Preface to the First Edition

Faith is believing and trusting in God. Theology is the discipline of thinking about God in light of our faith. But many people in the modern era have experienced a crisis of faith. This crisis has caused doubts regarding the ability of theology to speak intelligibly or meaningfully about the reality in which we live. If our trust be in God and God alone, however, then both our faith and our intellectual honesty will require that we face the crisis squarely and seek to reassess the potential of theology to present the ultimate truths that govern our lives. I write as one who has personally experienced the crisis and who wishes to suggest a postcrisis method for pursuing the theological task.

My story is not at all unusual, nor does it hinge upon dramatic external events. It is a story of the inner life and may be all the more instructive because of this. I was raised in a devout Lutheran family in the Midwest. We attended church frequently and my parents took their turns at Sunday school teaching and serving on the church council. The Christian symbol system imbued my daily life. God, heaven, hell and the drama of salvation were as real to me as George Washington, the Declaration of Independence, and General Motors. The only threat to the validity of my family’s faith was a rumor about godless university professors who were teaching the theory
of evolution, which contradicted the Genesis creation account. I dreaded the thought that I should ever come under the influence of such idea mongers who might puncture the sealed world of religious truth in which I lived.

But then I turned eighteen and went off to the big state university—straight into the den of intellectual iniquity. The rumor became reality. Some professors laughed overtly at the beliefs of the more fundamentalist students. It seemed that my freshman English teacher asked at least once a week: “If God is omnipotent, can God make a stone so heavy even he can’t lift it?” This question was always followed by a smirk and a chuckle. My biology professor was much more sympathetic and spent considerable time assuring us that there need be no conflict between science and religion as long as they—like church and state—did not mix. But I could only recall Shakespeare’s “me thinks thou dost protest too much,” and the professor’s protestations created more suspicion that I had come to the either/or fork in the road.

My response was to plunge headlong into studying the philosophies of atheism, concentrating on the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre. Although genuinely concerned about my soul, my father kept asking me to study something that would get me a job and to stop studying philosophy. But I was concerned with truth. So I pushed on.

I now describe those college years as my critical stage, a stage from which I have not yet thoroughly emerged. By “critical” I mean I was learning to stand back and examine my religious beliefs and symbols from an alien point of view. I was learning how to offer alternative explanations for religious phenomena, thinking about them without loyalty to Protestant Christianity and even without reference to the reality of God. In short, I was entering the world of doubt.
This meant that whatever I would eventually affirm positively in the way of religious commitment would henceforth have to be done freely, done alone, and done on the basis of my own resources rather than simply inherited from my past. Instead of remaining solely a doubter, in time I came around to reaffirming the basic tenets of Christian belief. Making such affirmations of faith constituted a move beyond criticism to a postcritical belief system. In retrospect, I believe this is one form of experiencing what Saint Paul meant when he wrote of leaving the milk toast to eat solid meat—that is, of maturing in Christ.

The postcritical reaffirmed faith does not produce exactly the same theology as the original naive faith did, however. It is still faith in the same God and the same religious symbols, to be sure. Yet there is a change in how one thinks about such matters. A theologian’s task is to trace such steps in the change of thinking. The task of this volume is to examine the precritical symbols of Christian faith, to explicate them in light of critical and postcritical modes of thinking, and to suggest a coherent scheme for organizing Christian doctrine and theology.

**Ecumenical and Ecumenic Courage**

As I attempt to organize and explicate Christian theology, I wish to maintain an *ecumenical* and an *ecumenic* mood. With the term *ecumenical* I wish to affirm at the outset what I believe to be the God-intended unity of all Christian believers, the unity of the one body of Jesus Christ. I take it that when Saint Paul described Christ as having “broken down the dividing wall” (Eph. 2:14) he leaves no room for the kind of parochial prejudice that most Christians somewhat innocently but no less viciously grow up with. I have had the fortunate experience in my adult years of working quite
closely with Christians of various stripes. My dissertation adviser at the University of Chicago was a Roman Catholic, David Tracy. Later, I had the opportunity to teach in a Jesuit institution, Loyola University in New Orleans. Such experiences taught me how theologically emaciated would be my own denominational life if it were to sever all ties to the richness of the Roman tradition. Presently, I teach at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where I work daily with Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, Disciples of Christ, the Eastern Orthodox, and others, as well as with my own group, the Lutherans. I can no longer conceive of affirming “one Lord, one Faith, and one Baptism” without doing so in concert with my sisters and brothers across denominational lines. There is in the last analysis only one Christian faith, and it is an ecumenical faith.

When engaged in theological thinking, however, one must not let the ecumenical spirit devolve into a mushy sentimentality that discourages rigor or weakens intellectual commitment. The task is to explicate the gospel in ways that maintain integrity in our time, and this often means following the trail of hard-nosed honesty no matter where it leads. It may lead to criticism of someone else’s understanding of things. It may lead to criticism of one’s own understanding of things. In those sorts of situations, the ecumenical principle means that theological criticism need not be church-dividing. Christians can disagree theologically without running their opponents out of the church. Christians can honestly debate the meaning of the gospel within the framework of an acknowledged unity shared in Christ.

The second term, ecumenic, is closely related to but still distinguishable from ecumenical. Both words come from the Greek root, οἶκος, meaning house. When I use the term ecumenical to refer to interdenominational yet still intra-Christian relations, I am talking about the one, all-inclusive household of faith in Jesus Christ. The
term *ecumenic* is a bit different. It points to the window of faith that opens out toward the world beyond. It opens out to the universe that lies beyond the church. It is interreligious, concerned with non-Christian religious views. It connotes the sense of oneness of the human race and perhaps even the sense of ecological oneness—our human bond with nature as a whole—that are indicative of the emerging elements of postmodern culture. Whereas the term ecumenical reminds us of the implicit unity of the church, the term *ecumenic* reminds us of the unifying power of the kingdom of God.

The term *ecumenic* means two things for the present work in systematic theology. First, it means no field of knowledge is off limits. Everything one can learn about the inner life of the human spirit or about the outer world is relevant to our knowledge of God. Second, it means that persons of faith need to identify with the unity of all things, with the whole of God’s reality. If God be the creator and redeemer of all that is, then nothing within God’s creation is too dirty or too inimical to identify with. If it is because “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16), then we can love it too, in its entirety.

Significant things are happening on the ecumenical and ecumenic fronts. Theologians are talking seriously with one another across interreligious lines and are using one another’s insights to enrich their own respective traditions. In addition, the present generation seems to be experiencing a deepening of concern for the whole of which we are a part, for the whole human race to which Christians belong, and for the whole of creation understood as our home. New doors seem to be opening. It will take some courage to walk through them, however.

In 1983, the now late Edmund Schlink published a systematic theology, *Ökumenische Dogmatik*, which was aimed at pursuing theology with an inclusively ecumenical scope. In the fall of 1967, I
had the privilege of hearing Schlink’s lectures on twentieth-century theology at the University of Heidelberg. The lectures included one presentation on the signing of the Barmen Declaration, the 1934 document of the confessing Christians that declared a resounding yes to Jesus Christ with an accompanying no to Nazism, to Hitlerism, to totalitarianism, to anti-Semitism, and to the capitulation of the Christian faith to the whims of a powerful culture and a powerful body politic. Schlink told how Karl Barth and others put their names on the line, knowing they might be putting their careers, or even their lives, on the line at the same time. As Schlink finished, his lecture in the somewhat dispassionate style characteristic of German scholars, he removed his glasses and announced: “That was the way it was at Barmen.” The 120 or so students were so moved by the presentation that they rose to their feet and with tears in their eyes applauded spontaneously as the professor walked out of the room.

We knew that we were sitting in the historical shadow of great courage, that we were vicariously living again one of those moments when the power of faith casts out fear and faces the challenges Jesus had once forecasted would come our way.

The present time calls for a similar courage. The courage of 1934 reported by Schlink was exercised for the purposes of separating and dividing, for the purposes of distinguishing as sharply as possible between what the Christian faith stood for over against a society that was hostile to it. In his own career, however, after Nazism became mostly a memory, Schlink himself showed a kind of courage by investing his energies in a movement away from division and toward reunion—that is, toward reunion of separated Christian communities. This is where the present generation finds itself: called upon to consider with courage the possibility that something new might be in the offing, that the pain of division that separates human beings from one another might be healable, and that a new sense of the oneness of
the body of Christ and of the kingdom of God might be realizable in our own generation.

There should not be any anxiety over competition between an ecumenical Christian faith and a shared ecumenic spirit. They complement one another. God works in both spheres, although differently perhaps. If we press the household analogy, ecumenical or intra-Christian relations could be likened to a conjugal family, to an intimate bond. Ecumenic relations such as we find in interreligious dialogue or in shared strivings for social justice and ecological health could be likened to close friendships. We need to feel unity both in family life and in warm friendships if our life is to be rich.

Proleptic Explication of the Gospel

The sense of oneness of which I speak is something borrowed from God, the world’s future. Ecumenical and ecumenic consciousness anticipates the unity of all things that God has promised will come as a gift of divine grace. With this in mind, the central theme of this book is the concept of prolepsis, whereby the gospel is understood as announcing the preactualization of the future consummation of all things in Jesus Christ. The world has been given God’s promise that in the future all things will be made whole. The promise comes to us through Jesus who died on Good Friday and rose from the dead on Easter Sunday. As prolepsis, he embodies the promise because he anticipates in his person the new life that we humans and all creation are destined to share.

The argument all the way through this volume will affirm faith in the God of the future. The God of Jesus is mysterious on many counts, but one salient feature of the revelation in Jesus Christ is that this is a God of faithfulness. This God is trustworthy. In addition, this trustworthy God has given us a promise. The divine voice has spoken to us through the prophets and through the Son with the message
that a new and transformed world is coming where swords will be beaten into plowshares, lions will lie down with lambs, and there will be no more tears in our eyes. Now, this claim is either true or it is not. The Christian faith is constituted by trust that it is true. Its truth is nothing that can be discerned philosophically or deduced from the structure of natural phenomena. Its truth is dependent solely on the faithfulness of the God who promised that these things would come to pass.

As a confirmation of the promise and as an appearance of its fulfillment ahead of time, history has experienced the incarnation of the Son of God. The paradoxical presence of the incarnate Logos in Jesus of Nazareth meant that in that time and place the universal will of God was at work under the finite conditions of human personality. On the one hand, Jesus was subject to transiency, to the evil designs of others, to the power of present fixation and denial of futurity, or, in short, to death. Jesus was a part, not the whole, of creation. The cross on which he died signified that God’s will is not “done on earth as it is in heaven.” On the other hand, Jesus’ own unyielding faith in God meant the incarnate one never broke relationship with God’s future. Even when facing death and praying in Gethsemane, Jesus said, “Thy will be done.” The Easter resurrection was God’s act wherein the faith of Jesus was vindicated and his oneness with the coming consummate fulfillment was affirmed.

The imagery attached to the traditional picture of the incarnation is that of a heavenly being coming down to take up residence on earth. It is spatial imagery. What would happen should we temporalize incarnation imagery and locate God’s creative power at the consummation? We would get prolepsis. By prolepsis here I mean anticipation of future reality in a concrete preactualization of it. Jesus Christ is the future made present. He is the first fruits (1 Cor. 15:20), a foretaste of the great banquet yet to be enjoyed in the consummate
kingdom of God. The good news of the gospel is that the kingdom of God has arrived ahead of time in Jesus of Nazareth and is the promised destiny of the whole of creation.

The exhilarating impact of the gospel is that it evokes in us the life of beatitude. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes the life of beatitude as living a blessed life today in light of the coming of God’s kingdom tomorrow. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” says Jesus, because “they will be called children of God” (Matt. 5:9). God’s future wholeness exerts its healing power now. In the life of beatitude the Holy Spirit collapses time, so to speak, so that believers can share ahead of time in the oneness of all things that is yet to come. Eyes of faith can catch a glimpse of the unity beyond the division and conflict that seem to be so destructive to our race and to the realm of nature to which we belong. Amid the viciousness of devouring competition, one can envision the lion lying down with the lamb. Amid the desert of portending mass destruction, one can glimpse the river of life flowing from the throne of God. Amid the wanton lack of care for the beings and things of this world, one can feel the heart beat with the rhythms of the divine love that pervades and promises wholeness throughout creation.

The Emerging Postmodern Context

The emerging postmodern consciousness and its vision of integrating wholeness constitute the primary context within which I seek here to understand and explicate the gospel and in which I wish to evoke the life of beatitude. The modern world—the world we have lived in since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century—is the critical world that has torn apart the relation between the human mind and objective reality. Through the specialization of knowledge into separate disciplines, modernity has broken our naive sense of oneness with the whole of the world. Emerging schools of postmodern
thought, however, are searching for ways to reunite what has been separated, to fix what has been broken apart. As I try to explicate the significance of the gospel in this context, I will ask just how God’s promise of future wholeness for all creation affects our life now amid a world of brokenness. My suggested answer is that it does so proleptically and beatitudinally.

**Male and Female in Theology**

The present period is a time of acute gender consciousness. We can no longer define the human simply in terms of what both sexes share in common. What is distinctive must be taken into account.

The bulk of the inherited tradition of Christian literature has come from male theologians. Today’s scholars are asking: Might the distinctively male apperception of things have slanted the direction taken by theology in the past? Are there nuances and insights drawn from the way women experience the world that could enrich the theological enterprise? With these questions in mind, I am here adopting a principle of gender complementarity. According to the complementarity principle operative in this book, whenever concepts are explored that are based upon analogies to what is human, these concepts should take both genders into account.

**Gratitude**

Some words of gratitude are in order. I did not write this book in isolation. Numerous parties have given me encouragement. I wish to thank the Board of Trustees of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and its past president, Dr. Walter Stuhr, for granting me sabbatical time away from my teaching responsibilities in order to concentrate on research and writing. I wish to thank as well the Lutheran Brotherhood for including me in its Seminary Sabbatical
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I dedicate this work to Jenny, my beloved wife and devoted companion for more than a quarter century. She along with the rest of my immediate family—Paul, Kathy Kim, and Elizabeth—deserves a thank you. They have been most tolerant and patient during those long periods when my body was present but my mind was buried in one or another chapter of the yet-to-be-written book. They flatter me by saying that now with the book finished they are glad to have me back again. It is still nice to be welcomed home, even if you have never really left it.

I also wish to memorialize the whole family in which I grew up. I refer particularly to my father, Theodore Frank Peters Sr., and to my mother, Lillian May (Tesch) Peters, who first demonstrated the love of God in my life and who never ceased to encourage me to live graciously and responsibly. Unfortunately, both my mother and
father died during the decade in which I was working on this book. I pray that the oneness we previously shared in Christ will soon be realized once again as a oneness we can share together.

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Finally, I offer this book to those students of the Christian mysteries who seek a better understanding of the symbols of our faith and who wish to pursue the loving life as a response to God’s gracious love for us.

Ted Peters
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