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978-0-521-69037-9 - An Introduction to Christian Theology

Richard J. Plantinga, Thomas R. Thompson and Matthew D. Lundberg

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Far from being solely an academic enterprise, the practice of theology can pique the interest of anyone who wonders about the meaning of life. Inviting readers on a journey of “faith seeking understanding,” this introduction to Christian theology – its basic concepts, confessional content, and history – emphasizes the relevance of the key convictions of Christian faith to the challenges of today’s world.

In the first part, this book introduces the project of Christian theology and sketches the critical context that confronts Christian thought and practice today. In the second part, it offers a survey of the key doctrinal themes of Christian theology – including revelation, the triune God, and the world as creation – identifying their biblical basis and the highlights of their historical development before giving a systematic evaluation of each theme. The third part provides an overview of Christian theology from the early church to the present.

RICHARD J. PLANTINGA is Professor of Religion at Calvin College. He is the editor of *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (1999).

THOMAS R. THOMPSON is Professor of Religion at Calvin College. He is the editor of *The One in the Many: Christian Identity in a Multicultural World* (1998).

MATTHEW D. LUNDBERG is Assistant Professor of Religion at Calvin College.

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# AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

RICHARD J. PLANTINGA  
THOMAS R. THOMPSON  
MATTHEW D. LUNDBERG



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*We dedicate this book to a delightful dozen:*

*To Sharon, Aubree, Nathan, Lukas; to Kelly, Joshua, Jonathan,  
Julianna; to Joan, Carrie, Kristie, Matthew – each of our wives and  
children three, who continue to ensconce us in their love and  
faithfulness. This book is also a fruit of your lives and of our common  
journey of faith.*

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## *Preface*

This book is both an introduction and an invitation to Christian theology. For many people today theology is a mysterious enterprise – they don't know quite what it is, or what to make of it, or are daunted by its sublime subject-matter (God, creation, and their relation) and lofty claims. Others regard theology as an arcane, academic exercise – too intellectual, too preoccupied with angels and pinheads, too fixated on doctrines of the past to be of any contemporary value or practical relevance.

Through the course of this text, we hope both to inform the uninitiated and to win over those who may hold theology in contempt, as we invite you on a common journey of “faith seeking understanding” – to invoke a classic definition of theology. As a way of easing into our studies, we offer two initial and informal images of theology.

First, theology can be thought of as an intellectual and practical *wrestling with God*. We have in mind here that famous wrestling match between Jacob and the mysterious angel or man, a figure who turns out to be God in person and who changes Jacob's name to *Israel* – a dramatic and signature moment in the life of God's people (Gen. 32:22–32). Throughout a long, dark night of struggle Jacob persists in his quest of the divine identity and blessing. At daybreak he realizes that he has caught a glimpse of God (face to face) and is humbled and changed in the process, as indicated by his wrenched hip and new name. The name “Israel” indicates “one who wrestles with God and with humanity and who overcomes” (v. 28). In Jacob's case, this was an important moment toward the fulfillment of the covenant promise to Abraham that through his legacy all nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3; also see 35:9–11). Those who aspire to be the people of God (Israel) are called to represent God to others and others to God as bearers and mediators of God's reconciling grace in a fractured world. The name Israel captures the very mission of God's people – struggling with God and humanity for the sake of the world's blessing. Theology is an important part of this mission – it is an intellectual wrestling with God

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and humanity (including ourselves, others, and creation at large) for the practical sake of their right relation. Christian theology aspires to be in the service of representing the triune God in the world by bearing the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is himself the true and renewed Israel (see Matt. 1–7). Theology struggles with God and humanity within the various dimensions of creation as a whole for the sake of Christ’s reconciling, liberating, and ennobling gospel. This signature image of theology will recur as an important motif in the theological explorations that follow.

A second informal image of theology: When the upstart and controversial rabbi Jesus of Nazareth was pressed by learned scribes to identify the greatest commandment, what he considered the heart and hub of God’s law or *torah*, he gave this answer: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30–1). While many persons may excel in loving God with heart or soul or strength, fewer seem to be as interested in loving God also with the mind. (Indeed, many verge on anti-intellectualism when it comes to religious or Christian faith.) Theology can be of help here, since it is first a reflective, cognitive discipline. In fact, theology can be thought of as the “intellectual love of God,” as a learning to love God with our minds. But just as the mind in Jesus’ commandment cannot be divorced from heart and soul and strength, since love of God is a whole-personed act, theology is in the service of these other dimensions as well. Theology informs, clarifies, and helps us to consciously integrate our appropriate response to God.

Jesus’ *torah*-in-a-nutshell also reminds us that love of God cannot be divorced from love of neighbor, for the latter is the proof of the former, as the apostle Paul indicates when he states: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14; cf. Rom. 13:8–10). Theology, therefore, is in intellectual service to the practical relations of God and neighbor, which properly speaking also includes the whole neighborhood – the breadth of God’s good but frustrated creation.

As a persistent wrestling with God and the intellectual habit that serves love of God and neighbor, theology tackles the question of the meaning of life. We think that the answer to this perennial and ultimate question is actually quite simple to state, but most arduous to accomplish. The meaning of life? Here’s one simple way of putting it: *learning to love*. From our basic Christian convictions, we believe that such a meaning can only be grounded in the triune God, who *is* Love (1 John 4:8), and God’s love for us;

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but this is a love that is meant to spill over into all creation. Theology wrestles intellectually in practical service of this love that we hold supremely expressed, embodied, and available in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Given these initial informal perspectives on theology, we hope that you will join us in our ongoing journey of faith, a faith that by its very nature seeks an informed understanding in a theological quest to learn to love.

A few words about the text itself. This is an introduction to Christian *systematic theology*. As such, Part I introduces readers to the basic project of Christian theology – what it is and how it works – and attempts to sketch the critical context in which we must forge, refine, and articulate our theology today.

Part II is a survey of the key themes of Christian theology – Christianity’s central teachings or doctrines. Under each of these topics (e.g., God, humanity, Christ) we generally sketch out the *biblical basis* for the teaching and review the *historical development* or highlights of the doctrine before we offer a *systematic consideration* of that theme. In this concluding systematic and constructive exploration we note the various ways that different Christian traditions or thinkers have understood the doctrine in question – how they have configured it, what they have emphasized, how they have nuanced their interpretation – many times by mapping out different models of this particular doctrine. While we attempt to do this fairly and squarely, we do not normally remain neutral in our assessment, but will typically take a position on such options, recommending which one we deem “best” – that is, most theologically responsible given our criteria of biblical and confessional *orthodoxy*, broad *coherence*, and practical *relevance*.

Part III is a historical survey of Christian theology through its five significant theological epochs. As such, it can be read profitably and independently before, during, or after Parts I and II. Depending on particular needs and goals, different readers and teachers may wish to utilize this section in varied ways. The historical overlap and occasional repetition between Part III and the historical review of each doctrinal locus is intended to reinforce or “mother” learning. A concluding glossary provides a ready reference for key theological terms.

Finally, we must call attention to the fact that we are not only offering here an introduction to Christian theology as an established, objective discipline and tradition, but also proposing a contemporary statement of Christian theology. While serving as an introduction *to* systematic theology, this book carries out that task by *being* a systematic theology. This is the point of our advocating certain positions on doctrinal subjects. This is also why we first attempt to contextualize the theological project in our contemporary or

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“postmodern” world (Chapter 2). Given the issues and pressing problems of our times, we are attempting to rally the rich resources of Christian theology within the parameters of historic orthodoxy in a way that is internally coherent and practically relevant to our trying times. That the reader may well not agree with us on some doctrinal points should only serve as stimulus to further theological thinking and discussion. Indeed, such conversation is a key and critical task of the ongoing nature of Christian theology, of our mutual wrestling with God and the world in the quest for an orthodox, coherent, and relevant faith.

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## GENERAL ABBREVIATIONS

BCE	Before the Common Era (equivalent to BC = “Before Christ”)
CE	Common Era (equivalent to AD = “In the Year of the Lord”)
Gk.	Greek language
Hebr.	Hebrew language
KJV	King James Version, Authorized Version of the Bible
Lat.	Latin language
NASB	New American Standard Version of the Bible
NIV	New International Version of the Bible
NT	New Testament, Christian scriptures
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
OT	Old Testament, Hebrew scriptures
RSV	Revised Standard Version of the Bible
WWI	World War One
WWII	World War Two

## BIBLICAL BOOKS USED IN THE TEXT

1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
1 John	1 John
1 Kings	1 Kings
1 Pet.	1 Peter
1 Sam.	1 Samuel
1 Tim.	1 Timothy
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
2 Kings	2 Kings
2 Pet.	2 Peter
2 Sam.	2 Samuel
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
2 Tim.	2 Timothy

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*List of abbreviations*

Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Amos	Amos
Col.	Colossians
Dan.	Daniel
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Eph.	Ephesians
Exod.	Exodus
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Gal.	Galatians
Gen.	Genesis
Hab.	Habakkuk
Heb.	Hebrews
Hos.	Hosea
Isa.	Isaiah
Jas.	James
Jer.	Jeremiah
Joel	Joel
John	John
Josh.	Joshua
Jon.	Jonah
Lev.	Leviticus
Luke	Luke
Mal.	Malachi
Mark	Mark
Matt.	Matthew
Mic.	Micah
Neh.	Nehemiah
Num.	Numbers
Phil.	Philippians
Prov.	Proverbs
Ps., Pss.	Psalms, Psalms
Rev.	Revelation, the Apocalypse of John
Rom.	Romans
Titus	Titus
Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon
Zech.	Zechariah