POCKET DICTIONARY of
THEOLOGICAL TERMS

Over 300 terms
clearly & concisely defined

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InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois
Preface
A Note to the Reader

“You can’t know the players without a scorecard!” claim the program vendors as they make their way through ballpark stands. In a similar manner we might say, “You can’t understand theology without definitions.”

This Pocket Dictionary attempts to provide a basic understanding of the three hundred or so significant words and concepts you are most likely to encounter in the theological books and articles you are reading. The entries consist primarily of English terms, but we also have included key foreign phrases—especially Latin and German—as well as a select group of theologians who have played central roles in the history of theology.

In using the Pocket Dictionary keep several things in mind. First, the format of the book is quite simple. The terms, phrases and names are arranged together in alphabetical order. Second, we have focused our attention on basic, generally held definitions. Rather than being exhaustive treatments, therefore, our descriptions seek to provide you with a foundational, working knowledge of the concepts. This working knowledge in turn ought to place you in a position to glean a fuller understanding from the theology texts you are reading, the lectures you are hearing or even the information you find in more exhaustive theological dictionaries. Third, while much of the material we present is generally accepted among the various Christian traditions, the fact that we write from a broadly evangelical, Protestant perspective is clearly evident from time to time.

The Pocket Dictionary is a reference book. Thus we do not intend that you read it from cover to cover. Rather we anticipate that you
will have it next to you or on your desk as you read theological literature. You can then consult the *Pocket Dictionary* when you come across a term that is unfamiliar to you. If you are a student, you might also use it as a “crib sheet” to help you prepare for whatever definition-oriented exams you might encounter.

Being a reference book, the *Pocket Dictionary* is cross-referenced. An asterisk before a term or phrase indicates that it appears elsewhere in the book as a separate entry. *See* and *see also* references indicate entries that might provide additional information. Typical abbreviations found in reference works like the *Pocket Dictionary* include

- c. (*circa*) meaning “approximately,”
- b. standing for “born”
- d. meaning “died.”

As members of Christ’s church and disciples of Jesus we find reading theology highly rewarding. We hope you will too. And we hope that this *Pocket Dictionary* will assist you in the process.

*The Authors*
a posteriori, a priori. Terms used to refer to whether an assertion is dependent on experience (a posteriori) or independent of experience (a priori). For example, if one observes creation and sees in it an organized pattern, it might be concluded a posteriori (i.e., on the basis of observing creation) that God exists as its cause. However, if God’s existence can be proved on some basis prior to sense experience, then the existence of God is argued a priori.

accommodation. Speaks of God making himself known to humans in words and ways suitable for the finite human mind to comprehend. The most significant example in which God accommodates to humankind is found in the coming of Jesus Christ—deity taking human form. See also incarnation.
adiahphora. Items of belief not essential to *salvation. In Lutheran thought the adiaphora were defined as practices of the church that were neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. In contemporary terms, adiaphora are those things not clearly addressed by Scripture that Christians may freely practice or believe with a clear conscience before God and that do not affect salvation.
adoption. God’s act of making otherwise estranged human beings part of God’s spiritual family by including them as inheritors of the riches of divine glory. This adoption takes place through our receiving in faith the work of Jesus Christ the Son (Jn 3:16), being born of the Spirit (Jn 3:5-6) and receiving the Spirit of adoption (Rom 8:15-16). See also reconciliation.
adoptionism. The theory that asserts that God adopted Jesus of Nazareth as his Son. In other words, Jesus was born human but became God’s Son at a particular point in his life. This theory fails to reflect scriptural texts that point to Jesus’ eternal relationship with the Father (e.g., Jn 17:5).
advent. Literally meaning “coming” or “arrival,” this term refers to the coming of Jesus Christ to earth to provide *salvation by his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Christians now anticipate a second advent when Christ will return to earth in bodily
form to receive the church and to judge the nations. The term *Advent* also refers to a season of the church year during which the church prepares to commemorate Christ’s first coming to earth (Christmas). The Advent season encompasses the four Sundays prior to Christmas Day. *See also* parousia.

**aesthetics (esthetics).** The area of philosophy formally concerned with defining the nature of beauty and discovering criteria or standards by which something can be evaluated as beautiful. In Christian theology beauty is usually defined as what reflects in some way God’s own character and nature. *See also* ethics.

**agnosticism.** Literally, “no knowledge” and taken from two Greek terms, a (no) and gnosis (knowledge). In a more formal sense *agnosticism* refers to a system of belief in which personal opinion about religious statements (e.g., “God exists”) is suspended because it is assumed that they can be neither proven nor disproven or because such statements are seen as irrelevant. *See also* atheism.

**Alexandrian school.** So called because of its origin in the city of Alexandria (Egypt), this Christian center of scholarship was led first by Clement of Alexandria in A.D. 190 and then by Origen in A.D. 202. The Alexandrian school was influenced by the philosophy of Plato and understood the task of biblical interpretation as seeking out its literal, moral and allegorical senses. In other words, the Alexandrian theologians taught that although the Bible was literally true, its correct interpretation lay in the moral or allegorical senses more than in the literal sense. *See also* Antiochene school.

**allegory, allegorical method.** An allegory is a story in which the details correspond to or reveal a “hidden,” “higher” or “deeper” meaning. The allegorical method of biblical interpretation assumes that biblical stories should be interpreted by seeking the “spiritual” meaning to which the literal sense points. *See also* typology.

**amillennialism.** The belief that the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20 do not represent a specific period of time between Christ’s first and second comings. Many amillennialists believe instead that the *millennium refers to the heavenly reign of Christ*
and the departed saints during the Church Age. Amillennialists usually understand Revelation 20 to mean that the return of Christ will occur at the end of history and that the church presently lives in the final era of history. See also premillennialism; postmillennialism.

**Anabaptist.** A general term referring to several varied movements coming out of the Protestant *Reformation in the 16th century, often referred to as the *Radical Reformation. Anabaptists rejected infant baptism as practiced in the Lutheran and Reformed churches. Furthermore, Anabaptists believed that these churches either had been corrupted or had not separated themselves fully from what the Anabaptists considered to be errors of the Roman Catholic Church. Anabaptists therefore urged their followers to be baptized as conscious disciples of Christ. Significant Anabaptists include Menno Simons and Jacob Hutter. See also Mennonites.

**Analogy of being (analogia entis).** The argument that there is sufficient similarity between God and creation so that observation of the universe will yield a limited understanding of God’s nature. The analogy of being is usually said to extend more to humans than to the universe itself, in that humans are created in the image of God (see imago Dei). Contemporary theologians have debated the extent to which sinful humans can perceive creation as pointing to God. Some theologians (e.g., Karl *Barth) reject completely the use of the analogy of being as a valid theological principle.

**Analogy of faith (analogia fidei).** A principle of interpretation that suggests that clearer passages of Scripture should be used to interpret more obscure or difficult passages. For *Augustine the analogy of faith requires that Scripture never be interpreted in such a way that it violates the church’s summary of Christian faith (i.e., the Apostles’ Creed). For Luther, Christ is the analogy of faith, so that Scripture needs always to be interpreted as testifying to Christ. For Calvin the analogy of faith assumes that because the Spirit oversaw its writing, Scripture and the Spirit together interpret other parts of Scripture.

**Analytical philosophy.** An early twentieth-century philosophical
movement that sought to understand how a sentence “means” something. Early analytical philosophers (e.g., A. J. Ayer) asserted that sentences are meaningful only if they can be verified or falsified in some way, at least theoretically. This suggests that religious, ethical and poetic sentences are meaningless, in that they can neither be verified nor falsified. See also logical positivism.

**Anglican, Anglicanism.** Anglicanism began in seventeenth-century England as part of the English Reformation and continues as the state church of England. Anglicanism was formed out of the theology of *Protestantism, especially *Calvinism, but maintained a strong affinity to the worship and structure of the Roman Catholic Church. Common to all of Anglicanism is its use of the *Book of Common Prayer in worship. It declares the central Anglican principle: “The rule of prayer is the rule of belief.”

**anhypostasis.** The belief that Christ in his incarnation did not take characteristics of a specific human being upon himself, but rather took on humanity in a “generic” sense. Thus Jesus of Nazareth was not so much a “new” human as much as he was “like” a human in every way. Traditionally, the church has rejected the anhypostasis theory as an inadequate explanation of Christ’s humanity.

**animism.** A system of belief that asserts that spirit beings are the cause of all movement, growth or change (animation) in the world. Although many animists acknowledge one most powerful god, they are highly sensitive to the presence of the spiritual in the world. Animists, therefore, would explain various movements, such as the growth of a tree, the rustling of its leaves and the shedding of its leaves, as visible effects of invisible spirits.

**annihilationism.** The belief that all the wicked will be judged by God and thrown into the lake of fire, where they will cease to exist. Some annihilationists suggest that this will occur instantaneously, while others believe that the unrighteous may experience a brief period of awareness. However, all annihilationists agree that no individual, however wicked, will suffer eternally a conscious existence in hell. See also conditional immortality.
Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). A medieval monk, philosopher and theologian who eventually became the archbishop of Canterbury, England. Anselm is best known for his formulation of the *ontological argument for the existence of God, as well as his *satisfaction theory of the atonement. Anselm also sought to understand the reasons that God had to become human in Christ and give himself as a sacrifice for sin. Anselm understood the task of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum (faith seeking understanding).

anthropology. From the Greek words *anthrōpos (human) and *logos (word), that is, words about, or teaching concerning, humankind. Anthropology in general refers to any study of the status, habits, customs, relationships and culture of humankind. In a more specific and theological sense, anthropology sets forth the scriptural teachings about humans as God’s creatures. Christian anthropology recognizes that humans are created in God’s image (*imago Dei) but that sin has in some way negatively affected that image. Anthropology is also interested in the question of the constitution of a human being, that is, the relationship between body, soul, spirit and so on.

anthropomorphism. A figure of speech used by writers of Scripture in which human physical characteristics are attributed to God for the sake of illustrating an important point. For example, Scripture sometimes speaks of the “face” or “arm” of God, even though God is revealed to be Spirit and not limited in time and space by the constraints of a physical body. Anthropomorphisms essentially help to make an otherwise abstract truth about God more concrete.

antichrist. Literally, “against Christ,” the term refers to individual, social or ideological opposition to the words and deeds of Christ. Some theologians understand the antichrist to be a future individual who will oppose Christ and whose rule in the world will serve as a sign of the nearness of Christ’s second coming. The term appears only in the letters of John, yet biblical writers in both the OT and the NT used similar concepts, such as “sons of Belial” (as found in the Pentateuch and historical books); “the little horn” (Daniel); “the abomination of desolation” (Matthew