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*The God Who Saves*  
*A Dogmatic Sketch*

by David W. Congdon

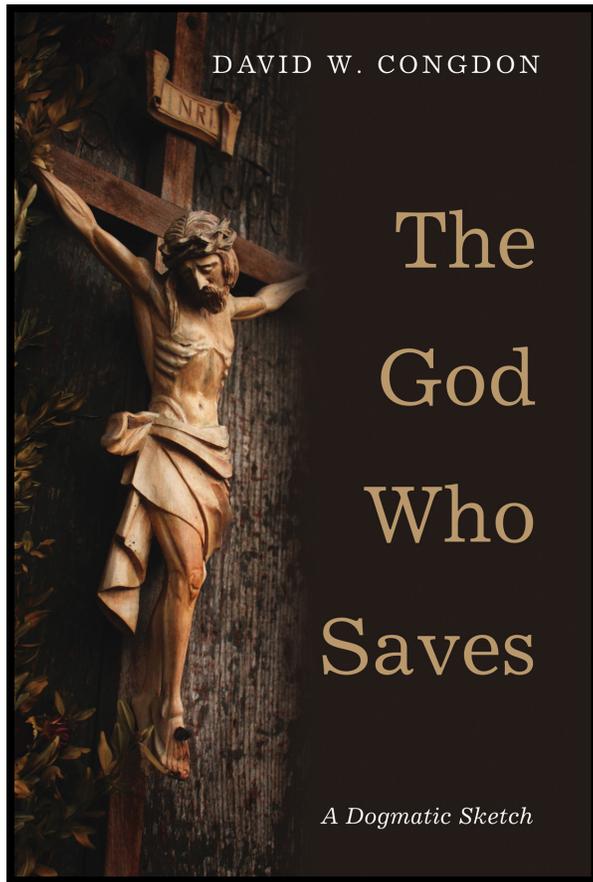
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## New Title From David W. Congdon

*The God Who Saves*  
*A Dogmatic Sketch*



Ever since Karl Barth breathed new life into the field of theology, systematic theologies have tended to follow the order of the creed—placing the doctrine of God, and especially the doctrine of the trinity, at the beginning. *The God Who Saves* presents a novel approach to Christian dogmatics that makes soteriology the first and normative word in theology. The result is a consistently *soteriocentric* theology. The work is additionally distinguished from other systematic approaches to Christian doctrine by the fact that the soteriology in question derives from a fresh hearing of the apocalyptic message of the New Testament. The God who saves is the God who invades and interrupts the cosmos in the death of Jesus. This saving event, which embraces each person without remainder, is definitive for God's identity as the triune Christ, Spirit, and Creator. Finally, *The God Who Saves* is a uniquely interdisciplinary work of theology, drawing on contemporary philosophy, history of religions, intercultural studies, hermeneutical theory, and popular culture. Here is a bold, constructive work of dogmatic theology for the twenty-first century.

**David W. Congdon** (PhD, Princeton Theological Seminary) is associate editor at IVP Academic. He is the author of *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology* (2015) and *Rudolf Bultmann: A Companion to His Theology* (2015)

## Interview with David W. Congdon

### **Why did you set out to write a systematic theology?**

I was asked by Robin Parry in 2010 to consider writing a systematic theology on the basis of Christian universalism. I was well-known within the blogosphere as a universalist thanks to a series of posts I wrote in 2006. I certainly never intended to write a systematic theology, but Robin's question started the gears turning in my head. At the time I was in the midst of my PhD program at Princeton Theological Seminary, so I shelved the project while I worked on my dissertation. I returned to the book in 2014 and realized that I needed to rework the project from the ground up. This is the result.

### **You are known for your work on Bultmann. How is this related to your other books?**

There is actually a very close connection with my previous work. In *The Mission of Demythologizing*, an expanded version of my dissertation, I attempted to figure out what the relationship between Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann actually is. What I discovered is that Barth and Bultmann part ways over soteriology—over universalism in fact. Barth's mature theology, in which he rejects the form of dialectical theology he previously shared with Bultmann, is a thoroughgoing attempt to secure the universality and sovereignty of divine grace. His later doctrine of election claims that all human beings are elect in Christ, who alone is the elected and rejected one. Bultmann opposes this idea and argues instead that election takes place in the act of faith itself, which is the position of the early Barth. This is a clear impasse and I make no attempt to reconcile Barth and Bultmann on this point in my previous books. I have always been convinced that Barth was right to make God's grace universally effective, but I became convinced that Bultmann was equally right to emphasize the freedom and historicity of the human person. *The God Who Saves* is my attempt to develop an account of universal salvation within a Bultmannian approach to theology.

### **So how do you achieve this?**

You'll have to read the book to find out! But as a teaser I will say here that I make several key moves. First, I define the Christ-event as an event in which Christ is placed outside of himself. Second, I define faith as an act of cocrucifixion in which we participate in Christ's being-outside-himself. Third, and crucially, I define this act of faith as a primarily unconscious act, following the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Fourth, I then argue that wherever one is placed outside oneself, one participates in the crucified Christ and is saved. Fifth, I conclude that all persons find themselves displaced at some point in their lives and preferably at numerous points.

### **Is this a kind of religious pluralism?**

Not exactly. Religious pluralism, as I understand it, would say something like, "All religions are equally valid paths to God." My own view is that no religion is a path to God—not even Christianity! The unconscious act of faith is prereligious, indeed prereflective. It occurs as much outside religion as it does within it. The saving act of God is blissfully unconcerned with religion. If religion has a purpose, then it is to call our attention to this saving act wherever it occurs and to help place us in a position to encounter it.

## Interview with David W. Congdon cont.

### **I notice you place the doctrine of the trinity at the end. Why is that?**

A lot of people have criticized Schleiermacher for making the trinity into an “appendix” to theology. In fact he does no such thing! The word he uses for the doctrine is *Schluss*, which means “conclusion.” The trinity is the appropriate conclusion or capstone to theology. It summarizes and encapsulates all that precedes it. The reason the trinity must come at the end of theology is that we only know who God is in light of what God has done. To presuppose the trinity because it is part of Nicene dogma is to foreclose on the possibility of understanding who God is anew in our time and place. It is to freeze God into an object of the past instead of to let God confront us as the Lord of the present. Barth is often championed for placing the trinity at the beginning, but in fact he reconstructs the doctrine of the trinity in that opening volume on the basis of a doctrine of revelation. And in the fourth volume he reconstructs the trinity again on the basis of his doctrine of reconciliation. So in truth Barth shows us that the trinity is always the conclusion. The question for every theologian is: what is our starting point?

### **How do you see your work in relation to the many other systematic theologies appearing today?**

I do not view this book as being comparable with the recent works by Sarah Coakley, Brian Gerrish, Katherine Sonderegger, Anthony Thiselton, Douglas Ottati, and others. For one thing, *The God Who Saves* is not a full systematic theology; many important topics are not discussed that would need to be included in a genuine systematics. It is more of a “dogmatics in outline” or a manifesto for a future systematics. With this caveat in place, my work is most similar to that of Gerrish. He and I both stand in the tradition of Schleiermacher, but whereas he remains more thoroughly Schleiermacherian, my work appropriates this tradition as it has been criticized and refracted in the work of Barth, Bultmann, Gerhard Ebeling, and Eberhard Jüngel. This leads me to place creation at the end rather than the beginning. But the difference between our theologies becomes most apparent in our pneumatologies. Gerrish, following Schleiermacher and Troeltsch, makes ecclesiology the extension of christology and thus collapses pneumatology into ecclesiology. He expressly criticizes Barth for an ecclesiological occasionalism that defines the church purely as an event. My own approach develops Barth’s view of the church and seeks to push this eventfulness even further than Barth was willing to go.

### **You conclude the book with some thoughts on the afterlife. This is a controversial topic. What is the point of Christianity if there is no conscious existence after death?**

I recognize how sensitive and challenging this topic is, but we might as well ask: is the point of religion to grant us exclusive entry to some eternal pleasure dome? The problem with most accounts of the afterlife is that they are clearly compensatory. They seek to reward those who have suffered in this life at the hands of others and punish those who have enjoyed this life at the expense of others. As scholars of the history of religion have demonstrated, heaven and hell have always been projections of unfulfilled human longing. In my closing epilogue I explore the views of Barth and Jüngel. Both of them reflect exegetically and theologically on the afterlife, and both conclude that a conscious afterlife is not a biblical notion. God does not promise a second life in heaven after death but rather that the life we have lived on this earth will be raised to participate in God’s life. Our existence will be eternalized. Ministers of the gospel should not preach that we will see our loved ones in heaven. Rather they should preach that our lives are held securely by God. We may not have a firm grasp on ourselves, much less on God, but God has a firm grasp on us. This is the hope and promise of the gospel.

## An Excerpt from *The God Who Saves*

I have argued that Christian faith confesses a God who saves. Theology is the conceptual interpretation and clarification of this axiom of faith. It is a scientific, hermeneutical, and practical discipline that humbly and rigorously reflects on the relation between God and humanity in the light of God's reconciling self-revelation in Jesus Christ. But what does it mean for God to save? What does it mean for us to be saved? These questions—which lie at the very heart of Christian self-understanding—elude easy answers and must be asked anew by every generation. The difficulty of reaching any kind of agreement is only compounded by the fact that there has never been a dogma of the atonement. No ecumenical conciliar statement about the meaning of salvation exists. The ecumenical councils were content with clarifying the nature of Christ's person without clarifying the nature of his saving work and how we participate in it. This has left the church with “an inherited heap of proposals” (Jenson) and little agreement about how to evaluate them.

The following chapters attempt to offer a systematic theological account of salvation, a soteriological *dogmatica minora*. That is to say, they seek to articulate various doctrines of the Christian faith in terms of the economy of grace. Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and creation—these and other doctrines will be explicated in light of the saving event that Christian faith confesses has taken place in Christ. This project is thus the consistent application of Melancthon's axiom (“to know Christ means to know his benefits”) to the whole of Christian theology. *To know God is to know the God who saves*. Theology is only properly Christian theology when it interprets the subject-matter of theology—the material content of dogmatics—in terms of its salvific significance for us.

The implication is that, as Eberhard Jüngel puts it, “you are not teaching the *matter* properly if you do not at the same time think of its use.” . . . To adapt Luther, unless we learn to know God in this way (i.e., soteriologically), we necessarily go wrong. Unless theology speaks of a reality that is “useful for us as believers,” that “helps us,” it speaks in vain. To borrow an image from Wittgenstein, theology that is not determined by soteriology is language “idling,” that is, not “doing work.” If any doctrinal statement is irrelevant to the question of salvation, then it is highly questionable whether it has a place in a distinctively *Christian* articulation of faith. To paraphrase Luther, it is not Christian theology when you explicate doctrines from a historical or metaphysical point of view; they must be interpreted in terms of their usefulness and significance for us as believers. (pp. 53–55)

## Praise for *The God Who Saves*

“David Congdon and I grew up together theologically. It has been my privilege to watch his penetrating insight grow and develop into a creative theological program. Rumors of dialectical theology’s demise have been greatly exaggerated. If you are interested in a glimpse of what a fresh dialectical theology for the twenty-first century looks like—and you should be!—you need look no further.”

—**W. Travis McMaken, Associate Professor of Religion, Lindenwood University**

“While the idea of universal salvation has long been a minority report in the Christian tradition, it has found an increasing number of advocates in recent times. This volume provides a rigorous, creative, and comprehensive dogmatic account of this belief from one of the brightest young scholars at work today. Even those who are not in agreement with Congdon’s line of argument and conclusions will be challenged and enriched by the detail and scope of his engaging theological vision.”

—**John R. Franke, Theologian in Residence, Second Presbyterian Church, Indianapolis; Author, *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth***

“Congdon has authored a sophisticated and ambitious dogmatic essay full of insight and bristling with provocation. He invites us to join him in a sustained experiment in radically soteriocentric thinking: what if the work of the God of the gospel on the cross were truly the Archimedean point from which *all things* are moved and so saved? Congdon’s aim is to limn the revolution in Christian theology that should follow when Christian imagination and intelligence are animated and disciplined anew by faith in the God whose very being is at stake in his advent ‘for us and for our salvation.’ *The God Who Saves* is an important intervention in contemporary doctrinal debate.”

—**Philip G. Ziegler, Chair of Christian Dogmatics, Professor, University of Aberdeen**

“This is a bold, clear, and stimulating articulation of the good news. While few will follow Congdon at every point, his account of eschatological theo-actualized universalism provokes in the places where it matters most, and reminds us again why the advent of Jesus Christ is the first article of faith, and the ground that makes Christian dogmatics possible, intelligible, and profoundly hopeful. Dorothee Soelle once insisted that ‘when we ask ourselves what God is like, we must answer first by looking at what God does.’ This essay takes up that momentous task admirably.”

—**Jason Goroncy, Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology, Whitley College, University of Divinity, Australia**

“A powerful and provocative work. In prose that is simultaneously critical, polemical, and constructive, Congdon articulates in outline a distinctive theological vision of the apocalyptic gospel of God’s gracious salvation. Though many will disagree with the proposals found herein, none can afford to ignore the searching questions that Congdon puts to contemporary theological discussions. To do so would impoverish our discourse and impair our witness to the expansiveness of God’s embrace.”

—**Christian T. Collins Winn, Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology, Bethel University**

