

Engaging the
Doctrine *of* God

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**Contemporary
Protestant
Perspectives**

EDITED BY

Bruce L. McCormack

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Preface

Is there such a thing as *the* evangelical doctrine of the being and attributes of God? Many would probably like to say, “Yes, of course there is. The evangelical doctrine of God is the *orthodox* doctrine of God. It has to be because evangelicals are, by definition, committed to Christian orthodoxy.” But is there even an orthodox doctrine of God? I raise the question because it is not immediately obvious what would make any doctrine of God to be orthodox in the first place. “Orthodoxy” means, quite obviously, “right teaching,” and for evangelicals, the material norm for deciding what is right teaching must surely be Holy Scripture. It is conformity to scriptural teaching which guarantees the orthodoxy of any opinion. So far, all evangelicals would be in agreement. Scripture, however, has to be interpreted. Decisions must be made as to its proper meaning. In some cases, where doctrinal disputes have threatened to disrupt the peace and unity of the church, councils were called to *decide* what constitutes orthodox teaching in relation to the disputed questions. All of this is to say that “orthodoxy” is finally a church concept. It is a concept that belongs to the realm of ecclesiology because it is the Church which must make the decision as to how Holy Scripture is to be understood—not individual theologians, no matter how great their personal prestige. To be sure, since the decision of the Church is a decision with regard to the proper understanding of a material norm that is *other* than itself, its decisions on any question are inherently reformable. Still, those decisions made by the Church in the past which continue to enjoy support among the great majority of the divided churches possess a degree of ecclesial authority that is unsurpassed. The more ecumenical the council, the more its decisions shape the common faith of all the churches.

But here is the problem: no ecumenical council was ever convened to establish the limits of “orthodoxy” where the being and attributes of God are concerned. No ecumenical council has ever addressed, even in passing, the issues involved. The Nicene Creed, which did define the limits of orthodoxy where the triunity of God is concerned, certainly has *implications* for one’s understanding of the being and attributes of God. But a wide range of treatments of the being and attributes of God can be shown to be compatible with the Nicene Creed. The truth of the matter is that there is no “orthodox” doctrine of God, if by that is meant an understanding of God’s being and attributes.

One might well say that, for my church, the Westminster Confession of Faith serves as the sole subordinate standard for determining what constitutes right teaching in this area of doctrine. And if the reader does belong to such a church, then I would have to concede the truth of his or her claim. *For you*, the teaching of chapter 2 of the Westminster Confession stands alone in defining the limits of orthodoxy in this area of doctrine. But a defender of the Westminster doctrine of God might immediately want to ask, Is the Westminster doctrine not the doctrine of the church fathers, Calvin, and all who are “orthodox” in relation to those matters which have been treated by the church councils? This is where things get interesting! The Westminster Confession says, “There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts or passions.” The insistence that God is without body or parts constitutes an affirmation of divine *simplicity*, obviously. Note also that God’s being “without passions” is an affirmation of divine *impassibility*. Neither of these affirmations, however, is included in the earlier Reformed confessions.¹ In fact, these confessions give only sparse treatment to the being and attributes of God, much as Calvin did by devoting only a slim chapter to the subject in his *Institutes*.² This means that many Reformed churches have never

1. Simplicity and impassibility do not find expression in the articles on God in the Genevan Confession (1536), the First Helvetic Confession (1536), the French Confession (1559), the Scots Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561, revised 1619), or the Second Helvetic Confession (1566). The Genevan Catechism (1545) has very little to say about God’s being and attributes, choosing to turn its attention instead to divine providence and redemption, and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) offers no treatment of the subject whatsoever.

2. Calvin’s doctrine of God comprises three very brief subsections which take up but three pages in the McNeill edition. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.x.1–3, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster; London: SCM, 1960). Of these three sections, only the second treats the being and attributes of God. And even then, Calvin is treating how God relates to his creatures, not how God is in himself. Reflecting upon Exod. 34:6–7, Calvin writes of the name given to God there, “Here let us observe that his eternity and his self-existence are announced by that wonderful

made divine simplicity and impassibility a matter of confession. Hence the Westminster Confession defines the limits of orthodoxy in relation to the doctrine of God *only* for those churches that continue to uphold it as their sole subordinate standard of faith; it does not define orthodoxy for all Reformed churches. My point is that no ecumenical consensus exists on the doctrine of God, and there is no single creed or confession recognized across denominational boundaries that defines orthodoxy in this area for the great majority of Christians in the same way that the Nicene Creed does for the doctrine of the Trinity. That being the case, any doctrine of God which does not clearly collide with the Nicene Creed (or, we might add, if you like, the Chalcedonian Formula) might conceivably be “orthodox” and would have to be regarded as a serious possibility by doctors of all the churches.

In the nature of the case, work on the doctrine of God today—whether done by evangelicals or non-evangelicals—must be *exploratory*. In our work with the doctrine of God, we are not working in the realm of received dogma, critically analyzing it and defending it. In this particular case, we have no dogma. What we have is only the doctrines of individual teachers, past and present, whose contents often overlap but just as often diverge on important issues.

The essays contained in this volume first saw life as lectures given at the eleventh Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, held in the city of that name from August 29 to September 1, 2005, under the sponsorship of Rutherford House. Doctrinal preaching is an important part of every Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference. The tone of this conference was set by David Wright’s moving sermon—one which succeeded in introducing one of the conference’s central problems, namely, the question whether God suffers and, if so, how this is possible. The papers which followed showed that evangelical exploration into the doctrine of God today is very much in flux and that opinions are divided. Contributors ranged from those deeply committed to one form of “classical theism” (Paul Helm) on the one end of the spectrum to those cautiously critical of it (Bruce McCormack) on the other end. I call my own position *cautiously* critical because I have learned so much from classical theism—and because there are evangelical options which were not represented at our conference and which would have to be located somewhere to the “left” of me. The other

name twice repeated. Thereupon his powers are mentioned, by which he is shown to us not as he is in himself, but as he is towards us; so that this recognition of him consists more in living experience than in vain and high-flown speculation.” Whether Calvin is right to regard God as unknowable in himself is a question for itself. What is clear is that he wants to content himself with what God has revealed—and to say no more. Perhaps this is why divine “simplicity” and “impassibility” are nowhere mentioned in this context or in any of the confessions of faith authored or coauthored by Calvin.

contributors at our conference are to be found at various points between these two poles. If I were to divide them into groups (and this is only my opinion), I would place Don Carson, Oliver Crisp, Donald Macleod, and John Webster on the classical end of the spectrum, with N. T. Wright, Henri Blocher, Pierre Berthoud and Stephen Williams as belonging to the “progressive” end in their willingness to pose questions to concepts of divine timelessness, impassibility, and so forth (with occasional nods of agreement from the otherwise classically oriented Professor Webster). That two leading “Barthians” such as Webster and McCormack can, for the most part, appear on different ends of a spectrum of beliefs about God tells us something important about divisions within evangelical Barthianism. We do not all take the same things from Barth! Even more important, however, the range of possibilities found on this spectrum of beliefs tells us something significant about evangelical reflection on the doctrine of God today. Such consensus as may once have existed on the doctrine of God has now given way to major differences of opinion on some very important topics. It is my fervent hope that evangelicals will one day be able to build a new consensus on the doctrine of God. But that will require patience, mutual respect, careful exegetical and historical spadework, and rigorous theological argumentation. If the essays in this volume accomplish nothing more than to kick-start a conversation which leads to such a new consensus, then they will have amply served their purpose.

I would like to thank Mr. Robert Fyall, the director of Rutherford House, for his oversight of the 2005 conference and for all of his work at the House. Bob will be leaving his post as director this year. We will all miss his wise administration and his saintly spirit around the place. Thanks are also due Mr. Robert Hosack of Baker Academic. This is the second collection of essays to be published by Baker Academic.³ Bob and his team are delightful people to work with; they are highly skilled professionals who manage to be consistently patient with the foibles of academics. I wish finally to thank Stina Busman, PhD candidate here at Princeton Seminary, for introducing uniformity of formatting into papers written by scholars from France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Her work is deeply appreciated. And finally, thanks are due to Keith L. Johnson, another of our PhD students, for his careful editing of the final draft of the manuscript.

3. See Bruce L. McCormack, ed., *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).