

INTRODUCING CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Foundations
for the Twenty-first
Century

MICHAEL J. ANTHONY

GENERAL EDITOR

 Baker Academic 2001
A Division of Baker Book House Co
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49516

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

3

Klaus Issler

Theology is the study of God—who God is and what he has provided for his creation, both now and forever. Studying theology is especially important for Christian educators, as illustrated in this definition of Christian education: “Christian education is a reverent attempt to discover the *divinely* ordained process by which individuals grow in *Christlike-ness*, and to work with that *process*.”¹ First, to understand anything about life, we must begin with God and his revealed instructions. Second, human nature is designed by God to become Christlike—the goal toward which we educate (cf. Rom. 8:28–29). Finally, becoming like Jesus involves a “divinely ordained process” with which Christian educators must work. Each of these factors requires theological understanding and must inform how we educate Christians. This chapter presents a brief survey of commonly held beliefs among evangelical Protestants² to help inform the development of Christian education theory and practice.

BIBLIOLOGY: THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL REVELATION

The Bible is God’s special revelation in written form and is open to public inspection. It is uniquely inspired (“God-breathed,” 2 Tim. 3:16), rendering it authoritative for all times, the ulti-

mate standard of truth about God and his plan (John 17:17), providing the essential source for salvation (Acts 4:10–12) and God’s explicit will for our lives (Matt. 4:4). God superintended the writing of the Scriptures by human authors (2 Pet. 1:20–21) so that, incorporating their individual personalities, literary styles, and interests (e.g., Rom. 9:1–3, free expression; Luke 1:1–4, research), these authors composed and recorded God’s authoritative message in the words of the original manuscripts. Although the Bible consists of sixty-six books (thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament) written over a period of approximately one thousand five hundred years by about forty human authors who wrote primarily in Hebrew and Greek, it speaks as one complete unit, having one ultimate divine author. No additional, equally authoritative revelation exists (such as the *Book of Mormon*) to which Christians must turn. Although the Bible does not provide exhaustive information on every topic, it is completely sufficient in what it teaches about God, our relationship with him, and his explicit will for Christian living.

The Bible is completely truthful, never affirming any falsehoods, even regarding incidental references.³ The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy affirms that “the authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made rel-

ative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.⁷⁴ God's Word has been recorded for us in human language for our regular use and study. The words of the Bible are comprehensible to any reader, whether Christian or not. But the significance and application of the Word comes only to believers who interpret the Word accurately and welcome its truth by illumination of the Holy Spirit.

To interpret the Bible properly, believers must discover the author's main theme or big idea from the context and details of the paragraph or episode. Once the public meaning of the passage takes shape, we work on our personal response to the passage in light of the author's message to his readers. How were the original readers to respond? How do I respond in my situation today? God uses his "living and active" Word to "[judge] the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). Bible study is a dynamic process if we are willing to listen humbly and respond to the Spirit's ministry in our lives (Matt. 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49; James 1:22-25).

Bible study is at the heart of Christian education. Our job is to take the living Word of God and write it on the hearts of believers. The result should be a slow process of life transformation that draws them closer in their relationship with God. Bible teaching requires a firm conviction of the origins and purposes of Scripture. As Christian educators, our lives must evidence this transformation before we can ever expect others to follow. Scripture teaches that it is impossible to know and understand the things of God (i.e., theology) without the Holy Spirit residing within us (Rom. 8:6-11). Once this relationship with God is established and one becomes a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17), an understanding of theology becomes profitable.

THEOLOGY PROPER: THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

How can we describe God, since God is unique (Isa. 40:25)? As the child's prayer frames it, "God is great and God is good." Millard Erickson employs these two focal points to outline the wonder

and beauty of God's essential nature (greatness) and his natural and moral attributes (goodness).

The Greatness of God

God is personal—God thinks, feels, wills, and relates with others. God is life and the source of all living creatures. God is essentially an immaterial, nonspatial, invisible Spirit, existing without any physical body (John 4:24; Luke 24:39; 1 Tim. 6:15-16). Furthermore, God is immanent and present everywhere (omnipresent, Ps. 139:7-12). Philosopher Dallas Willard explains, "[God] occupies [space] and overflows it but cannot be localized in it. Every point in it is accessible to his consciousness and will, and his manifest presence can be focused in any location as he sees fit."⁷⁵ Wayne Grudem clarifies, "God is present in different ways in different places, or . . . God acts differently in different places in his creation."⁷⁶ Having no beginning and no ending, God is everlasting (Ps. 90:2; Isa. 43:13).

God is constant (immutable, James 1:17). Grudem notes, "God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations."⁷⁷ God is also all-powerful (omnipotent, Ps. 145:3; Isa. 40:21-26) and all-knowing (omniscient, Isa. 40:13-14, 28). Thus, whatever God plans to do, he will accomplish (Isa. 43:13; 55:11; Matt. 19:26).

The Goodness of God

Erickson identifies the goodness of God as consisting of ten attributes, clustered within three groups: (1) moral integrity—holiness, righteousness, justice; (2) integrity (truthfulness)—genuineness (real), veracity (speaks truth), faithfulness (keeps promises); and (3) love—benevolence, grace, mercy, and persistence. The basis of any Christian ethic is God's moral nature. Furthermore, Jesus Christ shows us who God is, for Jesus himself "is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb. 1:3; see also John 14:7-9).⁷⁸ What all ethical theories critically lack, Christianity uniquely offers: the perfect, ethical example. Christians are not restricted solely to abstract principles for ethical conduct, because in Jesus we have a model for good living.

THE TRINITY—THREE PERSONS IN ONE GOD

God is one divine Being, but not one person, for he is an eternally existing "divine society" of three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who love each other dearly and who comprise the one Christian God. The Bible makes reference to the three members of the Trinity in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Isa. 48:16; 61:1; Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14).⁹

The Person and Work of God the Father

Lewis and Demarest state that God the Father "creatively designs and initiates relationships and activities. The point illustrated is not a time of origin, but a distinctness of activity with sameness of nature. The first person initiates and purposes."¹⁰ Thus, the decrees and plan of God are from the Father (Ps. 2:7-9; Eph. 1:3-14). In addition, the Father uniquely answers prayer (Matt. 6:9; Eph. 3:14) offered by mankind, by the Spirit (Rom. 8:26-27), and by the Son (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25).

Christology: The Person and Work of God the Son

At the center of Christianity is Christ. In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul narrates a basic outline: Who is he? What kind of person is he? What did he accomplish? Regarding his person, Jesus Christ is the preexistent, divine Son of God (John 1:1; 8:58), born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:16), who willingly took on human nature forever. Jesus became and remains the unique God-man, who displayed for the world to see both what God is really like and what the good potential of humanity is really like.¹¹ At the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 45), the church officially acknowledged that "our Lord Jesus Christ [is] the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood."¹² Scripture cites references about Jesus' human body (e.g., thirsty, Matt. 25:35; hungry, Matt. 4:2; weary, John 4:6; died, John 19:30-34) and his experience of a full range of emotions (e.g., weeping, Luke 19:41; compassion, Mark 6:34; righteous anger,

Mark 3:5; frustration, Matt. 17:17; troubled, Matt. 26:37).

Heresies about Jesus are bounded by two extremes. Either his full deity is acknowledged, denying that Jesus was also essentially human (e.g., *docetism*: Jesus only appeared to be human), or his full humanity is acknowledged, denying his essential preexistent divine nature (e.g., *adoptionism*: Jesus was a good man but nothing more).

Regarding the work of Jesus, he performed the roles of prophet, priest, and king. As prophet (Deut. 18:15-19 [Acts 3:22-23]; Matt. 13:57; John 6:14; 7:40), Jesus was God's faithful messenger and teacher, communicating old and new truth about God and his plan (Matt. 4:17). As the unique priest outside of the Levitical lineage (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7:11, 17), Jesus was both the once-for-all sacrifice and the one who offered the sacrifice (Heb. 10:11-14). During his first coming, Jesus took on the role of the suffering servant prophesied by Isaiah (Isa. 52:13-53:12), offering himself as a perfect atonement for our sins (1 John 2:2). "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, . . . he was buried, [and] he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Jesus is also the king, who veiled his glory during this first advent (Matt. 17:2; John 17:5), announcing the coming of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15; John 18:36; Acts 1:3). After his resurrection, the Father laid all authority on Jesus (Matt. 28:18). We now await the moment when Jesus will return again, implementing an age when the will of God will be done on earth (Matt. 6:10) and Jesus reigns as the King of kings (Matt. 25:31-46; Rev. 3:21; 19:16; 20:4).

Pneumatology: The Person and Work of God the Holy Spirit

The most important aspect in studying the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is coming to terms with the personal nature of the Holy Spirit. Grudem notes, "After Jesus ascended into heaven, and continuing through the entire church age, the Holy Spirit is now the *primary* manifestation of the presence of the Trinity among us. He is the one who is most prominently *present* with us now."¹³

All the members of the Triune God are coequal persons. Thus, the Spirit is not a silent partner in the Trinity, for he speaks (Acts 8:29; 10:19) and

may be "griev[ed]" by us (Eph. 4:30). Just as believers interact with the Father and the Son, in the same manner they can interact with the Spirit—in conversation and prayer, in worship and thanksgiving. J. I. Packer affirms that "prayer to the Spirit is equally proper when what we seek from him is closer communion with Jesus and fuller Jesus-likeness in our lives."¹⁴ Jesus equated the Spirit with "rivers of living water" (John 7:38 RSV) within the believer. The Spirit is the Divine Counselor or Mentor sent by Jesus to indwell each believer, with whom every believer can develop a personal relationship (John 14:16–18; Rom. 8:6).

Regarding the work of the Spirit, he was involved in creation (Gen. 1:2), in the inspiration of Scripture (2 Sam. 23:2–3; Acts 1:16; Heb. 3:7; 2 Pet. 1:21), in selective indwelling in Old Testament persons (Gen. 41:38; Dan. 4:8), in the life of Jesus Christ (Luke 1:35; 4:18; Acts 10:38), in the ministry of conviction of sin throughout the world (John 16:8–11), and in the regeneration and renewal of sinners into saints (Titus 3:5). For New Testament believers since Pentecost, at the moment of regeneration the Holy Spirit indwells each believer forever (John 14:16; 1 Cor. 6:19), baptizes us (1 Cor. 12:13), seals us (Eph. 4:30), and inaugurates regular prayer for each believer (Rom. 8:26). As we walk with the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 25), the Spirit fills (Eph. 5:18), teaches (John 16:12–15), guides (Rom. 8:14), and assures us (Rom. 8:16).

Furthermore, the Spirit dynamically empowers the believer (1) in deepening our relationship with God ("fellowship with the Spirit," Phil. 2:1; 2 Cor. 13:14); (2) for Christlike living ("fruit of the Spirit," Gal. 5:22); (3) for growing together into a healthy and mature Christian community ("unity of the Spirit," Eph. 4:3); and (4) for ministry to others ("spiritual gifts," 1 Cor. 12:1) and evangelism ("filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly," Acts 1:8; 4:31).

The Holy Spirit plays a significant role in empowering the believer to perform works of service. The various gifts of the Spirit (Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:7–11, 28; Eph. 4:11) have been given for the express purpose of mobilizing the church to transform the world for Christ. Christian educators begin their role by first identifying their area(s) of giftedness and then using the gift(s) through the power which the Holy Spirit provides to do his work.

ANTHROPOLOGY: THE NATURE AND STUDY OF (REDEEMED) HUMAN PERSONS

Among all of God's creation, humanity is uniquely created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26; 9:6; James 3:9).¹⁵ Furthermore, believers are now being renewed and conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28) in that Jesus has become the Second Adam, the pioneer of a new redeemed human race (1 Cor. 15:20–23, 45–49). Although the meaning of the phrase "image of God" is not easily discerned, three facts are clear. The focal point is on God as the prototype. As Charles Sherlock notes, "From the beginning of our discussion it is vital to be clear about how we image God, before we begin to explore what being made in the image of God as human beings may mean."¹⁶ Secondly, human nature was designed so that God the Son could take on humanity. Erickson explains, "We know from the Bible, that God chose to become incarnate in a creature very much like himself. It is quite possible that God's purpose in making man in his own image was to facilitate the incarnation which would someday take place."¹⁷ Furthermore, since Jesus was the only person ever to live fully within his humanity and also follow God's will, we must study more about Jesus to learn about our own humanity.

Anthony Hoekema draws together differing proposals regarding "being created in God's image" to suggest both *structural* and *functional* aspects for human nature. "By the image of God in the broader or structural sense we mean the entire endowments of gifts and capacities that enable man to function as he should in his various relationships and calling."¹⁸ These gifts and capacities include self-consciousness, reasoning, self-determination, moral sensitivity, and aesthetic awareness. Regarding the functional aspect of the image of God, Robert Saucy identifies two particular dimensions, that of being God's unique representative on earth (Gen. 1:26–8; Ps. 8:5–8; cf. Rev. 22:5) and that of being uniquely able to have a relationship and be in communion with God (Deut. 6:5; Ps. 8:3–4; Matt. 22:36–37; Rev. 3:20).

"Being human involves community."¹⁹ God is making a people for himself (1 Pet. 2:9–10; Rev.

21:3). From the beginning, God created humankind as male and female (Gen. 1:26). The divine commentary "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18) goes deeper than marital union to indicate an essential social aspect of our nature. "If we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12 NKJV). In Western society and within Christian circles, an element of radical individualism hinders believers from growing more fully into a wholesome interdependency as a community of persons, rather than purely as an aggregate of human units. "We are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom *the whole body*, being fitted and held together by that which *every joint supplies*, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (Eph. 4:15–16 NASB, emphasis added).

A proper view of Christian maturity must fit God's design of human nature. For example, Christian education programs based on truncated conceptions of "spiritual" maturity designed for isolated individuals will do more harm than good. We need Christian education programs that include whole-person, interactive-community, and Holy Spirit-mentored components in order to help believers grow to spiritual maturity.

SANCTIFICATION: GROWING TOWARD MATURITY IN CHRISTLIKENESS

At the moment of salvation, God begins a new work involving two distinct phases—*justification*, the declaration of the believer's positional righteousness in Christ based on Christ's substitutionary death and atonement; and *sanctification*, the process by which God the Holy Spirit and the believer participate together in the project of the believer becoming Christlike experientially. Grudem supplies the following table to heighten contrasts between these two aspects:²⁰

Justification

Legal standing
Once for all time
Entirely God's work
Perfect in this life
The same in all Christians

Sanctification

Internal condition
Continuous throughout life
We cooperate
Not perfect in this life
Greater in some than in others

In an important sense, Christians have become "new creatures" in that certain "old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Cor. 5:17 NASB). First, believers are no longer enslaved to sin, being freed from the power and obligation to sin (Rom. 6:6–23). Christians do not need to sin. Second, with God's grace believers have the potential and ability to grow in righteousness and actually sin less and less in this life (Rom. 6:12; 1 John 2:1). Although trials and temptations test us, Christians can overcome any trial (1 Cor. 10:13; James 1:2–4; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21) and can resist Satan at any moment (James 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8–9; 1 John 2:14) by God's grace. Finally, God the Holy Spirit, who now lives within each believer forever (John 15:16), is ready to mentor each believer toward Christlike living (Rom. 8:6, 11, 16, 23, 26–27). As Henry Holloman notes, "Christlikeness is God's goal for Christians and . . . sanctification is His way for believers to become more like Christ."²¹

What expectations does God have for our part in the sanctification process? Although God has promised the completion of our growth (Rom. 8:29–30; Phil. 1:6) this side of death and heaven, the Bible clearly indicates a synergistic arrangement, a human participation with God's grace where both agents are operative (note the various Scriptural imperatives that urge believers to do something). Without our effort in response to God's initiatives and divine resources, no sanctifying will occur. For example, in the Old Testament, priests carrying the ark of God were explicitly instructed by God to walk forward, placing their feet in the Jordan River. Then God would dry up the waters for the Israelites to pass through on dry ground (Josh. 3:13–17). But until their feet actually touched the water, God would not stop the Jordan River from flowing. Similarly, though it is God who does the work, he still expects us to participate in the training process. The classic text is 1 Timothy 4:7–8, in which Paul charges Timothy: "Train yourself to be godly. For physical *training* is of some value, but godliness has value [in every way], holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (emphasis added). Furthermore, the writer to the Hebrews lifts up Jesus' example to encourage our resolve: "You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your *striving against sin*" (Heb. 12:4 NASB, emphasis added).

ECCLESIOLOGY: THE NATURE AND WORK OF THE CHURCH

For some, "church" is a place or service one goes to on a certain day of the week. Biblically, however, the church is a community or family of people, with Jesus Christ as its Head (Eph. 1:20–23), its Savior (Eph. 5:25–27), its Teacher (Matt. 23:8; John 13:13), its Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4), and its Lord (John 13:13). The church has a three-fold focus—*upward* to God, to glorify, worship, love, and be in communion with God (Matt. 22:37–38; John 4:23–24; 1 Cor. 10:31; Eph. 1:12); *inward*, to grow and nurture itself in love and community and to care for the needs of the saints (Rom. 12:13; Eph. 4:1–3, 11–16; 1 Tim. 5:3–16); and *outward*, to bring the good news to a world without God (Matt. 28:19–20) and to do good in the world (Gal. 6:10).

The New Testament makes distinctions between the local (or visible) church, a gathering of believers in one location, and the universal (or invisible) church, the totality of all believers throughout the world, irrespective of the local church they attend.²² Further matters related to the church can be clustered under three general headings: *Communion with God* (e.g., worship [Matt. 4:10]; prayer [1 Tim. 2:1–8]; participatory celebration [Eph. 5:19–21]; biblical instruction [1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 2:2]; ordinances of baptism [Matt. 28:19]; and the Lord's Supper [1 Cor. 11:17–34]); *Organizational Aspects* (e.g., qualifications and roles of leadership [1 Tim. 3:1–7; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1–6]; giftedness for ministry of each believer [1 Cor. 12:7, 11; Eph. 4:16; 1 Pet. 4:10–11]); and *Relational Aspects*.

Relational Community

Jesus' own strategy of disciple making involved building communities (selecting the Twelve to be with him, Mark 3:14), through team ministry relationships (sending them out two by two, Mark 6:7), and through close personal friendships (Peter, James, and John, Matt. 26:36–38). Genuine community and various sets of close friendships always go together. Two kinds of lists indicate what healthy relationships look like: the famous "love" chapter in 1 Corinthians 13 and all of the "one another" verses scattered throughout the New Testament. Some of these exhortations can be experienced at almost any level of relationship, such as

"forgiving one another" (Eph. 4:32 KJV) or "be hospitable to one another" (1 Pet. 4:9 NASB). But some require a greater depth of trust and intimacy within close friendships to engage more freely in personal aspects of loving: "admonish one another" (Col. 3:16) or "confess your sins to one another" (James 5:16 NASB).

Reconciliation Ministry

To round out the church's community-building strategy, there is a great need for regular mediation and reconciliation among its members. The apostle Paul castigated the Corinthian church for not providing a means for resolving conflicts among members (1 Cor. 6:1–8), whether personal, financial, or business matters. Jesus encouraged the use of third-party mediation (the primary resolution mode in non-Western cultures) when a conflict cannot be resolved between the two parties by themselves (the primary resolution mode of Western cultures) (Matt. 18:15–17).²³ If we fail to plan here, we plan to fail by permitting non-Christian forms of relating and sinning among the church family. The healthy church family is not one that has no members who sin; that is reserved for heaven. Rather, it is the church that intentionally and regularly facilitates resolution for the customary differences and conflicts that arise among its members—members who are saints but not yet perfected (Phil. 4:2–3).

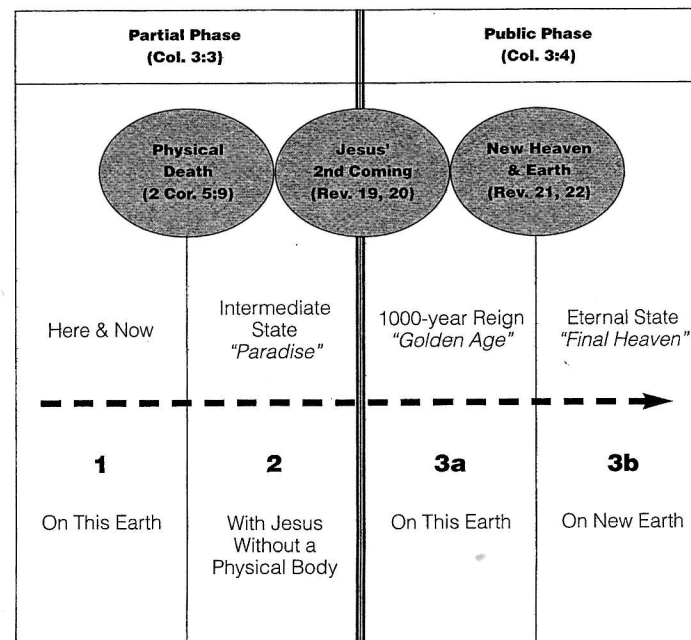
ESCHATOLOGY: THE CHRISTIAN'S HOPE AND DESTINY

When recommending a movie or novel to a friend, explaining how the story ends spoils the surprise. But with God, knowing how history ends makes all the difference in the world for living now (cf. Rev. 21, 22). In the future, God will permanently take up residence in the midst of his people (Rev. 21:3; cf. Jer. 31:33). He will be our God, and we will be his people—something God has been planning for a long time. Believers will experience the fullness of the glorious presence of God: "They will see his face" (Rev. 22:4; Num. 6:25; Isa. 25:9). In the future, God's kingdom will finally and fully be on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10). It will be a new day, a "new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1), with no night, no need of any lights (Rev.

22:4–5), and no more pain or mourning or death (Rev. 21:4). Finally, believers shall serve God and reign with him forever and ever (see figure 3.1) (cf. Dan. 7:18, 27; Rev. 3:21).

What happens to believers who die now, before Christ comes? In God's eschatological program, there is both a partial phase and then a public phase initiated at Christ's second coming (see figure 3.1). Now believers only experience part of the full benefits of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:22–32). All spiritual blessings are accessible (Eph. 1:3), but our physical bodies will not be redeemed until later (Rom. 8:23). Believers can look forward to physical death, since we are then ushered into a new phase of living to be with Jesus (2 Cor. 5:6–8). We enter what Jesus called "paradise" (Luke 23:43), or "Abraham's bosom" (Luke 16:22), also called the intermediate state, in which we exist without physical bodies (2 Cor. 5:6–8)

Figure 3.1
From Here to Eternity



Note: Amillennialists and Postmillennialists believe Christians move from step 2 to step 3b, with no thousand-year reign after Christ's return. Premillennialists believe Christ will return to set up a thousand-year reign on the earth.

until the future resurrection. Then, at Christ's coming, the public phase begins, and all believers receive their renewed resurrection bodies (1 Cor. 15:51–58; Phil. 3:20–21). At some point, believers will individually stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of their lives on earth (2 Cor. 5:10; cf. 1 Cor. 3:12–15; Matt. 25:14–30). Two additional eschatological events precede the second coming of Christ: the "rapture"²⁴ of the saints to be with Jesus (1 Thess. 4:15–17; John 14:2–3) and the great tribulation, a period of judgment on the earth (Matt. 24:21–22; Rev. 6:15–17).²⁵

A difference is evident among the theological traditions regarding the thousand-year reign of Christ (Rev. 20:1–6). Amillennialists and postmillennialists believe that when Christ comes again, the eternal state will begin. For premillennialists, prior to the eternal state Christ will inaugurate the thousand-year reign, a golden age on this earth as

promised in the Old Testament (e.g., Isa. 25:6–9; Ezek. 37:21–28; Zech. 14:16–21) during which Satan will be bound (Rev. 20:1–3). Near the end of this reign Satan will be loosed, and Christ will defeat Satan and permanently assign him to hell (Rev. 20:7–10).

INTEGRATING THEOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

When relating theology to the social sciences, the challenge for Christian educators is to maintain an evangelical affirmation of the final authority of the Bible while allowing other legitimate sources of knowledge to inform the practice and content of Christian education (e.g., how best to learn or teach, particulars about good parenting practices).

The biblical record is the central hub around which any theological interpretation is made. Yet each interpretative statement must also be checked by past theological tradition, by reason, and by experience.²⁶ When assessing the truth or falsehood of the advice of a friend or the claim of a neighbor, we regularly consult such tests of truth by checking our understanding of Scripture along with the teachings of respected pastors and Bible scholars, by discerning whether the claim makes sense or is logically consistent (Luke 24:11), and by deciding whether it fits with daily living (John 20:24–25).²⁷

Theology and social science may be integrated in a number of ways.²⁸ In some cases, theology or the social sciences may provide the rationale or presuppositions for the other (e.g., being created in the image of God [Gen. 1:26], all persons must be accorded equal dignity, justifying the ethical treatment of persons in research). In some instances, either theology or the social sciences fills in details for general principles offered by the other (e.g., empirical research may suggest more detailed guidance for understanding how best to raise children without provoking anger [Eph. 6:4]). But in some critical arenas, theology and the social sciences offer competing explanations of reality, and only one explanation can be true (e.g., Christianity affirms that human nature is created in God's image and consists of both immaterial [spirit/soul] and material [physical body] aspects,

while the majority of social science publications understand human nature solely within macroevolutionary, antismaterialist, and physicalist terms). Christian educators must let both theology and the social sciences enlighten them, while still permitting the Bible to have final authority in all matters. Ultimately, all truth is God's truth, no matter what source uncovers it.

THEOLOGICAL DISTINCTIVES

One's theological tradition may also inform the interpretation of Scripture. It is unfortunate that these differences have been used among believers as a source of division rather than as a way to frame an intellectual debate among trusting friends. It is often best to differentiate between theological distinctives when applied to a particular doctrinal area. We'll demonstrate by using the topic of eschatology. For our example, differing scenarios are offered to explain what takes place prior to Jesus Christ's second coming. Two prominent eschatological views, amillennialism and premillennialism, actually fit into larger theological systems that attempt to explain the unity of God's overall plan.

Covenant Theology and Amillennialism

God's kingdom project encompasses two major covenants: the covenant of works (Gen. 1–2) and the covenant of grace (Gen. 3–Rev. 22). In the Garden of Eden, God offered Adam and Eve the opportunity to obey him and thus enjoy the blessings of his provision. Due to Adam's disobedience, however, God instituted the covenant of grace for all subsequent believers. The relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament is one of continuity, although certain symbols have been altered. God's church was established in the Old Testament, especially through the nation of Israel with symbols (circumcision) and ordinances (Passover). Yet, Israel's continual disobedience severed it from God's grace. God then instituted the international New Testament church, the "new Israel" (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 6:16). The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper replace circumcision and the Passover. Since the church continues the traditions from the Old Testament, all Old Testament promises to national Israel now

apply directly and solely to the church, not Israel. In the future, Christ will come to set up his eternal kingdom, not just a thousand-year reign.²⁹

Dispensational Theology and Premillennialism

Dispensationalism offers another way to tie together the unity of God's plan by highlighting certain unconditional covenants God established in the Old Testament. The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1–3) provides the overriding framework to explain God's plan. God unconditionally promises to bless the nation of Israel, but through Abraham and his descendants, God will bless all nations. In time, God entered a conditional covenant with the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19)—the Mosaic covenant. Israel eventually rebelled against God and was exiled from the land.

During these later disobedient years, God promised to make an unconditional new covenant with the house of Israel. In the future, after Israel has been judged by God and scattered around the globe, God will then gather them together again (Ezek. 36:22–32) and "put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it" (Jer. 31:31–34 NASB). Centuries later, Jesus came to institute this new covenant with his death and resurrection (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8–9). The new covenant was implemented in two phases relating to the two comings of Jesus. First, all New Testament believers after Pentecost are beneficiaries of the spiritual blessings of regeneration during this church age. Then, Jesus' coming will be premillennial to inaugurate a golden messianic reign of one thousand years (Rev. 20:1–6). Here, all the promises of the Old Testament will be fulfilled, with Jesus reigning in Jerusalem and national Israel having special prominence. All church-age believers will be resurrected at this time to share in God's bounty and provision in this golden messianic era.

CONCLUSION

To maintain evangelical distinctives in formulating both theory and practice in Christian education, we must become more aware of how our presuppositions and approaches influence the development of curriculum, instructional design,

programmatic development, and so forth. As Christian educators, we can help our people enter into Christlike living and a deeper relationship with God by letting sound theology have its proper role in Christian education theory and practice.

One's theology must be predicated upon a solid conviction that God's Word is trustworthy. Many evangelicals hold to an inerrant view of Scripture. This is the belief that the Bible alone is authoritative and speaks for God. Without such a view, one's theological moorings are as firm as the latest fashion trend. Christian education begins with sound theology rooted deeply in the pages of Scripture. Its programs are designed with an understanding of the sinful nature of humans and the holy nature of God.

The astute Christian educator sees his or her work as an extension of Christ's mission to draw humankind into a saving and intimate relationship with a loving God. This is done in partnership with the Holy Spirit and in cooperation with other believers. How long does this take place? Perhaps that depends on your particular theological distinctives as they influence your understanding of the end times. Regardless of what those may be, we would do well to heed the admonition of our Lord that commands us to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that" we have been commanded (Matt. 28:19–20 NASB).

NOTES

1. Nevins Harner, *The Educational Work of the Church* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1939), p. 20 (emphasis added).

2. Within Christianity there are three general families: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. The Orthodox Church of the East and the Roman Catholic Church of the West separated in A.D. 1054. Among the issues dividing the Western and Eastern Church was the so-called *filioque* clause. The West affirmed the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father "and the Son" (Latin, *filioque*), whereas the Eastern Orthodox denied this. The Nicene Creed was later edited to include the *filioque* clause. The Protestant Reformation began when Martin Luther proposed his Ninety-five Theses for debate in A.D. 1517. Within the Protestant family, evangelicals tend to emphasize the following theological distinctives: (1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God's saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, and (5) the importance of a spiritually

transformed life" (George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], pp. 4-5).

3. "Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact," (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], p. 90).

4. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978), printed in Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, appendix 1, p. 1204. Affirming complete inerrancy recognizes the figurative use of language, that some scribal errors may have been incorporated in the text we have today during the copying of manuscripts [although no critical doctrines are affected by these scribal errors], and the supposed "problem passages" for which reasonable explanations have been proposed (cf. J. P. Moreland, "The Rationality of Belief in Inerrancy," *Trinity Journal* 7 [spring 1986]: 75-86).

5. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), p. 76.

6. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 175.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

8. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 737.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

10. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1994), pp. 275-76.

11. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pp. 737, 736, respectively.

12. Cited in Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1169.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 634 (Grudem's emphasis).

14. J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1984), p. 261.

15. Since this chapter is written for Christian educators primarily working with Christians, we explore human nature as redeemed and regenerated. What is human nature like for Christians, following their conversion?

16. Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), p. 19.

17. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 737.

18. Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 70-71.

19. Sherlock, *Humanity*, p. 90.

20. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 746.

21. Henry Holloman, *The Forgotten Blessing: Rediscovering the Transforming Power of Sanctification* (Nashville: Word, 1999), p. 94.

22. Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), p. 18.

23. Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993).

24. Regarding the timing of the rapture, three options have been proposed: (1) *posttribulational* (e.g., Matt. 24:22, 29-31), in which the end of the tribulation, the second coming of Christ, and the rapture take place around the same time; (2) *midtribulational*, a rapture sometime during the tribulation in which the church is removed prior to the most difficult part of the tribulation, (e.g., Rev. 12:6, and as represented by the rapture of the two witnesses, Rev. 11); or (3) *pretribulational*, at a point before the tribulation, removing the church from experiencing any of God's wrath upon the earth (e.g., Rev. 3:10). For further study, see Gleason Archer et al., *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-tribulational?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

25. Prior to inaugurating the eternal state, all nonbelievers will appear before God at the great white throne of judgment, where they will be judged for their deeds and assigned to hell, a place away from God—what is called the "second death" (Rev. 20:11-15).

26. This four-factor interpretive framework was articulated by John Wesley (d. 1791), thus the label "Wesleyan quadrilateral." This framework consists of four sources of knowing God: Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. See Kevin Lawson, "Theological Reflection, Theological Method, and the Practice of Education Ministry: Exploring the Wesleyan Quadrilateral and Stackhouse's Tetralectic," *Christian Education Journal* n.s. 1, no. 1 (spring 1997): pp. 49-64.

27. John Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 72.

28. J. P. Moreland, "Introduction," in *Christian Perspectives on Being Human: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Integration*, ed. J. P. Moreland and David Cioocchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pp. 7-14.

29. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646) remains the standard systematic statement of covenant theology.