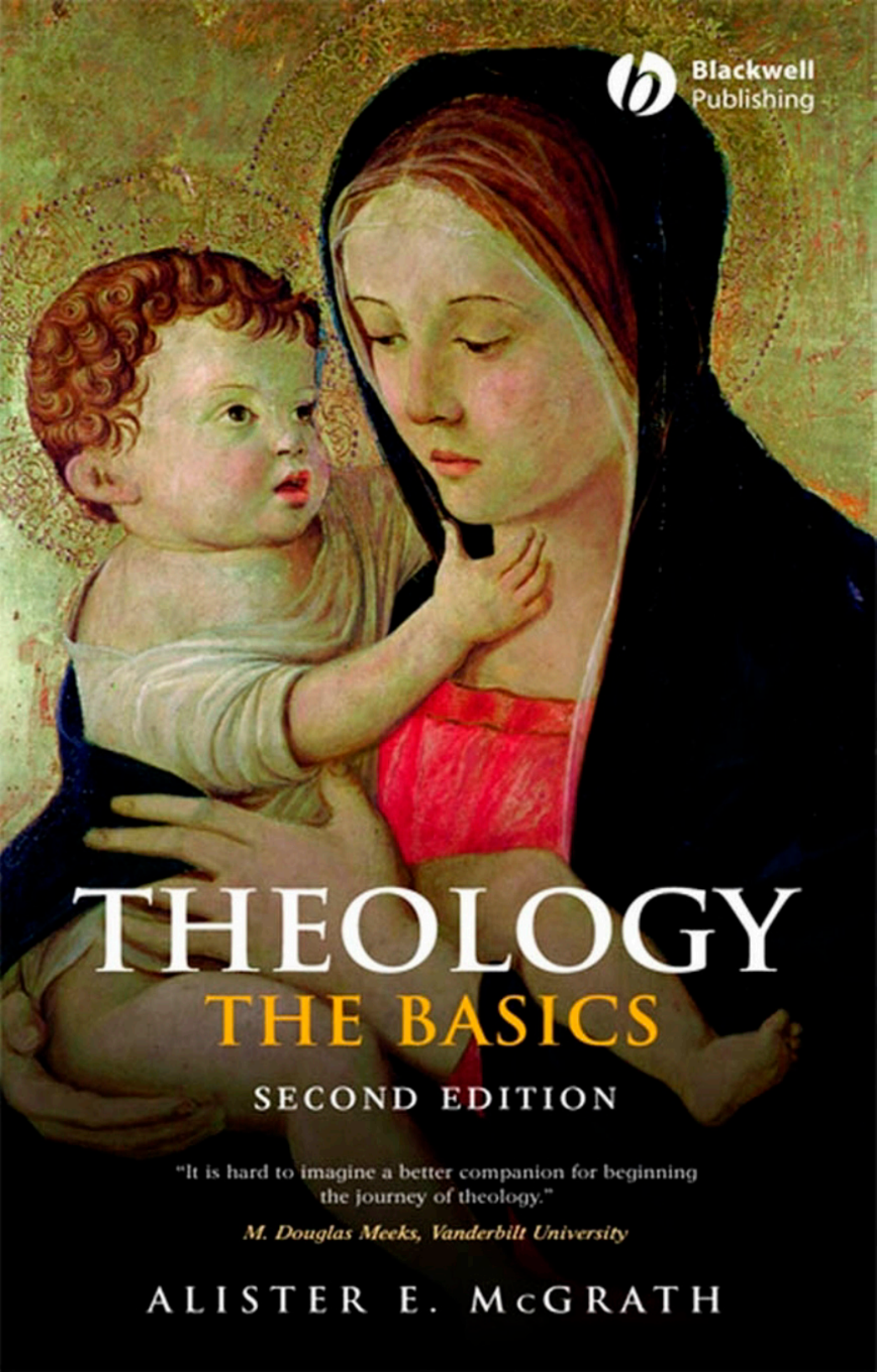




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SECOND EDITION

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the journey of theology."

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ALISTER E. McGRATH



# THEOLOGY: THE BASICS

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*M. Douglas Meeks, Vanderbilt University*

# THEOLOGY: THE BASICS

## SECOND EDITION

ALISTER E. McGRATH

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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?

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) 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 fourth 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 third edition, provides more than 360 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, which are incorporated into the new edition. It is our hope that this expanded version of the original 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 third edition in due course.

Alister McGrath  
Oxford

# *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. 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 designates the period since then. 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 approach adopted in this work is *topical*. We are going to look at a number of areas of Christian thought, and explore 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. 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, in contrast, interpreted the Bible in ways that their apostolic authors would have approved. What had been handed down from the apostles through the church was not merely the biblical texts themselves, but a certain way of reading and understanding those texts.

Everyone who wishes to perceive the truth should consider the apostolic tradition, which has been made known in every church in the entire world. We are able to number those who are bishops appointed by the apostles, and their successors in the churches to the present day, who taught and knew nothing of such things as these people imagine.

Irenaeus’ point is that a continuous stream of Christian teaching, life, and interpretation can be traced from the time of the apostles

to his own period. The church is able to point to those who have maintained the teaching of the church, and to certain public standard creeds which set out the main lines of Christian belief. Tradition is thus the guarantor of faithfulness to the original apostolic teaching, a safeguard against the innovations and misrepresentations of biblical texts on the part of the Gnostics.

This development is of major importance, as it underlies the emergence of “creeds” – public, authoritative statements of the basic points of the Christian faith, which are based upon the Bible, but avoid maverick interpretations of biblical material. This point was further developed in the early fifth century by Vincent of Lérins (died before 450), who was concerned that certain doctrinal innovations were being introduced without good reason. There was a need to have public standards by which such doctrines could be judged. So what standard was available, by which the church could be safeguarded from such errors? For Vincent, the answer was clear – tradition. For Vincent, tradition was “a rule for the interpretation of the prophets and the apostles in such a way that is directed by the rule of the universal church.”

## **Creeds**

Having noted the importance of creeds, we may explore how they came about in their present forms. Their emergence was stimulated by two factors of especial importance.

1. The need for public statements of faith which could be used in teaching, and defense of the Christian faith against misrepresentations.
2. The need for personal “confessions of faith” at the time of baptism.

We have already touched on the first point; the second needs further exploration. It is known that the early church attached especial importance to the baptism of new members. In the third



and fourth centuries, a definite pattern of instruction and baptism developed: new members of the church were instructed in the basics of the Christian faith during the period of Lent, and baptized on Easter Day. These new members of the church were asked to confirm their faith by assenting to key statements of Christian belief.

According to the *Apostolic Tradition*, a work written by Hippolytus of Rome (died ca. 236) in the early years of the third century, we know that three questions were put to each baptismal candidate: “Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, our Savior? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy church, and the forgiveness of sins?” As time went on, these questions were gradually changed into a statement of faith, which each candidate was asked to affirm.

The most important creed to emerge from these “baptismal creeds” is the “Apostles’ Creed,” which is widely used in Christian worship today. Traditionally, this creed is set out as twelve statements, each of which is attributed to one of the twelve apostles. Although it is now widely agreed that this creed was not actually written by the apostles themselves, it is nevertheless “apostolic” in the sense that it contains the main ideas of the Christian faith that the church received from those apostles. The present form of the creed can be traced to the eighth century. In its present form (see p. xi), it consists of three parts, corresponding to the three questions that Hippolytus reports as being asked of baptismal candidates back in the third century. Although each of the questions has been expanded, the same basic structure can still be identified.

The Apostles’ Creed offers a very convenient summary of some of the main topics of the Christian faith, and we shall regularly use it as a basis for discussion throughout this book.

## Reason

Finally, we need to note the importance of reason in Christian theology. Traditionally, Christian theology has seen reason as