paucity of *thinking* and *knowing* in our Christian walk. The Lord is concerned that we *think*, *learn about*, and *know* Him. This is a significant part of Christian obedience. But for many of us, the obedient use of the *mind* might be something of a foreign idea.

On one occasion, Jesus was responding (as was His custom) to a number of His detractors (Mark 12:13-34ff.). They had come to trap Him and to show their superior knowledge of Scripture (i.e., the Old Testament) over His. The Sadducees and Scribes came to ask Him questions that were, for them, doctrinal conundrums. The Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection from the dead, asked Jesus to explain to them how the notion of resurrection could be made compatible, in the afterlife, with (their view of) marriage.

Jesus said to them, in very plain terms, that they were wrong. But they were not simply wrong about some minor matters; Jesus was

not rebuking them for getting details wrong. Rather, he made plain that they were wrong about Scripture, and they were wrong about God (Mark 12:24).

Not to be deterred, one of the scribes, who had overheard Jesus' answer and was impressed by it, decided he would enter the discussion:

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength' " (Mark 12:28–30).

Most Christians are well aware of Jesus' answer here. And most are aware of the reason that this answer is given. It does indeed sum up our responsibility toward God. If we have a love for God that includes the entirety of who we are as people, then the rest of what Scripture says will be solidly in place in our lives. What is sometimes overlooked, or minimized, in this greatest command, however, is that in loving God with all of our being, we must love Him *with our minds*.

In our overly romanticized culture and context, "love" and "mind" do not readily go together. We cannot imagine a love story where the boy says to the girl, "I love you with all of my mind." Nor could we find a Hallmark card that trumpeted the depth of someone's mental love for someone else.

The mind, so we tend to think, is the realm of the abstract, the cold, the calculated, the aloof. It is the polar opposite of the typical view of the "heart." The mind, we may think, dwells in cool detachment from the "real world." It may concern itself with sports statistics or recipes. Beyond that, the mind is more a hindrance to love than a help.

But we are commanded to love God with everything that we are—with our hearts, our souls, our strength, *and with our minds*. Our love for God is to permeate every aspect of who we are as people. If we love God with only part of who we are, then we really do not love Him as we should. Suppose, for example, that we commit to love God with all our strength, but that we neglect completely to love Him with our hearts. What would that love look like? It would be an external, vacuous love,

a love that might work hard and long, but a love in which, literally, our hearts were not in it. That kind of love is not biblical love; it is a perversion of it.

So also if we neglect to love God with our minds. But what does it mean to love God with our minds? At minimum, this means that we are to *know* God—that is, we are to read and understand what Scripture says about God, and to submit intellectually (and otherwise) to that teaching. We are to think God’s thoughts after Him. Those thoughts are found in God’s revelation.³ When we read Scripture, when we study it, we are to see it as the only true description of what reality is like. We are to reorient our thinking, so that the things around us, and within us, take on the truth that God has spoken.

This requires intellectual effort. But, we should recognize, it *does not* require advanced academic degrees. What it requires is that the “people of the Book” be those who think about, who meditate on, and who long to understand just exactly what “the Book” is saying to us—about God, and about everything else.

Here is a test. If you’re reading this brief section on loving God with your mind, and your initial reaction is, “But we shouldn’t make Christianity overly intellectual,” then you are probably more entangled with the spirit of the age than you might think. The spirit of the age is largely anti-intellectual. It is, we could say, more in line with the game show *Wheel of Fortune* than with *Jeopardy*. In *Jeopardy* the use of the mind is required. Without it, one cannot even be considered a contestant. In *Wheel of Fortune* on the other hand, all that is required is the luck of the spinning wheel, knowledge of the alphabet, a basic ability to spell, and the enthusiasm to yell, “Big money! Big money!”

Our culture is often more like *Wheel of Fortune* than *Jeopardy*. We have a basic knowledge of the alphabet—enough to send a text message or write an email. Beyond that, life, for many, is the luck of the wheel and a hope that “big money” will come our way.

Has the church imbibed a *Wheel of Fortune* mentality? Are we content with the basic “alphabet” of Christianity? Do we conduct our

3. We have to recognize, however, that even those revealed thoughts are accommodated to us as creatures. God’s revelation gives us truth, but that truth is creaturely truth, thus always subject to creaturely limits. God’s own truth is not subject to such limits, but is always connected to the truth that is revealed.

spiritual lives according to a superficial trust in God and a hope for a big reward in the end?

Remember the lament of the author to the Hebrews? His concern was for the Christian growth, the *holiness*, of his readers. Without that holiness, he warned, they would not even see the Lord (Heb 12:14). But he was deeply disappointed in their level of Christian maturity. He wanted to write to them about the deep things of Christ and His ministry, but he knew them well enough to know that many could not digest the strong meat of biblical truth:

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity (Heb 5:11–6:1).

These professing Christians were in danger of falling away from their expressed faith. One of the reasons they were in danger was that they had not loved God with their minds. They were infants, unable to think, unable to digest the solid meat of the truth of God. This was no incidental malady; it was central to their inability to follow and to know Christ. Notice how the author puts it: If they want to grow in Christ into mature adults, they need to leave the *elementary* doctrines of Christ behind.

This does not mean they leave behind what they know. It means, rather, they move from the church nursery to the sanctuary; they move from the kindergarten of biblical truth to adult education. They are to take the things they know and integrate them more and more fully into the teaching of Scripture. They are to meditate on the things of Christ, in His Word, and think about them in such a way that the Scriptures make more and more sense to them and thus explain more deeply who Christ is—and who they are in Him. They are to probe the depths of Scripture so that they begin to think as adults. All of this

probing and thinking is not, however, simply to make them smarter. If they grow into spiritual adults, it will show in how they live. Only then will they be able to be engaged in the “constant practice of discerning good from evil.” According to this passage, the mental effort that believers are required to make concerning the truth of God’s Word inevitably shifts to the practice of discernment. In thinking properly, in other words, we learn to *live* properly, and thus to glorify God. This takes mental effort; it requires meditation and thought. But it is as essential to Christian maturity as ingesting something besides milk is to growing into adulthood.

But why talk about the importance of Christian thinking in a book that focuses on *mystery*? Isn’t mystery, by definition, something that is beyond the bounds of our thinking?

It is. But here is the biblical irony of it all. In order to worship God for His incomprehensibility, it is necessary to *know* Him deeply. Or, to put it differently, in order to confess properly what we *do not* know, we have to be clear about what God has given us to know. The only way to understand what these mysteries are is by understanding, from Scripture, what it is that causes us rightly to confess our inability to fully comprehend them. We have to know in order to know what we cannot know. The only biblical context for what we *do not know* is *knowing*.

If we are influenced by the temptation to ignore the mind in our Christian walk, we may not see—even worse, we may not *want* to see—the majesty of these mysteries. But if that is the case, then we will remain infants, able only and always to take in milk and never able to grow up into the maturity of Christ (see also, for example, 1 Cor 2:6, 14:20; Eph 4:13; Phil 3:15; Col 1:28). In the chapters that follow, we will be challenged to think, and to think deeply. There is no substitute for this. There is no better time than the present to “go on to maturity.”

• • • •

As we think about the biblical view of mystery in the following chapters, we will be addressing questions that are on the lips of many serious Christians (as well as who do not believe): How can God be three and one? How can God take on a human nature? Can an eternal and unchangeable God also act in history? If God planned everything,

how can I be responsible? Do my prayers make any difference in God's plan? Will we finally know everything when we get to heaven?

These are questions that recognize some of the mysterious tensions that Scripture presents to us. They are good questions, but wrong answers to good questions can rob us of a full, and fulfilled, Christian life, and they rob God of His proper glory. Proper answers—answers that allow the mystery of God and His ways to shine brightly—will evoke in us proper worship, preparing us for an eternity of worship with Him, in which, because of the majestic mystery of God's triune character, we will be "lost in wonder, love, and praise."

*Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

—Charles Wesley, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling"

CHAPTER 2

The Majesty
of the Mystery
of the Depth
of God

Whenever then we enter on a discourse respecting the eternal counsels of God, let a bridle be always set on our thoughts and tongue, so that after having spoken soberly and within the limits of God's word, our reasoning may at last end in admiration.

—John Calvin

*Commentary on the Epistle of
Paul the Apostle to the Romans*

The great truths about which Paul was writing to the church at Rome caused him to explode in doxological praise in Romans 11:33–36. This praise passage, which exalts the incomprehensibility of God and His ways, carries with it some of the richest truths and teachings in all of Scripture.

OH, THE DEPTH ...

It may help us to think of the epistle to the Romans in terms (roughly, at least) of two distinct but related sections. Generally speaking, chapters 1 through 11 present the *doctrinal data* of the Christian gospel, and chapters 12 through 16 focus on the *practice* of that doctrine. This does not mean that we, or the Bible, artificially separate doctrine from practice. Thinking obediently is as important as—is even a prerequisite for—living obediently. But Paul’s “therefore” in Romans 12:1 is a definite movement toward putting into practice those truths that have been so wondrously set forth in previous chapters.

It is remarkable, then, that at the transition point between doctrine and practice, at the place where Paul moves from a more didactic emphasis to a more practical one, he interjects a glorious and majestic doxology:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge
of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how
inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:33–36).

Notice that the construction of this passage demands that we see it as praise. Paul's "oh!" is an exclamation, a cry of worship and delight in God. Nowhere else in the New Testament does a passage begin with this use of the particular term "oh!" It is a term of joyful and satisfying surprise, and deep wonder. It evokes and initiates an attitude of reverence, awe, and worship. This one term, "oh," has the effect of pointing us to that which is transcendent, that which rises above the normal and the mundane. It causes us immediately to move beyond the immanence of this world and to set our spiritual eyes on the unapproachable light and glory of God Himself. This one word, "oh," sets the tone and tenor for the rest of what Paul says in this doxology. And what he says, he says in praise to the true and Triune God.

There is a reason why the Holy Spirit inspired the apostle Paul to write in this particular way. What would we think, for example, if Paul had said, "The riches of God's wisdom and knowledge are deep"? That would have been perfectly true, of course. Indeed, that is exactly what Paul is saying in 11:33. But simply to state it in that way lacks something; it omits a central and crucial aspect in Paul's communication of God's depth.

Instead of simply stating the truth, Paul *exclaimed* it, beginning his doxology with "oh!" The etymology of the word "exclaim" is "to shout out." In other words, the meaning of Paul's exclamation is embedded in the form of his expression. When we *exclaim*, we do not simply say true things in a matter-of-fact kind of way. Rather, we, metaphorically or actually, "shout out" an exclamation; that's the purpose *and* the meaning of it. We affirm the truth that is contained in the exclamation, but we also call forth a response by the *way* that we state it; an exclamation is a truth that requires, when affirmed, an action. In exclaiming, we are not content simply to say something. The exclamation itself, then, as a particular grammatical *style*, communicates the content, but also says much about how we are supposed to *acknowledge* that content. The exclamation tells us reams about *how* we are to think of the content in the statement as it is given to us.

Think, for example, of one of the differences between teaching and preaching. Granted, there are many points of agreement between the two activities. Oftentimes, however, one of the differences can be seen in *how* the truth of God is communicated. If I am teaching a course on the doctrine of God, I may lay out some specific points affirming, say,