

Chapter 1

Our Approach

Convictions, Persuasions and Opinions

SHARON PEERED AT ME THROUGH LARGE OVAL GLASSES. “This really isn’t theology you’re teaching us, is it?”

I had to look closely to make sure she wasn’t teasing. Sharon was in her early twenties. She had joined Campus Crusade staff and was taking my basic theology course as part of her ministry preparation.

“Why...do you ask?” I said, groping for words.

“Because every day when I leave class, my heart is so filled with God’s love, I just want to sing. I’m actually enjoying all this doctrine stuff!”

ENJOYING THROUGH KNOWING

Enjoying “doctrine” and “theology”? Somehow these two words sound stiff and dull. However, *doctrine* is just another word for teaching, and *theology* simply means knowledge of God. I’ve called this book *Enjoying God* because I hope your experience will be a little like Sharon’s. My prayer is that as you explore Christian theology—what Christians believe—you will increasingly experience the deep joy reserved for those who truly know Him.

How does it work? How does knowing about God help us enjoy an intimate relationship with Him? When Jesus was asked, “Which is the greatest commandment?” he answered, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.”¹ To most Christians, loving God with all your heart and soul makes sense. But how can we love God with our minds? The answer is we need to understand what God has said about who He is, who we are, and how we can have a relationship with Him. Of course, knowing and enjoying God involves more than simply knowing about Him and what He has said. However, I’m convinced we cannot truly know God without first knowing a good deal about Him.

Recently I was listening to a radio psychologist. A young woman called in asking what she should do about her live-in boyfriend who been gone for three days and left no message or note.

“How long have you known him?”

“About four months.”

“And how long has he been living with you?”

“Three months.”

“Have you called the place he lived before?” the psychologist asked.

“I don’t know where he lived; I never called him there.”

“Have you tried calling his work?”

“I don’t know where he works or even the name of the company.”

“How about his friends or his parents, have you tried calling them?”

“He never mentioned any other friends or his parents.”

The psychologist paused, then asked, in obvious consternation,

"Where'd you meet this guy?"

"In a bar. We always met at the same bar."

"And what did he say when you asked him about his family or his friends or his work?"

There was moment of silence before the caller quietly said, "I never asked."

"You never asked? And you say you love this man?"

"Yes, I love him very much, and I'm worried about him."

"Listen dear; I met my husband 10 years ago at a party. In the first half hour of conversation, I found out who his parents were, what he studied in college, where he worked, and lots more. I knew more about him in 30 minutes than you've learned living with this guy for three months! How can you say you 'love' him? You know nothing about the man!"

The psychologist was right. How can we genuinely love someone we know little about? The more we know about God--who He is, what He values, what He says about things--the more we can truly begin to love Him with our minds. That's the purpose of this book: to help you discover what God has said concerning a wide variety of subjects and, as a result, to experience a deeper love relationship with Him.

In each area of theology which follows, you will find a brief sketch of a particular doctrine—an area of teaching God has given to us about Himself, about ourselves, or about the world. In a few pages you can grasp the basic ideas of what the Bible teaches and what Christians believe. We'll look at what we believe, why we believe it, and how our beliefs can bring us into a more intimate and enjoyable relationship with our God. To begin, let's explore an idea that may surprise you: not everything we believe as Christians needs to be, or even should be, held as a strong conviction.

RECOGNIZING THE LEVELS OF BELIEF

As a young Christian, I wondered why some believers argued over what seemed like trivial points of belief. I was puzzled as well by those who called themselves Christians but denied basic doctrines like the deity of Christ or the Trinity. I was like a starving man invited to a feast when I read in C. S. Lewis's introduction to *Mere Christianity* that he was going to present "an agreed, or common, or central, or 'mere' Christianity."² But I wondered, wouldn't this be some insipid, worthless, "lowest-common denominator?" As if anticipating my question, Lewis went on to say that the common core of Christian belief "turns out to be something not only positive but pungent; divided from all non-Christian beliefs by a chasm to which the worst divisions inside Christendom are not really comparable at all."³ In the remainder of the book, Lewis establishes two categories of views: those that are a part of "mere" Christianity and those that are not.

You might be wondering, isn't this kind of distinction unbiblical? Isn't everything in Scripture essential? Shouldn't believers, once they understand a passage, hold its truth as firmly as they do that of any other passage? In this sense should not every teaching of Scripture be a part of "mere" Christianity?

The answer to each of these questions must be a firm no. The New Testament writers themselves held more than one category of belief. They held some beliefs as nonnegotiable for all Christians, others as matters of individual conscience on which

believers could have diversity of understanding, and other beliefs as solely matters of personal preference.

Sadly, the conflict and division that characterized Christianity in Lewis's day is still with us. The need for restoring a unity, based on a distinction between what is central in the Christian faith and what is secondary, is as great as it was when Lewis wrote *Mere Christianity* more than a half century ago. In this book I hope to separate those beliefs that are essential to our Christian faith from those that are peripheral or even questionable.

A good way to grasp the kinds of distinctions we need to make is to look at the writing of the apostle Paul. Some people think of Paul as always dogmatic and unyielding. It is true, the apostle who jumps off the pages of Acts and his many letters was a man of strong convictions and bold action. But that's one reason I find it so intriguing that Paul did not hold all of his beliefs at the same level of importance. We find in Paul's letters three distinct levels of belief: convictions, persuasions, and opinions.

Level 1: Convictions

Even though Paul was a man of peace and tolerance, he considered some issues so crucial and central to the faith he was willing to risk dividing the body of Christ. Paul told us about one such issue in his letter to the Galatians.

The conflict centered on Peter (also called Cephas) who was the acknowledged leader of the church in Jerusalem, the center of first-century Christianity. As a good Jew, Peter had grown up eating only the prescribed Jewish foods. After his vision from God,⁴ apparently Peter relaxed those rigorous standards and ate Gentile foods, at least when eating with Christians from Gentile backgrounds. When some legalistic Jewish believers arrived from Jerusalem, Peter "began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision."⁵ But the problem did not end there. When Peter stopped eating Gentile food, "the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy."⁶ Finally Paul could stand it no longer and publicly confronted Peter. "But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, 'If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'"⁷

The issue of eating or abstaining from non-kosher food was not, as it might first appear, the real crux of what Paul believed at a conviction level. We know this because he told us in Romans 14, that issues like this are best left to individual persuasion. A far more serious issue was at stake in Antioch.

Peter's behavior, whether intentional or not, was threatening the unity of the body of Christ and confusing the means of salvation. Peter's withdrawal from eating with the Gentiles challenged the "truth of the gospel" that Paul had been preaching. Specifically, Peter was tacitly denying the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone, as the apostle makes clear in Galatians 2:16. Paul was willing to take a strong, public stand because the issue was essential to salvation. The conduct of Peter and the other Jews seemed "calculated to throw obscurity and doubt on the true gospel."⁸ In this instance Paul is making a conviction-level stand, not yielding "for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you."⁹ In other words, Paul was willing to stand and

fight, even risking a public controversy, because the issue of circumcision struck at the heart of the gospel. Any compromise at this point would be tantamount to a loss of the gospel itself!

In Galatians 2, Paul is acting from *convictions* concerning matters crucial to salvation. These are not simply *persuasions* about which the apostle, although certain he is right, can allow other believers to disagree. Rather, in these cases Paul is willing to risk the very unity he spent so much of his life building. The reason he took such a great risk is that it concerned the very heart and truth of the gospel.¹⁰

Convictions for Paul are matters of belief where the gospel itself is at stake. In these matters Paul is not "tolerant." Rather he confronts those in error and is ready to break fellowship with them if they do not repent.

Likewise, we believers today should have certain doctrinal truths which we hold at a conviction level. I believe we should have very few convictions, but we should be willing to die, or suffer ridicule, for them. Someone has said, "If you don't have anything you'd be willing to die for, you may not have anything worth living for!" If I'm ever confronted with the choice to either deny Christ or die, I hope and pray I'd have the courage and grace to choose death as many heroic Christians have down through the centuries.

I believe our convictions should be on subjects we have studied for ourselves. Secondhand convictions are dangerous, although many Christians harbor them. Do you really want to die for something you merely heard a pastor or radio preacher say a decade ago? Furthermore, convictions should be restricted to concepts clearly taught in many passages of Scripture. And we should expect confirmation by Church history with a general, though perhaps not perfect, consensus.

Remember, breaking fellowship with those who significantly disagree at the conviction level is not only legitimate but often essential. By "breaking fellowship" I mean treating a Christian as we would a non-believer. We are polite to non-believers and talk with them, but our main concern is to bring them into a relationship with Christ. In the same way, we can still be cordial and speak with a believer who stubbornly disagrees on a conviction-level issue. However, we are not to treat him or her as a believer in good standing. Rather, our whole effort should be concentrated on trying to bring about a return to an orthodox stand in this crucial area of doctrine. Church leaders should be willing to engage in the appropriate steps of church discipline with mature believers who persist in believing and teaching errors on conviction-level doctrines (Matthew 18:15-17).

Some examples of doctrines I'd classify as convictions are: the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and salvation by grace through faith. We will look more closely at each of these convictions in coming chapters.

Level 2: Persuasions

We find a second level of belief in Romans 14. In verse 5 Paul stated, "One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully persuaded in his own mind." Notice, while each person is to be fully persuaded, Paul is not insisting on uniformity of view between "fully persuaded" believers. Each person can have his or her own belief, yet remain in unity with believers who disagree.¹¹

"Persuaded" is a strong term meaning "having a filled-in, settled belief."¹² Initially it might seem that Paul is speaking here of the strongest possible level of theological conviction.

However, as his argument continues, it becomes clear that this "full persuasion" should not be used as a basis for dividing fellowship with other believers or even thinking badly of them. Paul said we should not judge other Christians or hold them in contempt. Why? Because we'll "all stand before the judgment seat of God."¹³ Therefore, Paul concluded we should stop judging believers and instead "determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way."¹⁴ For Paul it is possible to have a "full persuasion" yet not need to break fellowship with those in the Body of Christ who strongly disagree.¹⁵

Paul was saying there are many issues on which a mature believer may have a settled, full persuasion and yet not be justified in judging his brother. The principle he draws is larger than any single issue: "Who are you to judge the servant of another?" (vs. 4). The dividing line is that which is not essential for salvation. Martin Luther came to the same conclusion.¹⁶ Luther believed there were some matters worth disputing and even those that warranted breaking Christian fellowship.¹⁷

Romans 14 shows that Paul held some issues as persuasions where Christians should have firm beliefs, yet accept other believers who disagree. I would propose that the primary dividing line between theological persuasions and those doctrinal convictions which would warrant confrontation and a risk of division should be whether the beliefs in question are essential to salvation.¹⁸

Most Christians have a fair number of persuasions and the number of our persuasions generally increases as we study. One likely consequence of reading this book is that you will emerge with some new persuasions. Persuasions should be subjects we have studied enough to be entitled to a clear view on the subject. Persuasions are often not on main themes of Scripture, but generally should be confined to subjects about which the Bible speaks. We can feel free to argue for our persuasions, but we should respect and cooperate with those who disagree. Some examples of beliefs I think should be treated as persuasions would be: millennial views, the role of "tongues," and the age of the earth.

Level 3: Opinions

We find a final level of belief in Paul's treatment of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. In dealing with the question of celibacy he says: "This I say by way of concession, not of command. Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am." As a single man Paul wished all were free to pursue God and ministry with a single-minded devotion like his. But clearly Paul does not think this is God's will for everyone, for he goes on to say that "each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that" (verses 7-8).

The Greek word for wish is *thelo*, which in this context expresses "desire" or "design."¹⁹ The apostle uses the word three other times in this chapter. In verse 36 Paul says a father may, if he wishes, allow his unwed daughter to marry. Clearly, this is not Paul's own first choice, but he is giving permission for each man to carry out his own preference. Again, in verse 39, Paul says a widow may marry whom she wishes and in verse 32 he says, "I want (*thelo*) you to be free from concern." In each case Paul is

using the word in the sense of an individual desire or personal preference. Therefore, *thelo* frequently carries the sense of a strictly personal or even hypothetical wish. So when Paul says, "I wish all were like me," he is expressing his opinion that the celibate state is best.

Perhaps an even clearer example of Paul expressing an "opinion" is found in 1 Corinthians 7:40. In advising the widow, he said, "But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is...." "Opinion" is the Greek word *gnoman* (from the verb *ginosko*, to know.) Used this way it could mean a "judgment" or "opinion." However, to interpret this word as "judgment" in the sense of authoritatively handing down a directive does not make sense in the context. Paul has just said that she is free to marry (v. 39), so this is not a command, simply a friendly opinion from Paul.²⁰

Elsewhere in this passage, Paul did speak authoritatively. In verse 12 the apostle undoubtedly expected his directives to be literally obeyed for he concludes his discussion in verse 17 with "and thus I direct. . . ." In this verse we find no hint of a disclaimer, no room left for individual conscience. But verses 25 and 40 are quite different. Clearly, neither of these is in the nature of a universal directive; for each carries a disclaimer in a nearby verse.

A more somber use of *thelo* comes from the lips of Christ in Gethsemane. When Jesus prayed, "Let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will (*thelo*) but as Thou wilt," it was not His conviction or even his persuasion that the cup would pass. It was simply His human wish to avoid the suffering that was before Him.²¹

Opinions are beliefs, desires, or even wishes which may not be clearly taught in Scripture or which may legitimately differ for various believers. Opinions may even be our own pet theories or prejudices, which may or may not turn out to be true. We will have many opinions, and they will change fairly frequently. Opinions may be on subjects which either we have not personally studied or on which the Bible is silent or ambiguous. We should speak tentatively or label our views as "my opinion" or as "speculation." Some examples of views that should be kept as opinions might be: How long until Christ returns? Which is the best Bible translation? Is time travel possible?

DISTINGUISHING THE LEVELS

I want to stop for a moment to clarify something that may be confusing. Often when I've taught these ideas in the past, some thought I was saying that what distinguishes one level of belief from another is how strongly a person feels about something. So let me state it as clearly as I can: what separates these levels of belief is *not* the psychological or subjective "strength" with which we hold a belief. An individual might feel very strongly about an issue and still choose, based on biblical or theological criteria, to class her view as a persuasion or an opinion rather than a conviction. For example, I have no doubt the Holy Spirit indwells every believer from the moment of salvation. I think this is an extremely crucial foundational doctrine for developing a consistent Christian walk. I have known a number of Christians who've not grown in their Christian lives because they were waiting for some outward sign that they'd received a "second blessing." Although I am passionate about this biblical teaching, I do not classify it as a conviction since it deals with our sanctification or Christian growth and is not a doctrine central to salvation.

Now let's recap where we've gone in this discussion. We've looked at three chapters from different letters of Paul where the apostle displayed three levels, or strengths, of beliefs. While "convictions," "persuasions," and "opinions" are not all in evidence in the same passage, and so this trilevel paradigm cannot be shown to be specifically taught, the presence of these three Pauline levels of belief gives us a strong biblical basis for not holding all our views at a conviction level.

So how do we distinguish the levels? *Convictions* are central beliefs, crucial to salvation, over which we should be willing to denounce someone in serious disagreement and, if there is no repentance, eventually divide fellowship. *Persuasions* are beliefs about which we are personally certain but which are not crucial to salvation. We must accept those with differing persuasions as members in good standing of God's family, even when we are certain they are wrong on these points. *Opinions* are beliefs about subjects on which either (1) we have a preference, but acknowledge that others may also be right in holding a different view, or (2) we do not have any confidence we yet know the truth of the matter. By extension, I will frequently use "opinion" in this book regarding matters, about which the Bible is silent or ambiguous, making certainty impossible.

Please note that while my lack of confidence in the truth of something may cause me to classify it as an opinion rather than a persuasion, the issue of confidence does not play any role in discerning between persuasions and convictions. A persuasion is not a conviction I'm less sure about. I should be equally certain about the truth of my persuasions as I am about my convictions. A conviction is a belief that is central to the Christian gospel itself. A good test to see if a belief should be classed as a conviction is to ask, "If I remove this belief from my theological system, would I still leave the essential claims of the gospel message intact?" If the answer is yes, then that belief, no matter how firmly I believe it or how strongly I feel about it, probably should be classed as a persuasion.

Setting the Boundaries

I'd like to suggest one final implication of this convictions-persuasions-opinions classification scheme. From the very early centuries of Christianity down to the present day, many churches, denominations, and other Christian groups have drafted lists of their core beliefs. These lists are usually called creeds, doctrinal statements, or statements of faith. I have long pondered the question, "What sorts of beliefs properly belong in these kinds of boundary statements?" Now, you may be thinking that my answer is obvious. You may think I'll say only conviction-level beliefs belong in these faith statements; however, that is not my conclusion. If boundary statements were only written to clarify who is, and who is not, a true Christian, then it might make sense to include only conviction-level beliefs.²² However, many doctrinal statements, especially in recent centuries, are designed to capture the distinctives of a ministry or a particular group of Christians and include a mixture of conviction-, persuasion-, and sometimes even opinion-level beliefs.²³

It is often a necessary protection for a church or other Christian organization to require its leaders and teachers to adhere not only to those beliefs common to all Christians but also to particular emphases or historic distinctives which distinguish that group from others. The only potential problem with this practice is that those signing the

statement might begin to look down on those who could not sign. For example, some seminaries have asked their faculty members, or even their graduating students, to sign an elaborate doctrinal statement that includes the teaching that Christ is going to return to the earth before the 1000-year millennial kingdom. In my view this is a clear example of a persuasion-level belief. An individual does not have to believe this in order to be a true Christian. However, I have no problem with this or any other nonconviction-level teaching being included in an institution's boundary statement as long as it is clear that one can become a genuine Christian without believing this particular nonessential teaching.

Emphasizing the Essentials

The young man shrank back in his seat as he listened to the persuasive voice of the speaker. *I haven't even finished college*, the young man thought. *I want to get married, have children, travel. I'm not ready for the end of the world!*

The speaker continued to detail recent world events: the Middle East had again erupted into armed conflict between Israel and her neighbors; Russia was threatening to intervene; famine and earthquakes were increasing around the globe. Then the climax of the message: the speaker paused dramatically, his voice almost a whisper, "I'll be surprised if Christ does not return before summer!"

It must be true. He seems so confident; he knows so much about the Bible. The young man believed the speaker when he said Jesus would come back by summer. Why? Because of the authoritative way the speaker asserted all his beliefs as if they were convictions.

I know this was the young man's reaction, because that young man was me! The year was 1967; and, of course, Jesus did not return by the summer of '67, in the air or any other way! Fortunately, my baby faith was not severely damaged by this dogmatic, prophetic teaching. However, a confusion of conviction- and persuasion-level beliefs can have serious consequences.

I've known non-believers who listened to messages like the one I heard and said, "He's returning by summer? We'll just wait and see!" Then later they scoffed, "I knew the Bible wasn't true." I believe we as Christians have a responsibility to distinguish between those central points about which the Bible is clear, and about which nearly all Christians agree, and those concepts which are peripheral or questionable.

Not only does a failure to distinguish between crucial and less-crucial beliefs sometimes keep people from coming to Christ, but that failure can hurt even our own walks as Christians. I often shudder when I hear Christian brothers or sisters speak of their own pet theories, as if they had a certain word from the Lord. The reason it frightens me is that I have known several believers, who seemed to hold everything they believed at the same high level of dogmatic conviction. When they told you which Bible translation you should read, it was with the same intensity and tone of voice they used when they talked about the deity of Christ. When I met these same people several years later, they had ceased to believe in Christ or the Bible at all.

As I talked with them, trying to understand how they had lost their faith, it seemed to me they had set themselves up for a fall. They were expending so much mental and emotional energy trying to hold vast numbers of questionable ideas at the highest level of conviction that it took very little to rattle their system and bring the whole

thing crashing down. In their minds, it was either all true or none of it was true. When someone, perhaps even a well-meaning Christian, convinced them that one of their “convictions” was wrong, the whole, shaky edifice became suspect and eventually they could trust none of it. As strange as it may sound, one of the best ways to protect your faith may be to learn to take some of what you believe less seriously!

If we are going to love God with our minds as well as our hearts, if we are going to worship Him “in spirit and truth,”²⁴ then we must have some way to sort out what is crucial to our Christian faith from what is helpful but secondary or even optional or questionable. I have personally found the convictions-persuasions-opinions paradigm gives me confidence that I’m listening intently to those things God Himself deems most important without becoming overly distracted by peripheral issues.

In the next two chapters, we’ll embark on a journey toward knowing God better by looking at what God has told us about Himself. We’ll begin by answering the question, “Can we know that God exists?”

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. What is your instinctive reaction when you hear the words “doctrine” or “theology?”
2. What is the connection between knowing about someone and knowing them in a personal way?
3. Before reading this chapter, were there Christian beliefs you held at what could be described as a “conviction” level? Make a list and put it somewhere so you can refer to it later as you read this book.
4. Have you ever observed Christians fighting or breaking fellowship over issues that should have been treated as persuasions or opinions? How should they have handled their disagreement?
5. Does your church (or denomination or Christian organization) have a “boundary statement”? Obtain a copy of it and see if you can classify the various points into the three levels of belief.

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Brainstorm: What are some beliefs that we should treat as convictions? (Don’t evaluate; just have someone write down a list of possible convictions.)
2. What are some of the differences between convictions and persuasions as described in the first chapter?
3. What are some differences between persuasions and opinions?
4. What are some problems that might be solved if more Christians distinguished among these three levels of belief?
5. What are some ways it might help each of us personally if we made this distinction?
6. What are some doctrinal beliefs that we’re not exactly sure how to classify? (Refer to the list from question 1. Make a new list of beliefs that the group is unsure how to classify or disagrees about. Save this new list for future discussion.)

RECOMMENDED READING

Note: the reading suggestions in this book fall into three main levels: beginning (for popular, adult-level reading); intermediate (for serious inquiry at the college or Bible school level); advanced (scholarly reading for graduate-level theology students).

Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz, *Knowing God 101: A Guide to Theology in Plain Language* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2004). Appropriate for junior-high or high-school students, this book is soundly evangelical, easily readable, and covers all the areas of doctrine, including a chapter on the Christian life. The book employs the first person and many icons, text boxes, and other graphic devices to stimulate interest. Beginning.

Gilbert Bilezikian, *Christianity 101* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993). Written by a Wheaton College professor, this book omits the crucial subjects of angels, Satan, demons, and the Christian walk, but has brief, helpful chapters on the other areas of doctrine. Intermediate

Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2008). This is an excellent overall resource which covers all the areas of doctrine in 280 pages. In addition, Enns includes excellent sections on biblical, historical, dogmatic (traditional) and contemporary theology. Intermediate

Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1983-1998). If I could only recommend one complete systematic theology, I would recommend Erickson. His treatment is thorough, philosophically sophisticated, quite readable and often devotional. Intermediate-Advanced.

Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994-2000). The most readable of today's evangelical academic theologians, Grudem defends a Reformed soteriology but is open to the miraculous gifts of the Spirit. Intermediate-Advanced.

Alan Johnson and Robert Webber, *What Christians Believe* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1989-1993). Every chapter of this scholarly but readable volume covers the historical development of each doctrine in considerable detail. Intermediate.

J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1997). Evangelical philosopher Moreland makes an eloquent case for the role of the mind in the lives of believers. Intermediate.

J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale, 1993). Packer covers all the areas of theology with brevity and clarity in more than one hundred 2-3 page chapters. Although the theological stance is staunchly Reformed, the tone is irenic. Basic-Intermediate.

Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1987). In this concise systematic theology, dispensational theologian Ryrie gives a biblically sound coverage of all the doctrinal areas. Intermediate.

Charles Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody, 1972). This concise (191 pages) but somewhat dry introduction covers all the areas of theology (except the Christian walk), and cites many biblical references. Beginning.

-
- ¹ Matthew 22:36-37. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, will be from the *New American Standard Bible* (La Habra, Calif.: Lockman Foundation, 1960).
- ² C.S. Lewis, (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 8.
- ³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity* p. 8.
- ⁴ Acts 10:1-35. In the first century, Jewish people followed a strict dietary code that was set out in the Jewish Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament). They could not eat pork, and even other meat had to be prepared in a very particular fashion (called "kosher"). However, the book of Acts tells us that God Himself made it clear to Peter that, as Christians, even those from a Jewish background did not need to continue to follow the kosher laws in order to be saved and accepted by God. So, Peter began to eat with the Gentile Christians, enjoying even their non-kosher food. Then a strict group of Jews (called "Judaizers" or "the party of the circumcision") came from Jerusalem teaching that people had to be circumcised and follow the kosher laws in order to be truly saved. To placate them, Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles. Paul publicly confronted Peter, because Peter's behavior was hypocritical and was confusing the gospel, altering the good news of how people can be saved.
- ⁵ Galatians 2:12b.
- ⁶ Galatians 2:13.
- ⁷ Galatians 2:14.
- ⁸ John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians* (Evansville, Ind.: Sovereign Grace, 1957), pp. 87-88. See also John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1884), p. 156. The phrase "the truth of the gospel" also occurs in verse Galatians 2:5, where it is used in a nearly identical fashion. Samuel Driver, Alfred Plummer, and Charles Briggs, eds. *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1921). also, Earnest Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, p. 11. Also, J.B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 107. Also, F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 115.
- ⁹ Galatians 2:5a.
- ¹⁰ Although the issues Paul deals with in these epistles include matters of both doctrine and moral behavior, I am only trying to draw out a paradigm for levels of theological belief. Some might argue that what Paul is dealing with in Galatians chapter two is strictly, or primarily, an issue of behavior or practice. While it is my view, and that of the theologians I've quoted, that Paul is dealing with a theological issue (salvation by grace through faith) which was being threatened by behavior, it is not necessary to accept my interpretation. Even if Paul was only dealing with behaviors that require discipline, the broader principle can be taken by way of application, that we should not treat all beliefs the same way.
- ¹¹ "Persuaded" (Greek, *plerophoreo*) occurs only eight other times in the New Testament, always carrying the sense of "full assurance" or of being "fully persuaded." In Romans 4:21, Paul describes Abraham's great faith in God as "being fully persuaded, that what He had promised, He was able also to perform." In Colossians 2:2 the apostle grieves for the Laodiceans "that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding." Here Paul's wish is for comfort and unity combined with full assurance (*plerophoreo*).
- ¹² Frederic Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1883; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), p. 456.
- ¹³ Romans 14:10.
- ¹⁴ Romans 14:10-13.
- ¹⁵ Some might object that Paul has in mind matters of Christian behavior that are in themselves morally neutral and that these principles cannot be applied to doctrinal controversy. However, many commentators down through church history have seen this as a general principle which applies to doctrine, as well as behavior. One example would be William Shedd who commented on verse five, "This is the general principle of action, in reference to points not essential to salvation." (William G. T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* New York: Scribner's, 1879), p. 391. In this broader view, Shedd follows Martin Luther (*Lectures on Romans*, trans. and ed. Wilhelm Pauck, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961, pp. 382-383.) and Calvin: "Paul refers to questions which disturb minds not yet sufficiently established, or which entangle them in doubts, as contentious. We may, however, widen this phrase to include any thorny and difficult questions which cause disquiet and disturbance to weak consciences without edifying them." John Calvin, *The Epistles of*

Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 290.

- ¹⁶ "For whoever judges someone else certainly believes that the one he condemns is doing something that goes against salvation and that he must therefore change his ways Therefore, as it was foolish then to regard these things as so weighty that one made salvation dependent upon them, meanwhile neglecting faith and love which alone are sufficient for eternal life" Luther, *Lectures*, pp. 382-383.
- ¹⁷ Luther broke with the Roman church over issues crucial to salvation, but refused to break with other Protestants over lesser matters. He was willing to develop separate styles of worship and discuss them with other Protestants, which led to maintaining separate spheres of influence. This is a historical example of rigid separation over an issue of conviction, and separation but mutual tolerance and acceptance, regarding issues of persuasion.
- ¹⁸ While this is a book about theological beliefs, not behavioral issues, I think a similar set of levels could be developed for Christian ethics. That project, however, is beyond the scope of this book.
- ¹⁹ *Theho* is a common word, being found more than 200 times in the New Testament. Frequently it simply means "will" or "would" but sometimes the word takes on the more tentative nuance of a wish or desire.
- ²⁰ By making this distinction, I am not teaching more than one level of inspiration or inerrancy of the biblical text. I believe that all of Paul's letters are equally inspired by the Holy Spirit and equally without error in the original autographs. While all statements in Scripture are inspired, all do not apply to believers today in the same way. I think the Holy Spirit Himself desired us to understand the difference between Paul's binding commands and his personal opinions. I will discuss inspiration, innerancy, and authority further in Chapter 5.
- ²¹ Matthew 26:39. Another example of *thelo* used to express a wish or desire for something contrary to God's will is found in chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians. Paul wrote, "Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you prophesy" (verse 5). Here is a theoretical or hypothetical usage of *thelo*. Paul knows that his wish cannot be fulfilled; for he has just said, "All do not speak in tongues, do they?" He is saying, in effect, "It would be ideal if everyone could have all the gifts, but" In this case, Paul is expressing a personal wish, even a desire contrary to known fact.
- ²² Some of the early Christian creeds did function as boundary statements between true and false believers, but in more recent times many merely serve to distinguish one group of Christians from another.
- ²³ For example the one-page statement of faith of Campus Crusade for Christ, which I sign annually, contains a number of conviction-level beliefs (the trinity, the deity of Christ, salvation by grace through faith, etc.). The statement also includes some persuasion-level beliefs, such as statements about the filling of the Spirit and the inerrancy of Scripture. Because I can fully affirm all of the articles without mental reservation, I can sign the statement even though I consider some of the articles more central to historic Christianity than others. Through the years, CCC has not treated its statement of faith as the dividing line between true and false faith. CCC leaders and staff have frequently cooperated in evangelistic thrusts with believers from other groups and denominations, who could not necessarily sign all the articles of our particular boundary statement.
- ²⁴ John 4:24, emphasis added.