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 – exploring its basic concepts, confessional content, and history – emphasizes the relevance of the key convictions of Christian faith to the challenges of today’s world.

Part I introduces the project of Christian theology and sketches the critical context that confronts Christian thought and practice today. Part II 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. Part III provides an overview of Christian theology from the early church to the present.

Thoroughly revised and updated, the second edition of An Introduction to Christian Theology includes a range of new visual and pedagogical features, including images, diagrams, tables, and more than eighty text boxes, which call attention to special emphases, observations, and applications to help deepen student engagement with the themes and history of Christian theology.

RICHARD J. PLANTINGA is Professor of Religion at Calvin University. He is editor of Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings and co-editor of Christianity and Religious Plurality: Historical and Global Perspectives.

THOMAS R. THOMPSON is Professor of Religion at Calvin University. He is editor of The One in the Many: Christian Identity in a Multicultural World.

MATTHEW D. LUNDBERG is Director of the de Vries Institute for Global Faculty Development and Professor of Religion at Calvin University. He is the co-editor of Thinking Theologically about Mass Incarceration and author of Christian Martyrdom and Christian Violence.
Praise for the First Edition

“The pedagogical success of this work is total, and this book can be read with profit as much by students, even beginners, as by teachers. Rarely will a book have deserved more than this one the name of manual, in the sense that, precisely, it is to be put in all hands” (p. 225).

Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses 91, no. 2 (2011) (translated from the original French)

“The whole scope of Christian doctrine is introduced both historically and materially in a way that is readable and generally reliable. … The authors attempt to present Christian theology in a voice that will be fresh, accessible, and attractive to students; the result is a text that is at once engaging and clearly written” (p. 350).

Theology Today 68, no. 3 (2011)

“While providing a contemporary and relevant understanding of Christian thought, the authors remain biblically and confessionally orthodox. … An excellent college-level text for introducing Christian theology” (p. 703).

Choice (Dec 2010)

“The authors make clear that the volume is written from a consciously Reformed position. This is evident in the stress on the biblical basis of the key doctrinal themes, in the systematic evaluations, and in the bibliographical entries. But the resulting narrative is much more attractive and generally accessible than might be found in much traditional Reformed dogmatics. The general reader is never forgotten, the central issues of theology are expertly explored in the widest context, and the volume makes for perhaps unexpectedly enjoyable reading. … This is an excellent and thoroughly contemporary introduction to theology which may be recommended with confidence” (pp. 409–410).


“This is an excellent textbook for undergraduate students and other readers who are interested in theology. It offers a balanced, succinct and clear treatment of all
major issues. Its particular strength lies in the endeavour to relate systematic theology to the burning issues of our day and age and its broad scope. In doing so, a good example is set for the readers.”

“Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae 39, no. 1 (2013)

“This is the best book currently on the market for introductory classroom use. It surpasses its competitors in clarity, content and methodology” (p. 230).

Biblical Studies Bulletin 41, no. 4 (2011)
AN INTRODUCTION TO
CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Second Edition

RICHARD J. PLANTINGA
Calvin University, Michigan

THOMAS R. THOMPSON
Calvin University, Michigan

MATTHEW D. LUNDBERG
Calvin University, Michigan
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.
Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Preface

Acknowledgments

Abbreviations

PART I INTRODUCTION TO THEOLOGY

1 What Is Theology? 3

2 The Critical Context of Theology Today 28

PART II KEY THEMES OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

3 Revelation and Knowledge of God 55

4 A Tale of Two Theisms 86

5 The Triune God 122

6 The World as Creation 164

7 Humanity in the Image of God and the Disfigurement of Sin 201

8 The Problem of Evil and the Question of Theodicy 228

9 The Identity and Person of Jesus Christ 255

10 The Reconciling Work of Jesus Christ 288

11 The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit 316

12 Dimensions of Salvation 348

13 The Church and Its Mission 371
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Christianity in a Global Context</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Hope and the Future</td>
<td>430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Theology in the Patristic Era (c. 100–500)</td>
<td>465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Theology in the Middle Ages (c. 500–1400)</td>
<td>499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Theology in the Reformation Period (c. 1400–1700)</td>
<td>528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Theology in Modernity (c. 1700–1960)</td>
<td>558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Theology in the Contemporary Period (c. 1960–Present)</td>
<td>597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Glossary</strong></td>
<td>632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>656</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures

1 A church building in Germany.  
2 A university lecture hall.  
3 Times Square, New York City.  
4 The two-way street of contextualization.  
5 Christ Pantocrator.  
6 Guido Rocha, Tortured Christ.  
7 Willy Stöwer, Titanic Sinking.  
8 Demographic shifts in the Christian church.  
9 Karl Barth’s threefold form of the word of God.  
10 Matthias Grünewald, Isenheim altarpiece, crucifixion.  
11 Spectrum of biblical inspiration and authorship.  
12 Spectrum of positions on general and special revelation.  
13 A Nazi belt-buckle.  
14 Divine attributes via positiva and via negativa.  
16 Michelangelo Buonarroti, The Creation of Adam, Sistine Chapel.  
17 Andrei Rublev, The Holy Trinity.  
18 Dante’s picture of the cosmos.  
19 Spectrum of views on creation and evolution.  
20 Rodin, Le Penseur.  
21 Mushroom cloud from the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki.  
22 Raphael, The School of Athens.  
23 The key affirmations of the Council of Chalcedon.  
24 Andrei Rublev, Christ of Zvenigorod.  
25 Biblical metaphors and atonement theories.  
26 Theophanes the Cretan, Pentecost.  
27 An oil-covered penguin after an environmental disaster.  
28 H. Richard Niebuhr on Christ and culture.  
29 Vincent van Gogh, The Church at Auvers.  
30 Peter Paul Rubens, The Adoration of the Magi.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Robert Lentz, <em>St. Oscar Romero of El Salvador</em></td>
<td>420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Edward Hicks, <em>The Peaceable Kingdom</em></td>
<td>458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Constantinian Cross</td>
<td>482</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Sandro Botticelli, <em>Saint Augustine in His Study</em></td>
<td>494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>The unity of truth in the Thomistic synthesis.</td>
<td>519</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Lucas Cranach, portrait of Martin Luther</td>
<td>532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Masaccio, <em>The Holy Trinity</em></td>
<td>560</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables

1 The sources and branches of theology  page 17
2 The criteria of systematic theology  23
3 Estimated global demographics of religious adherence  48
4 Kinds of revelation  58
5 The “Five Ways” of Thomas Aquinas  61
6 Key biblical names for God  92
7 Comparing theisms  113
8 Spirit, Wisdom, and Word in the OT  126
9 Trinitarian terminology  135
10 Key patristic contributors to trinitarian theology  141
11 Basic metaphysical options  188
12 Major types of theistic argument  192
13 The “procession” of the Holy Spirit in versions of the Nicene Creed  329
14 Four “pillars” of ecumenical eschatology  434
15 Other notable musical compositions about death and the hope of resurrection  450
16 Summary of early heresies  473
17 Canonical lists in the early church.  485
18 The basic affirmations of the first four ecumenical councils  490
19 Timeline of theology in the patristic era  496
20 The basic affirmations of the last three ecumenical councils  502
21 Typology of views of universals  524
22 Timeline of theology in the Middle Ages  526
23 The three uses of the law according to the Formula of Concord  539
24 The presence of Christ in the Eucharist  546
25 Timeline of theology in the Reformation period  555
26 Comparison of the methods of rationalism and empiricism  564
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>The perfections of God, according to Karl Barth</td>
<td>586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Timeline of theology in modernity</td>
<td>595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Comparison of second articles of the Nicene Creed and the Masaii/African Creed</td>
<td>628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Timeline of theology in the contemporary period</td>
<td>629</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

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 obscure matters, too fixated on doctrines of the ancient 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 (see p. 8). As a way of easing into our studies, we offer two initial 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 in Genesis 32:22–32 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.

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). The name Israel thus captures the very mission of God’s people – struggling with God and with humanity for the sake of the world’s blessing. 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. Theology is an important part of this mission – it is an intellectual wrestling with God, humanity, and
creation at large toward the practical goal of their harmonious relations. 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 of this book.

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 instruction (torah) in the Hebrew scriptures, 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 12:30–31). 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, anti-intellectualism is a constant temptation when it comes to religious or Christian faith.) Theology can be of help here, since it is firstly 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’s 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’s 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; 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 quite arduous to accomplish. What is the meaning of life? 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. 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 is supremely expressed, embodied, and available in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This book’s cover art, Andrei Rublev’s famous Holy Trinity image, keeps before our minds this open and inviting love of the triune God that passionately strives for the life of the world.

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.

Now 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 when approached systemically – and attempts to sketch the critical context in which we must forge, refine, and articulate our theology today.

Part II examines 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 charitably, 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 (see pp. 21–4).

Part III is a historical survey of Christian theology through five significant theological epochs. As such, it can be read profitably and independently before, alongside, or after Parts I and II. Depending on particular needs and goals, different readers and teachers may wish to use this section in varied ways. Any historical overlap between Part III and the historical review of each doctrinal theme in Part II will only reinforce learning. A concluding glossary provides a ready reference for key theological terms.

Finally, we must call attention to the fact that we are offering here not only an introduction to Christian theology as an established discipline and tradition, but are also proposing a contemporary statement of Christian
Accordingly, while serving as an introduction to systematic theology, this book carries out that task by being a systematic theology. This is why we advocate particular positions on doctrinal subjects. This is also why we first attempt to contextualize the theological project in our contemporary or "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 dialogue has always been a key and critical part of the on-going nature of Christian theology, of our mutual wrestling with God and the world in the quest for an orthodox, coherent, and relevant faith.

In this second edition of the book, we have made a variety of changes. While the structure of the text remains unchanged, we have removed some elements and added others, all with an eye to strengthening the clarity of explanation for our readers. We have also updated the research where relevant. Finally, we have added more visual features, including images, diagrams, and tables. The most significant addition is numerous sidebar boxes, which call readers’ attention to special emphases, observations, and applications that can deepen their engagement with the themes and history of Christian theology.
Acknowledgments

We are acutely aware of an “embarrassment of debts” in the making of this book. We are indebted to all of our teachers at various levels of education, and from all walks of life – from professors to pastors to the mouths of babes – for the ways they have shaped us theologically in chorus with the wisdom of the historic Christian tradition in all of its breadth and depth. We remain grateful to Kate Brett at Cambridge University Press for originally commissioning the book and offering us helpful guidance along the way, as well as to Aline Guillermert and Jo Bramwell for their assistance and careful editorial eyes. For the second edition of this book, we are grateful to our editor Beatrice Rehl for her thoughtful suggestions and patient encouragement even amid the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic; and we are thankful for Beth Morel’s meticulous editorial work. Our colleagues in the Religion Department at Calvin University have also been supportive of this project, as have our students over the years as they have read and wrestled with the first edition of the book.

We received generous institutional support for our work on the initial edition of this book. In particular, we want to express our gratitude to the Calvin University Board of Trustees for the Calvin Research Fellowships we were granted. We are also grateful for the research grants we received from the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship and the Calvin Alumni Association Board, as well as for an Interim Research Leave provided by the Office of the Provost.

Throughout the actual writing of the book, we were assisted by a variety of people. Miriam Diephouse McMillan served most capably as a research assistant for one summer of our work. Jan Curry and Jim Bratt helped to connect us to institutional sources of funding available at the university.

We are also grateful to Peter Williams of the World Council of Churches for helping us to obtain the photographic image of Guido Rocha’s *Tortured Christ*; and to Stan Kain of St. Isaac of Syria Skete for providing images of several Orthodox icons.
xx

Acknowledgments

For a variety of other forms of help and encouragement, we would like to thank Cheryl Brandsen, Lauren Ciesa, Glenn Fetzer, Simona Goi, Craig Hanson, Dan Harlow, Laurie Lemmen, Henry Lutrichuizen, Ken Pomykala, John Stevenson, and Leanne Van Dyk.


The extract from the script of the film Nuns on the Run, directed by Jonathan Lynn, is used by permission of HandMade Films plc.

Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
# Abbreviations

## General Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BCE</td>
<td>Before the Common Era (equivalent to BC = “Before Christ”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE</td>
<td>Common Era (equivalent to AD = “In the Year of the Lord”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gk.</td>
<td>Greek language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hebr.</td>
<td>Hebrew language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPCC</td>
<td>Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version, Authorized Version of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lat.</td>
<td>Latin language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Version of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>New Testament, Christian scriptures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OT</td>
<td>Old Testament, Hebrew scriptures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WWI</td>
<td>World War One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WWII</td>
<td>World War Two</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Biblical Books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Cor.</td>
<td>1 Corinthians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 John</td>
<td>1 John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Kings</td>
<td>1 Kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Pet.</td>
<td>1 Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Sam.</td>
<td>1 Samuel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Thess.</td>
<td>1 Thessalonians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Tim.</td>
<td>1 Timothy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Cor.</td>
<td>2 Corinthians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Kings</td>
<td>2 Kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Pet.</td>
<td>2 Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Sam.</td>
<td>2 Samuel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Abbreviations

2 Thess.  2 Thessalonians
2 Tim.  2 Timothy
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  Gospel of John
Josh.  Joshua
Jon.  Jonah
Lev.  Leviticus
Mal.  Malachi
Mark  Gospel of Mark
Matt.  Gospel of Matthew
Mic.  Micah
Neh.  Nehemiah
Num.  Numbers
Phils.  Philippians
Prov.  Proverbs
Ps., Pss.  Psalm, Psalms
Rev.  Revelation, the Apocalypse of John
Rom.  Romans
Titus  Titus
Wis.  Wisdom of Solomon
Zech.  Zechariah