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# FOREWORD

This volume is a landmark in American theology. It bolstered traditional Christianity at a time when many Christian thinkers were growing disenchanted with conservative theology. At the same time, however, it promoted the very epistemological principles that undergirded the new progressive forms of Christianity. It went through eight editions, won praise from scholars of various denominations, and gained wide adoption as a textbook.

Augustus Hopkins Strong (1836–1921) was one of the most influential theologians and church leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From 1872 until 1912 Strong served as president and professor of theology at the Rochester Theological Seminary in Rochester, New York. Among Northern Baptists he earned profound respect and exercised wide influence. As the Northern Baptist Convention began to polarize into liberal and fundamentalist factions after 1910, Strong sought to unify them on a platform of traditional doctrinal affirmations and modern scholarship. He persuaded John D. Rockefeller to underwrite a great Baptist university, which resulted in the establishment of the University of Chicago. But *Systematic Theology* was Strong's most influential legacy.

The book, which was originally published in three volumes, covers a remarkable breadth of scholarship. Strong was conversant with the full range of theological studies and quoted widely from his readings in the text. Strong was conversant also with the range of philosophical scholarship and engaged it constructively.

In most places *Systematic Theology's* conclusions reflect the traditional evangelical Augustinianism that prevailed widely among Protestants after the Reformation. For example, on the doctrine of God, Strong affirmed God's sovereign control of all creation. Although he held to a more progressive belief that God brought living things to their modern forms

through a divinely controlled process of evolution, Strong believed nevertheless in miracles and God's direct creative power.

In terms of other doctrines, Strong was a traditional Trinitarian. His Christology was thoroughly Chalcedonian—he believed that the incarnate Christ united the fully divine nature and the fully human nature in one person. His anthropology and soteriology were Augustinian, and he affirmed that the corruption consequent to sin rendered human beings unable and willing to obey the gospel; they loved the world and self more than God. Only God's sovereign election and the efficacious operations of the Holy Spirit overcame the corruption of the heart and produced repentance and faith, not by saving persons against their wills, but by making them willing to be saved.

In a few places, however, Strong's conclusions were less traditional. By the time of the eighth edition, he had adopted a progressive view of inspiration as it related to Scripture. Strong held that God's revelation occurred in various historical events and was comprised entirely of them. The Bible was the record and interpretation of the biblical authors' experience of revelatory events in history. When Christians read the Bible, their experience of Christ mediates its meaning, as the same God who revealed himself in historical events also reveals himself in the experience of every Christian. Strong defended the use of the new historical-critical method in interpreting the Bible, but he did so believing that it did not jeopardize traditional Christian orthodoxy. He still asserted that the Bible was without error.

Strong called his view of the atonement the "ethical theory." It was in most respects a traditional Protestant theory of penal substitution, but Strong rejected the notion of imputation. He argued instead that by Christ's voluntary organic union with the human race, Jesus inherited the guilt and penalty of Adam's sin. Therefore, God's wrath against human sin could justly fall on Jesus.

Strong did not intend to accommodate his thought to modern historicist premises. He intended to explain revealed and eternal truth. He embraced historicist principles nevertheless. This led him, for example, to divide the divine and human elements of Scripture. According to Strong's logic, historical criticism applied only to the human element of Scripture, and for this reason posed no threat to the Bible's divine element, which was above history. Thus, historical critics would perhaps find some

statements in Scripture that were historically defective, but this did not damage the Bible itself, Strong held, since Scripture's religious message transcended history. History was merely the outward structure.

The division of Scripture into human and divine reflected Strong's interpretation of all of history as the outworking of divine personality. It was a division between the temporary and the eternal, between changing history and the unchanging, transcendent God. In fact, Strong did not see this distinction in terms of division, but in terms of union. The historical was but the temporal outworking of God's transcendent purposes. Past and present, history and eternity were united in the person of God.

The key, therefore, to the union of eternal truth and human history is the person of God, who is the actor and internal essence of history. Strong's idealist understanding of the relationship of God to the universe and human experience was the crux of his confidence in the union of divine revelation and human history. It was also the key to his unification of traditional faith convictions and modern epistemology. Such unification was a form of philosophical idealism (much like the personalism of Boston University's Borden Parker Bowne). Strong called this thinking "ethical monism."

It seems surprising that, in the end, few theologians followed Strong's approach. Many liberals of Strong's generation agreed broadly with his philosophical idealism, but most felt that they still had little access to the divine side of history. The Bible and human experience were so deeply embedded in the historical conditions that liberal scholars believed they could not transcend those conditions to attain more than the smallest, most basic yield of theological truth. Historical thinking shrouded all human reason and conviction in a measure of relativity, or to be more precise, subjectivity.

In contrast, conservatives agreed with Strong's theological conclusions—that theological truth was broadly accessible and objectively knowable. However, conservatives rejected his premises—namely that such truth could be discerned by using the new historic-critical methods of biblical interpretation to understand the work of God in human history.

Throughout *Systematic Theology*, Strong communicated his firm belief that theological truth was broadly accessible to Christians. Theological convictions were objective and knowable. Strong's idealist philosophy—his belief in God's profound immanence in history—was the guarantee of coherence between divine revelation and human

understanding. It was the sturdy bridge between spiritual reality and human experience.

In time nearly all scholars judged that Strong's efforts to unite the premises of the new historical thinking with traditional affirmations of theological truth could not succeed. They were deemed incompatible systems and could be combined in a coherent whole only by main force. These judgments notwithstanding, Strong's theology is a striking American form of nineteenth-century mediating theology. To this day, *Systematic Theology* retains significant value as a remarkable study of the wide ramifications of the epistemological premises of both traditional orthodoxy and historicist liberalism.

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