

Foreword

Usually when theologians find out they were wrong about something, they admit it readily enough. But then they cover their tracks. They revise their views in light of the evidence, adopt the correct views, and from then on simply teach and talk as if they had always held these new, improved views. They may have taken a journey out of confusion to get to the truth, but once they arrive, they only tell about the destination. That's fair enough: what we want from theologians is a description of the land of truth.

The best thing about Matthew Barrett's book *None Greater* is that he doesn't wipe out his own footprints. He retraces them and takes us along for the journey. And it is a strange journey of discovery, because what Barrett discovered was the God he already knew. He had been praising God, trusting God, serving God, studying God in his Word, teaching true things about God, and praying to God all along. But somehow, at some point, it dawned on him that there was something unreal, incomplete, and inadequate in the way he had become accustomed to thinking about God.

This is where Barrett's journey intersects the journeys of so many of us raised in the Christian faith. Focusing on a preselected

subset of things we like to remember about God (his mercy, intimacy, concern for us, attention to us, love for us), we let our thoughts about God orbit around that familiar center. We grow comfortable with a certain set of reassuring, familiar, and cozy divine attributes. There are no sheer cliffs, dizzying heights, or fathomless abysses in the doctrine of God we let ourselves settle into. It's as if we have a doctrine of God that gets everything right except that it accidentally leaves out the sheer "godness" of God. But that means it gets everything wrong.

That is the shock that Barrett's book captures: Meeting the God you thought you knew, and being shocked by his sheer godness. God is greater than he thought God was! Extending that moment of shock into a whole book, Barrett explores all the divine attributes that we are so tempted to diminish, downplay, avoid, or ignore. Perfection, aseity, simplicity, immutability, impassibility, eternity, and all of the "omni-" attributes come parading by as we learn to confess a higher, more classical, and more biblical doctrine of God.

The main discovery Barrett records in this book is the discovery that God is greater, but there is another discovery that accompanies it: theology is hard. Theology is hard because once you realize how much greater God is—that than which nothing greater can be conceived, in the Anselmian ways of saying it—you realize how much harder God is to talk about. The problem cannot be overcome simply by studying theology books and learning some new, more technical vocabulary. Most readers will in fact pick up a few helpful new words from this book, since words like "aseity" are not exactly household words, and words like "simplicity" have a special meaning in theology. But picking up those terms, and using them to say more of the right things about God, is not enough. These words and concepts of the classical Christian doctrine of God are just markers along the way to reversing some deep-seated habits of thought. Those habits of thought mostly start out with a sentiment like "If I were God . . ." We are easily lulled into a

style of theology that starts from ourselves and imagines some ways in which God must be like that, but bigger and better. I feel sad when I am rejected, so God must feel even more rejected, but without acting out because of it. I need to be loved, so God must need to be loved even more, but also somehow he must be able to accept when he isn't. It's possible to take statements like these and nuance them enough, or hedge them with some biblical principles, or rule out gross errors, so that we end up with a decent theology of a respectable God. But there is an underlying problem that will keep generating errors every time we let down our guard. The underlying problem is a theological style that, even in its reading of Scripture, works up from us to God.

With *None Greater*, Barrett is determined to reverse that direction. He has learned that the proper path of theology is to follow the revelation of God from above to below instead, and he wants to bring readers along with him on this journey. It requires some truly counterintuitive moves, because we really have to get outside of ourselves to hear the message of God's perfection and blessedness. And it requires us to pay more attention to some of the major theological witnesses of the great tradition of Christian thought than we may be accustomed to do. That's because many of these older voices—Athanasius with his shocked reaction to Arianism, Augustine with his autobiographical *Confessions*, Anselm with his book-length meditative prayer—also wrote as pilgrims who had been surprised by the godness of God. So there is plenty of company on the journey that Barrett invites readers to join him on. What matters most, though, is to start the journey. What matters is to join the company of those who are permanently shocked by the sheer godness of the God we thought we knew.

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