

I also appreciate the counsel of Campus Crusade leaders John Rogers, Mark Rutter, and Jack Mattern for their encouragement to begin developing the book in the mid-1990s. What can I say to my longtime faithful friend and Doctrine Survey collaborator, Conrad Koch? You believed in this book from the beginning and even used the manuscript with your own students. Your thoughtful suggestions (and theirs) have improved it greatly.

I'm grateful to my friend and colleague J. P. Moreland, who first suggested NavPress to publish the book and recommended me to them. Thanks, Jay, for your encouragement and suggestions, especially during the crucial summer when I was struggling to complete the manuscript.

I am also grateful to my many students at the International School of Theology and in the Campus Crusade new staff courses, who gave helpful suggestions and corrections, particularly to Doctrine Survey student Brenda Bartelt for her thorough, detailed proofreading.

Kudos to the members of the Plot & Blot literary society: Ray Albrektson, Janet Grant, Gary Stanley, and Kirsten Wilson. You cheerfully endured and graciously edited multiple versions of many chapters over a several-year period. I'm particularly grateful to my longtime friend, fellow Plot & Blotter, and literary agent, Janet Kobobel Grant: without you, very simply, this book would never have come to be. Special thanks are due to my NavPress editors, Steve Webb, Gary Wilde, and Sue Geiman, especially for patiently enduring all my naive questions and ideas.

Most of all, I want to thank my wife, Jan. You encouraged me when I was ready to give up, you cheerfully picked up the slack when I had to set everything else aside to finish, and you even proofread several versions of the manuscript. I love and appreciate you more than I can say.

—ALAN KENT SCHOLES

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 the staff of a large mission agency and was taking my basic theology course as part of her ministry preparation.

"Well," I said, groping for words, "why do you ask?"

"Because every day when I leave your 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 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 *What Christianity Is All About: How You Can Know and Enjoy 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, rich joy reserved for those who truly know Him.

And knowing is a key to enjoying. When asked, “Which is the great commandment in the Law?” Jesus 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 modern Christians, loving God with all your heart and soul makes sense. But how can we love God with our minds? I think the answer is that 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 am convinced that we cannot truly know God without also 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 had been gone for three days, leaving no message or note.

“How long have you known him?”

“About four months.”

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

“About three months.”

“Have you called the place where he lived before?”

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

“Have you tried calling his work?”

“I don’t have that number either.”

“Have you dropped by his work to see if anyone there knows anything?”

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

“How about his friends? Have you tried calling them?”

“He never mentioned any other friends.”

“What about his parents, can you call them?”

“He never spoke of them; I don’t know where they live or even if they’re alive.”

The psychologist paused and then asked, in obvious consternation, “Where did 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? 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 ten years ago at a party. In the first half-hour of conversation, I found out who his parents were and where they lived, what he studied in college, where he worked, and lots more. I knew more about him in thirty 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!”

I think 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 all our minds. That is the purpose of this book: to help you discover what God has said concerning the wide variety of subjects He has told us about in the Bible, and as a result, to experience a deeper love relationship with Him.

In each of the areas of theology that follow, you will find a brief sketch of a particular doctrine—an area of teaching that 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 in this area of theology. 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

The seed for approaching theology as I will in this book was planted in my heart and mind many years ago when I first read *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. As a young Christian still in college, 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 Lewis's introduction that he was going to present "an agreed, or common, or central, or 'mere' Christianity."² But I wondered, wouldn't this just be some insipid, worthless, lowest-common-denominator theology? 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 his book, Lewis established 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 equally essential? Shouldn't believers, once they understand a passage, hold its truth as firmly as they hold to the truths of any other passage? In this sense shouldn't 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 without disunity, and other beliefs as solely matters of personal preference or style.

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.

One of the best ways to understand and appreciate the kinds of distinctions we need to make is to look at the writings of the apostle Paul. Some people think of Paul as always dogmatic and unyielding. It's true that the apostle who jumps off the pages of Acts and his many letters was a man of strong convictions and bold action. But that is one reason I find it so intriguing that Paul didn't hold all of his beliefs at the same level of importance. I think we find in Paul's letters at least three distinct levels of belief: convictions, persuasions, and opinions.

Level 1: Convictions

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

The conflict had to do with 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 who had been converted from a Gentile background. 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 didn't 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 nonkosher 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 made 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 was making a conviction-level stand, not yielding in subjection "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 Peter's behavior struck at the heart of the gospel message. Any compromise at this point would have been tantamount to a loss of the gospel itself!

In Galatians 2, then, Paul was acting from *convictions* about matters crucial to salvation. These were not simply *persuasions* about which the apostle, although certain he was right, could allow other believers to disagree. Rather, in these cases Paul was willing to risk the unity he had spent so much of his life building. His rationale for taking such a deep risk was that it concerned the very heart and truth of the gospel.¹⁰

Convictions for Paul were matters of belief in which the gospel itself was at stake. In these matters Paul was not "tolerant." Rather, he confronted those in error and was ready to break fellowship with them if they did not repent.

Likewise, I think we believers today should have some doctrinal truths that 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 have nothing worth dying for, you may have nothing worth living for!" I hope and pray that, if I were given the choice to either deny Christ or die, I would have the courage and grace to choose death, as have so many Christians through the centuries.

I believe our convictions should be tied to 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? Also, 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.¹¹ Some examples of doctrines that I think deserve to be held at the conviction level are the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and salvation by grace through faith. We will look more closely at each of these convictions in later 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 that while each person was to be fully persuaded, Paul wasn't insisting on uniformity of view among "fully persuaded" believers. Each person can have his or her own belief yet remain in unity with believers who disagree.¹²

"Persuaded" is a strong term meaning "having a filled-in, settled belief."¹³ Initially it might seem that Paul was 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 personal fellowship with other believers or even for thinking

badly of them. Paul said we should not judge other Christians or hold them in contempt. Why? Because we will “all stand before the judgment seat of God.”¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ For Paul it was possible to have a “full persuasion” concerning a matter of faith or practice and yet not feel the need to break personal fellowship with those in the body of Christ who strongly disagree.

Some might object that Paul had in mind matters of Christian behavior that are in themselves morally neutral and that these principles cannot necessarily be applied to doctrinal controversy. However, many commentators through church history have seen this as a general principle applying to doctrine as well as behavior. One example would be William Shedd, writing a century ago, who commented on verse 5, “This is the general principle of action, in reference to points not essential to salvation.”¹⁶ In this broader view, Shedd followed Luther¹⁷ and Calvin.¹⁸

Paul was saying there are many issues on which an individual, mature believer may have a settled, full persuasion and yet not be justified in judging his or her fellow Christian. The principle he drew is larger than any single issue: “Who are you to judge the servant of another?” (verse 4). For Shedd the dividing line was that which is not essential for salvation. Martin Luther came to the same conclusion.¹⁹ Luther believed that there were matters worth disputing and even those that warranted breaking Christian fellowship.²⁰

These verses in Romans 14 show that Paul held some issues as persuasions about which Christians should have firm beliefs while accepting other believers who disagree. Following Shedd and Luther, I would also propose that the proper dividing line between theological persuasions and those doctrinal convictions that would warrant confrontation and a risk of division should be whether the beliefs in question are essential to salvation.²¹

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 on which we have studied enough to develop a clear and informed view. Persuasions often don’t deal with the main themes of Scripture yet 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 persuasions would be millennial views, the role of “tongues,” and the age of the earth.

Level 3: Opinions

A final level of belief is found in Paul’s treatment of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. In dealing with the question of celibacy, he said, “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 who devoted all his time and energy to serving the Lord, Paul wished all were free to pursue God and ministry with such single-minded devotion. But clearly Paul did not think this is God’s will for everyone, for he went 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.”²² The apostle used the word three other times in this chapter. In verse 36 he said a father may, if he wishes, allow his unwed daughter to marry. Clearly, this was not Paul’s own first choice, but he was giving permission for each man to carry out his own preference. Again, in verse 39, Paul said a widow may marry whom she wishes. And in verse 32 he said, “I want [*thelo*] you to be free from concern.” In each case Paul was 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 said, “I wish all were like me,” he

was expressing his opinion that the celibate state is best.

Perhaps an even clearer example of Paul expressing an opinion comes in 1 Corinthians 7:40. In advising the widow, he said, "In my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think I also have the Spirit of God." The word "opinion" here is translated from the Greek *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 had just said that she was free to marry (verse 39), so this was not a command but simply a friendly opinion from Paul.²³

Elsewhere in this passage, Paul did speak authoritatively. In verse 12 the apostle undoubtedly expected his directives to be literally obeyed for he concluded 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.²⁴

Opinions are beliefs, desires, or even wishes that may not be clearly taught in Scripture or that 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 that we have not personally studied or on which the Bible is silent or ambiguous. In dealing with these things, 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 these: How long until Christ returns? Which is the best Bible translation? Where did Cain get his wife?

DISTINGUISHING THE LEVELS

I want to stop for a moment to clarify something that may be confusing. Often when I have taught these ideas in the past, some have misunderstood me as 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 am convinced the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, and I feel strongly that belief in inerrancy is a crucial protection for evangelical institutions. However, as I will explain in chapter 5, I think the general authority of Scripture is what we should hold as a conviction. I can and do fellowship with other Christians who accept the authority of the Bible but have doubts about its inerrancy.

Now let's recap where we've gone in this discussion. We've seen that, in three chapters of different letters of Paul, 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 views at a conviction level.

Once again, 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 believers 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 also may be right in holding a different view, or (2) we do not have any confidence that 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 absolute certainty impossible.

Please note that while my level of confidence in the truth of something may cause me to classify it as an opinion rather than a persuasion, this 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 want to draw out 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 will say only conviction-level beliefs belong in these faith statements, but 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.²⁵ However, many doctrinal statements, especially in recent centuries, have been designed to capture the distinctives of a ministry or a particular group of Christians and therefore include a mixture of conviction-, persuasion-, and sometimes even opinion-level beliefs.²⁶

I think it's fine, and 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 distinguishing that group from others. The only problem latent in 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 thousand-year millennial kingdom. This, in my view, 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 be a genuine Christian without believing this particular nonessential teaching.

Avoiding Confusing Conclusions

The young man was shrinking down into 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: tensions in the Middle East had again erupted into armed conflict between Israel and its neighbors; Russia was threatening to intervene; famine and earthquakes were on the increase around the globe. Then the climax of the message: the speaker paused

dramatically and almost whispered, "I'll be surprised if this summer comes and Christ has not yet returned for His saints in the air."

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 before 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 wasn't severely damaged by this dogmatic, prophetic teaching. However, a confusion of conviction- and persuasion-level beliefs can have serious consequences.

I have known nonbelievers 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 all, 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 that 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 believing 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, either it was 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. Oddly enough, 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,"²⁷ 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 that the convictions-persuasions-opinions paradigm gives me confidence that I am listening intently to those things God Himself deems most important without becoming overly distracted by peripheral issues.

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

■ FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION ■

1. What is your immediate reaction when you hear the word "doctrine" or the word "theology"?
2. What is the connection between knowing about someone and knowing him or her in a personal way?
3. Before reading this chapter, what Christian beliefs did you hold at a conviction level? Make a list and put it somewhere for reference later as you continue through 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 disagreements?
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 of the 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, *Bruce & Stan's Guide to God*** (Eugene, Oreg.: Harvest House, 1997). Appropriate for junior-high or high-school students, this book is soundly evangelical and easily readable and it covers all the areas of doctrine, including a chapter on the Christian life. The book employs the first person and uses 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, 1989). This is an excellent overall resource covering all the areas of doctrine in 250 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, 1983–1985). If I could recommend only 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). 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.
- 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.
- 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 C. 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. Intermediate.

Bruce L. Shelley, *Theology for Ordinary People* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993). Church-history professor Shelley has written a highly accessible two-hundred-page summary of all of the doctrines (including a chapter on the Christian life). Beginning-intermediate.

CHAPTER TWO

OUR GOD: THE ONE WHO EXISTS

IT FELT LIKE SOME BIZARRE DREAM, BUT IT WAS REAL AND I WAS fully awake. I was sitting on the front seat of a bus headed for downtown Moscow in May of 1991, one of the final months of the Soviet empire. Seated next to me was an imposing official of the Russian Ministry of Education.

“You know,” said the official, his face impassive, “in order to receive my doctorate, I had to pass a high-level exam on ‘The Principles of Scientific Atheism.’” The official knew I was a Christian. In fact, his superior, the Russian Minister of Education, had invited me, as a member of an international team of Christian scholars, to introduce Russian public school teachers to a course we had written on Christian ethics and morality.

“It must be hard for you to work with all us atheists!” he said.

I wondered how to respond. I knew this man was to accompany us to the three cities where we were scheduled to hold teacher-training conferences. I had been warned that he had the power to pull the plug on the entire project at any point.

So . . . is he just testing me?