



THIRD  
EDITION

# THEOLOGY

## THE BASICS

ALISTER E. MCGRATH

 WILEY-BLACKWELL



# Theology

## *The Basics*

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# Theology

## *The Basics*

Third Edition

Alister E. McGrath

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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## *Preface*

What is theology? The word has been used by Christians since the third century to mean “talking about God.” “Christian theology” thus means something like “talking about God in a Christian way,” recognizing that the word “god” means quite different things to different religious traditions. Christians think about their faith; “theology” is the term used for both this process of reflection and its outcome. To study theology is to thus think systematically about the fundamental ideas of Christianity. It is intellectual reflection on the act, content, and implications of the Christian faith.

Sometimes this means deciding what is the best way of understanding some aspect of the Christian faith. A good example is provided by the doctrine of the church. For some, the church is a “mixed body,” consisting of believers and unbelievers; for others, it is a “pure body,” consisting only of believers. Other examples can easily be given. So where do these different approaches come from? And what are their merits? And their implications? What difference do they make to the business of Christian living?

At other times, it means trying to understand why the Christian churches committed themselves to ideas which, at least on first sight, seem complicated and even a little implausible. Why should Christians believe that Jesus Christ is “truly divine and truly human,” when this seems much more difficult than a simpler statement such as “Jesus Christ is truly human.” Or, to take another familiar example, why should anyone want to believe that God is a Trinity – “one God, three persons” – when this seems so much more complicated than

simply believing in God? Doesn't this just make faith unnecessarily complicated?

There are many reasons for wanting to think about the Christian faith in more detail. Those who are not Christians will be interested in learning what Christians believe, and why. Theology offers an explanation of the Christian faith, and helps us to understand why Christians differ on certain points of importance. As the eleventh-century theologian Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033–1109) once remarked, theology is basically “faith seeking understanding.” Part of the inner dynamic of the life of faith is a desire to understand what is believed. Theology can be thought of as the Christian's discipleship of the mind.

For Christians, theological reflection can lead to personal enrichment, and a deepened appreciation of their faith. For the great Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (354–430), there is a genuine intellectual excitement to wrestling with God. He spoke of an “*eros* of the mind” – a sense of longing to understand more about God's nature and ways – and the transformative impact that this could have on people's lives. Other Christian writers have stressed the practical importance of theology, noting how it is essential for the ministry of the church. Preaching, spirituality, and pastoral care, many argue, are ultimately grounded in theology. This business of “thinking about God” takes place at many levels – in church study groups, in Bible studies, through preaching, and in academic seminars. Yet the study of theology has relevance beyond the Christian church. At least a basic understanding of Christian theology will be invaluable to anyone studying western cultural history, literature, or art.

This short, basic introduction to Christian theology is aimed specifically at those who are approaching it for the first time, and who feel intimidated by the thought of studying theology. It sets out to introduce you to some of its basic themes, problems, and personalities, and to whet your appetite to know more. There are severe limits to what can be dealt with in such a short book, and many readers will find themselves frustrated by the brevity of some discussions, and the omission of much material that is so clearly relevant to its topics. Happily, there are plenty of other works that will be able to take your studies further. This book, which is perhaps best seen as a “taster” in Christian theology, will make specific

suggestions about what you can do next, once you have finished this introduction.

This book sets out to explore some of the basic ideas of Christianity, engaging with some of its leading representatives. It *aims* to introduce you to the basics of Christian theology. It *assumes* that you know nothing about the subject. It *introduces and explains* the following aspects of Christian theology:

- some of its leading ideas, as they are found in the Apostles' Creed – about which more presently;
- how those ideas were developed and justified;
- the basic vocabulary, especially technical terms, used in discussion of those ideas;
- some of the key debates that have influenced Christian thinking during the last two thousand years;
- some of the leading thinkers who have shaped Christian theology down the centuries.

It also encourages you to *interact* with these ideas, by helping you to engage with some texts setting out some approaches to these questions. By the time you have finished this book, you will be able to go on to deal with more advanced works in the field, including the two standard theological primers written by the present author.

The book does not set out to advocate any one specific form of Christian theology, but to introduce its readers to a wide variety of ideas. The work is generous, both in terms of the range of Christian opinions noted, and the positive attitude adopted towards them. No attempt is made to settle the longstanding disputes of Christian theology. Instead, the reader is introduced to them, and helped to understand the points at issue. Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism are all represented in this work.

This book builds on the success of two earlier textbooks from the present author and publisher: *Christian Theology: An Introduction* and *The Christian Theology Reader*. The former, now in its fifth edition, provides a thorough university-level introduction to Christian theology, including comprehensive coverage of the history of theology, the basics of theological method, and detailed engagement with ten major areas of theology. The latter, now in its fourth edition, provides



more than 375 primary texts of relevance to the study of theology, along with individual introductions, commentary, and study questions. Although the present book is intended to be a brief introduction to the themes of Christian theology, it can also be used to lay the groundwork for a more detailed engagement with these two textbooks. The work tries to avoid any form of denominational bias, and aims to treat all positions examined respectfully and fairly. The approach adopted in this book has been tested on student audiences in Oxford over several years, and I am grateful to those who have helped me evaluate it.

The scale of the success of this shorter work took both the publisher and author by surprise. When it became clear that the book was being so widely used, we decided as a matter of some urgency to commission detailed evaluation of the work by its end users. This has produced many helpful suggestions for improvements, some of which were incorporated into the second edition. As the numbers of users grew, additional evaluation was commissioned, leading to the production of the third edition, which includes further significant improvements – most notably, a chapter dedicated to the theology of the Holy Spirit. It is our hope that this new edition will prove to be an asset to those teaching and studying theology. We look forward to receiving feedback which will help us when the time comes to produce a fourth edition in due course.

Users of this work may like to use it alongside a short collection of readings, designed to complement this textbook. *Theology: The Basic Readings*, now in its second edition, provides 62 readings, arranged in ten chapters paralleling those of this work. This makes it an ideal resource to help you take your reflections further. The first edition of this work was very well received, and it has been developed and expanded in the light of comments from its users. It is hoped that this additional work will be helpful in developing your grasp of Christian theology.

Alister McGrath  
London

# *The Apostles' Creed*

This book is loosely modeled on the Apostles' Creed, one of the most familiar and widely cited summaries of the Christian faith. It is regularly included in public worship, and is often the subject of sermons, textbooks, and study guides. Its simple structure creates an ideal framework for exploring some of the central themes of Christian theology. Although many earlier versions are known, this creed reached its final form in the eighth century.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

## *Getting Started*

Theology is “talk about God”; Christian theology is “talk about God” from a Christian perspective. It begins by recognizing that Christians have quite distinct ideas about who God is and what God is like. We find these expressed in the Bible, which all Christians regard as being of immense importance to matters of faith. Christian theology can be seen both as the *process* of reflecting on the Bible and weaving together its ideas and themes, and as the *result* of this process of reflection in certain ideas – ideas that are often referred to as “doctrines” (from the Latin word *doctrina*, meaning “teaching”).

There are also other documents which Christians regard with great respect, such as the “creeds.” The word “creed” comes from the Latin word *credo*, meaning “I believe.” A creed is basically a brief statement of the main points of the Christian faith. The best known of these are the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. These ancient creeds set out some of the basics of the faith, and are often used widely for teaching purposes. Many theologians would argue that Christian theology is the exploration of the basic ideas of these creeds, investigating their basis in the Bible, and their impact on Christian thinking and living.

So how do we go about studying theology? One way of studying theology is to read some theologians, and see what kind of approach they adopt. How do they develop their ideas? How do they assess arguments? How do they use the Bible and other theologians in their

approach? Two theologians from the classic era of Christian theology might be mentioned here:

- Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–74), a great theologian of the Middle Ages, whose *Summa Theologiae* (Latin: The “Totality of Theology”) is one of the most admired works of systematic theology.
- John Calvin (1509–64), whose *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is a landmark in Protestant theology.

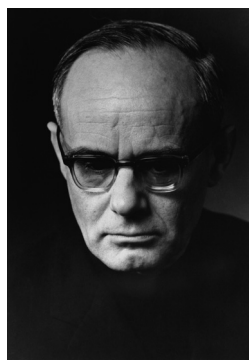
In the twentieth century, two theologians are often singled out as being of especial interest:

- The Protestant writer Karl Barth (1886–1968), whose *Church Dogmatics* are often regarded as the most important theological publication of this period.
- The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–84), whose *Theological Investigations* reestablished the short theological essay as a major way of conducting theological debate and exploration.

This approach has many merits. It does, however, make considerable demands on students. For a start, the writings of these theologians are often rather long. In addition, you need to know a lot of background material before you can really make sense of them. Anyway, why limit the study of theology to such a limited number of figures?

For this reason, some writers suggest that a *historical* approach is better. This means looking at the history of Christian theology, and seeing how it developed down the ages. Instead of focusing on a single individual, this approach allows students to see how Christian thinking has evolved. Again, it is a good way of doing theology. Yet it makes huge demands on students. Two thousand years of history takes a long time to master!

That history is often broken down into sections, to make it more manageable.



**Figure 1** Karl Rahner (1904–84).  
© Bettmann/Corbis.

While every theologian will have views on how best to divide two thousand years of Christian history, many use a framework which looks something like this.

The first hundred years is often referred to as the *apostolic* period. The fundamental sense of this term is “originating with the apostles” or “having a direct link with the apostles.” This is the period during which the works now included in the New Testament were written, usually considered to be limited to the first century. During this time, Christianity was spreading throughout the Mediterranean region and beyond. The missionary journeys of St. Paul, described in the Acts of the Apostles, are an excellent example of this activity.

This is followed by the *patristic* period, which is usually held to begin about the year 100, and end with the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The term “patristic” derives from the Greek term *patres*, meaning “fathers,” a term used to refer to the writers of this formative era. (Sadly, there were very few women among them.) The Council of Chalcedon marked a landmark in Christian thinking, especially over the identity of Jesus Christ, and is seen by many writers as bringing this important period of theological development to a close. The patristic period witnessed important theological explorations of the doctrine of the church, the identity of Jesus Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the relation of grace and free will.

This is followed by the *medieval* period, which is widely regarded as extending from the Council of Chalcedon until about the year 1500. The term “medieval” means “a middle age” or “an intervening period.” It was invented by humanist writers in the sixteenth century to refer to the (to them, uninteresting) period between the classical era and the Renaissance. However, the term is now widely used without this polemical or critical sense. The medieval period was immensely productive theologically, and produced some theological giants. We have already noted Thomas Aquinas’ great thirteenth-century work, the *Summa Theologiae*. Many other examples could be set alongside this, such as the writings of Duns Scotus (1266–1308) and William of Ockham (1280–1349). Among the many issues to be explored in detail during this period were the relation between faith and reason, and the theology of the sacraments. Alongside this, of course, there was continuing exploration of issues debated during the patristic period, including the identity of Christ and the relation of grace and free will.

The sixteenth century marked a period of radical change in the western church. This period of *reformation* witnessed the birth of the Protestant reformation, associated with writers such as Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin, which opened up a period of new theological debate. Certain theological topics became especially hot around this time, particularly the place of the Bible in theological debate, the doctrine of the church, and the question of what it is necessary to do in order to be saved.

The Catholic church also went through a period of reformation around this time, with the Council of Trent (1544–63) setting out the definitive Catholic position on issues of importance at this time. Many scholars also include the seventeenth century in this period, arguing that this represents the Protestant and Catholic consolidation of the developments that began in the previous century. It was during this century that Christians emigrated to North America, and began to establish that region as a major player in theological debates.

Finally, the *modern* period is generally understood to mean the period since the eighteenth century. This was a period of considerable instability in western Europe, especially following the French Revolution of 1789, and later through the rise of Marxism in eastern Europe in the twentieth century. Despite these anxieties, it was a period of remarkable theological creativity throughout western Europe and North America. In addition, a growing Christian presence in Africa and Asia during the twentieth century led to an increasing interest in developing “local theologies” in these new regions. These local theologies would be grounded in the Christian tradition, but sensitive to their local situations.

To survey these developments, which have been sketched with extreme brevity in these paragraphs, would be an impossible task. The end result would be very superficial and unsatisfactory. For this reason, a historical approach has not been adopted in this work. While studying the history of theology is a fascinating thing to do, it needs to be done in much greater depth than this brief work allows. Happily, there is another way of introducing theology, which avoids this problem: the *topical* approach, which considers individual subject areas.

The topical approach adopted in this work involves looking at a number of areas of Christian thought, and exploring what Christian

theologians have said about them and how they developed those ideas. This allows us to begin to wrestle with some of the great questions of Christian theology in a manageable way. It allows you to develop tools to think about theological issues, rather than just learning what certain great theologians have thought about them.

Any serious engagement with theology is going to involve examining specific theological topics and individual theologians, as well as the general history of the discipline. It is impossible to do theology properly without being aware of what theologians have thought about things in the past, and how this might be relevant today. However, a short book like this cannot hope to do justice to the complexities of individual thinkers or history. Yet the topical approach being used will allow us to look at the history of a debate, where this is relevant to the topic being discussed – and also at individual theologians, when they have a particular contribution to make to the discussion. This volume provides two useful additional resources to help with this process of interaction: a brief glossary of theological terms, and the biographical details of the major theologians mentioned in the text.

Throughout its long history, Christian theology has made an appeal to three fundamental resources: the Bible, tradition, and reason. The topical approach allows us to explore the place of each of these resources in theological debate. In view of their importance, we shall examine each of them in a little detail, before moving on to our first topic.

## Introducing the Bible

The word “Bible” comes from the Greek word *biblia* (“books”). It refers to a collection of books which Christians regard as having authority in matters of thought and life. The Bible is divided into two major sections, known as the *Old Testament* and *New Testament*.

The term “Old Testament” is used by Christian writers to refer to those books of the Christian Bible which were (and still are) regarded as sacred by Judaism. For Christians, the Old Testament is seen as setting the scene for the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, who brings its

leading themes and institutions to fulfillment. These texts are sometimes also referred to as “the Hebrew Bible.”

The word “testament” needs explanation. In this theological context, the word really means “covenant” or “dispensation.” The basic idea is that the same God who once entered into a covenant with the people of Israel (the “old covenant”) has now entered into a “new covenant” with all of humanity, leading to the emergence of the Christian church. The basic points being made here are:

1. The same God who called the people of Israel also called the Christian church. Both are “chosen peoples,” to use the biblical language.
2. That a new phase in God’s dealings with humanity came about in Jesus Christ. This is usually referred to as a “new covenant” or “new dispensation.”

This has important implications for the way in which Christians read the Old Testament. For Christians, the Old Testament anticipates the coming of Christ. This idea is regularly developed in the New Testament. If you would like to explore this briefly, read the first two chapters of the gospel according to Matthew, the first book of the New Testament, and try answering these two questions:

1. How many times does a phrase like “this took place to fulfill the prophecy of . . .” occur in these two chapters?
2. Why do you think that Matthew regards it as so important that Jesus Christ fulfills Old Testament prophecy?

There is widespread agreement within Christianity that the Bible has a place of especial importance in theological debate and personal devotion. All the Protestant confessions of faith stress the centrality of the Bible in relation to Christian thought and life. More recently, the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) reaffirmed its importance for Catholic theology and preaching. The authority of the Bible is seen as linked with the idea of “inspiration” – in other words, that in some way, the words of the Bible convey the words of God. This is stated clearly by most Protestant confessions of faith, such as the



“Gallic Confession of Faith” (1559), which includes the following declaration:

We believe that the Word contained in these books has proceeded from God, and receives its authority from him alone, and not from human beings.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) sets out a similar position:

God is the author of Sacred Scripture. The divine revealed realities, which are contained and presented in the text of Sacred Scripture, have been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For Holy Mother Church, relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and the New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. God inspired the human authors of the sacred books.

There are some disagreements within Christianity over exactly what is included in the Bible. The most important of these concerns a group of works usually referred to as “the Apocrypha” (from the Greek word for “hidden”) or as “Deuterocanonical works.” This includes books such as the Wisdom of Solomon and the book of Judith. These books, though dating from the period of the Old Testament, were not originally written in the Hebrew language, and are thus not included in Jewish or Hebrew Bibles. These are sometimes referred to as the “Tanakh” – an acronym of the Hebrew words for “law, prophets, and writings (*torah, nevi'im, ketuvim*).”

Protestants tend to regard these “apocryphal” books as interesting and informative, but not as being of doctrinal importance. Catholics and Orthodox Christians, on the other hand, regard them as part of the text of the Bible. This difference is reflected in the way in which Protestant and Catholic Bibles are laid out. Protestant Bibles – such as the famous King James Bible of 1611 or the New International Version – include these texts as a third section of the Bible, known as the “Apocrypha.” Catholic Bibles – such as the Jerusalem Bible – include them within the Old Testament section of the Bible.

## Tradition

A series of controversies in the early church brought home the importance of the concept of “tradition.” The word “tradition” comes from the Latin term *traditio* which means “handing over,” “handing down,” or “handing on.” It is a thoroughly biblical idea; we find St. Paul reminded his readers that he was handing on to them core teachings of the Christian faith which he had himself received from other people (1 Corinthians 15:1–4).

The term “tradition” can refer to both the action of passing teachings on to others – something which Paul insists that must be done within the church – and to the body of teachings which are passed on in this manner. Tradition can thus be understood as a *process* as well as a *body of teaching*. The Pastoral Epistles (three New Testament letters that are particularly concerned with questions of church structure, and the passing on of Christian teaching: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus) in particular stress the importance of “guarding the good deposit which was entrusted to you” (2 Timothy 1:14). The New Testament also uses the notion of “tradition” in a negative sense, meaning something like “human ideas and practices which are not divinely authorized.” Thus Jesus Christ was openly critical of certain human traditions within Judaism (e.g., see Matthew 15:1–6; Mark 7:13).

The importance of the idea of tradition first became obvious in a controversy which broke out during the second century. The “Gnostic controversy” centered on a number of questions, including how salvation was to be achieved. (The word “Gnostic” derives from the Greek word *gnosis*, “knowledge,” and refers to the movement’s belief in certain secret ideas that had to be known in order to secure salvation.) Christian writers found themselves having to deal with some highly unusual and creative interpretations of the Bible. How were they to deal with these? If the Bible was to be regarded as authoritative, was every interpretation of the Bible to be regarded as of equal value?

Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–ca. 200), one of the church’s greatest theologians, did not think so. The question of how the Bible was to be interpreted was of the greatest importance. Heretics, he argued, interpreted the Bible according to their own taste. Orthodox believers,