

Christian Theology

An Introduction

SECOND EDITION

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Preface

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth offers us a vision of Christian theology at its finest. It is, he suggests, like Tuscan or Umbrian landscapes, which hold us in awe on account of the breathtaking views which they offer. Even the most distant perspectives seem so clear. Barth is but one of many theologians to have stressed the sheer excitement that the study of Christian theology can bring. This book is written in the conviction that theology is one of the most fascinating subjects anyone can hope to study. As Christianity enters into a new phase of expansion, especially in the Pacific Rim, the study of Christian theology will continue to have a key role to play in modern intellectual culture. It also remains of seminal importance to any concerned to understand the central issues of the European Reformation, as well as many other periods in human history.

Yet one major American religious publication noted recently that "most clergy, never mind lay people, have given up reading theology." As a professional teacher of theology at Oxford University, I am painfully aware that this sense of enthusiasm and excitement is rare among university and seminary students of theology. They are more often baffled and bewildered by the frequently confusing vocabulary of Christian theology, the apparent unintelligibility of much recent writing in the field, and its seeming irrelevance to the practical issues of Christian living and ministry. As someone who believes that Christian theology is amongst the most rewarding, fulfilling, and genuinely *exciting* subjects anyone can ever hope to study, I have often wondered if anything could be done about this situation. This book, which arises out of a decade of teaching theology to undergraduates and seminarians at Oxford University, is a response to that concern.

There is an obvious need for an enjoyable introduction to Christian theology. Too many existing introductions make what experience shows

to be hopelessly optimistic assumptions about how much their readers already know. In part, this reflects a major religious shift within western culture. Many students now wishing to study Christian theology are recent converts. Unlike their predecessors in past generations, they possess little inherited understanding of the nature of Christianity, its technical vocabulary, or the structure of its thought. Everything has to be introduced and explained. The present volume therefore assumes that its readers know nothing about Christian theology. Everything is set out as simply and clearly as possible.

For some, this will mean that the resulting work lacks sophistication and originality. Those qualities are valuable in other contexts. They are not appropriate to a book of this kind. Simplicity of expression and clarity of exposition are the virtues which have been pursued in writing this work. Equally, whilst originality has its merits, in a work of this kind it is potentially a liability. Originality implies novelty and development; in writing this book, I have deliberately avoided presenting my own ideas as if these were of any interest or importance. In short, educational considerations have been given priority over everything else.

Inevitably, this approach means that the discussion of many major questions of Christian theology - especially questions of method - is somewhat limited. If my own notes are anything to go by, it would take a volume nearly five times the size of this one to do anything even approaching justice to the complexities of many of the issues raised. What is being offered, however, is an introduction, a sketch map, in order that the reader can pursue the questions in greater detail, having at least gained some understanding of what is at stake. My own experience strongly suggests that students stand a far better chance of understanding and appreciating seminal issues if someone is prepared to take the trouble to explain the background to the discussion, the questions at stake, and the terminology being used. I have assumed that the reader knows no language other than English, and have explained and provided a translation of every Latin, Greek, or German word or phrase that has become an accepted part of the theologian's vocabulary.

This book is not prescriptive. It does not seek to tell its readers what to believe, but rather aims to explain to them what has been believed, and to equip them to make up their minds for themselves, by describing the options available to them and their historical origins, and enabling them to understand their strengths and weaknesses.

Sadly, there is not space to discuss every theological development, movement, or writer which one might hope to include in a work of this sort. Time and time again, pressure on space has forced me to omit matters which many readers will feel ought to have been included, or to give a less full account of some questions than I would have liked. I can only apologize for these shortcomings, of which I am only too painfully

aware. The selection of matters to be discussed - and the manner in which they have been discussed - is based upon first-hand recent experience of teaching, and careful surveys of student opinion, in Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia, to discover both what students think ought to be included in this volume, and what they find difficult to understand, and hence requiring extended explanation. This survey was extended for the purposes of the second edition to include a large number of those involved in the teaching of systematic theology; wherever possible, their suggestions for alterations and improvement have been incorporated into this new edition.

I owe especial thanks to the following for invaluable assistance. To my students at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Oxford University in general, to whom I taught systematic theology over the period 1983-93, who brought out the need for this textbook, and helped to shape its form. To students at Princeton Theological Seminary, McGill University, Wheaton College, Drew University, Westminster Theological Seminary, Regent College (Vancouver), and Ridley College (Melbourne), on whom I tried out vast tracts of this volume in my efforts to ensure its intelligibility and applicability across the English-language world. To Professors David F. Ford (Cambridge), Gabriel Fakure (Andover Newton) and Keith Ward (Oxford), who cast a critical eye over early drafts of the first edition, and ensured a balanced coverage of material. To Jennifer Day, Elspeth McCullagh, and especially Julia Pryor, for reading through the material, and preventing me from lapsing into scholarly obscurantism. To the 90 teachers of systematic theology, in Europe and North America, who provided detailed responses to evaluation sheets, and thus prepared the way for the revision of this work. I am grateful to Mr Drew Ladner, formerly on the staff of the White House, Washington, for invaluable help in preparing the section dealing with theological resources on the Internet.

Finally, I owe an immeasurable debt to Blackwell Publishers, especially Stephan Chambers and Alison Mudditt, for inviting me to write this work, and encouraging me throughout the long process of writing, testing and rewriting. It has taken far longer to write and revise this book than I care to think; I only hope that it will encourage a new generation of students to discover the fascination of Christian theology, and communicate that to others.

of a relationship. "The Thou confronts me. But I enter into a direct relationship to it" (Martin Buber). The presence of God is thus localized or focused on the notion of an encounter with something undefinable, which is recognized as being a "Thou." The strengths and weaknesses of this approach are similar to those of the existentialist model just discussed.

The Holy Spirit

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit really deserves a full chapter in its own right. The Holy Spirit has long been the Cinderella of the Trinity. The other two sisters may have gone to the theological ball; the Holy Spirit got left behind every time. But not now. The rise of the charismatic movement (see pp. 124-6) within virtually every mainstream church has ensured that the Holy Spirit figures prominently on the theological agenda. A new experience of the reality and power of the Spirit has had a major impact upon the theological discussion of the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Models of the Holy Spirit

"God is spirit" (John 4: 24). But what does this tell us about God? The English language uses at least three words - "wind," "breath," and "spirit" - to translate a single Hebrew term, *ruach*. This important Hebrew word has a depth of meaning which it is virtually impossible to reproduce in English. *Ruach*, traditionally translated simply as "spirit," is associated with a range of meanings, each of which casts some light on the complex associations of the Christian notion of the Holy Spirit.

1 *Spirit as wind* The Old Testament writers are careful not to identify God with the wind, and thus reduce God to the level of a natural force. Nevertheless, a parallel is drawn between the power of the wind, and that of God. To speak of God as spirit is to call to mind the surging energy of the "Lord of Hosts," and remind Israel of the power and dynamism of the God who had called Israel out of Egypt. This image of the spirit as redemptive power is perhaps stated in its most significant form in the account of the exodus from Egypt, in which a powerful wind divides the Red Sea (Exodus 14: 21). Here, the idea of *ruach* conveys both the power and the redemptive purpose of God.

The image of the wind also allowed the pluriformity of human experience of God to be accounted for, and visualized in a genuinely helpful manner. The Old Testament writers were conscious of experiencing the presence and activity of God in two quite distinct manners. Sometimes God was experienced as a judge, one who condemned Israel for its waywardness; yet at other times, God is experienced as one who refreshes the chosen people, like water in a dry land. The image of the wind conveyed both these ideas in a powerful manner.

It must be remembered that Israel bordered the Mediterranean Sea on the west, and the great deserts on the east. When the wind blew from the east, it was experienced as a mist of fine sand which scorched vegetation and parched the land. Travellers' accounts of these winds speak of their remarkable force and power. Even the light of the sun is obliterated by the sand-storm thrown up by the wind. This wind was seen by the biblical writers as a model for the way in which God demonstrated the finitude and transitoriness of the creation. "The grass withers and the flowers fall, when the breath of the Lord blows on them" (Isaiah 40: 7). Just as the scorching east wind, like the Arabian sirocco, destroyed plants and grass, so God was understood to destroy human pride (see Psalm 103: 15-18; Jeremiah 4: 11). Just as a plant springs up, fresh and green, only to be withered before the blast of the hot desert wind, so human empires rise only to fall before the face of God.

At the time when the prophet Isaiah was writing, Israel was held captive in Babylon. To many, it seemed that the great Babylonian empire was a permanent historical feature, which nothing could change. Yet the transitoriness of human achievements when the "breath of the Lord" blows upon them is asserted by the prophet, as he proclaims the pending destruction of that empire. God alone is permanent, and all else is in a state of flux and change. "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands for ever" (Isaiah 40: 8).

The western winds, however, were totally different. In the winter, the west and south-west winds brought rain to the dry land as they blew in from the sea. In the summer, the western winds did not bring rain, but coolness. The intensity of the desert heat was mitigated through these gentle cooling breezes. And just as this wind brought refreshment, by moistening the dry ground in winter and cooling the heat of the day in summer, so God was understood to refresh human spiritual needs. In a series of powerful images, God is compared by the Old Testament writers to the rain brought by the western wind (Hosea 6: 3), refreshing the land.

2 *Spirit as breath* The idea of spirit is associated with life. When God created Adam, God breathed into him the breath of life, as a result of which he became a living being (Genesis 2: 7). The basic difference

The Doctrine of God

between a living and a dead human being is that the former breathes, and the latter does not. This led to the idea that life was dependent upon breath. God is the one who breathes the breath of life into empty shells, and brings them to life. God brought Adam to life by breathing into him. The famous vision of the valley of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37: 1-14) also illustrates this point: Can these dry bones live? The bones only come to life when breath enters into them (Ezekiel 37: 9-10). The model of God as spirit thus conveys the fundamental insight that God is the one who gives life, even the one who is able to bring the dead back to life.

It is thus important to note that *ruach* is often linked with God's work of creation (e.g. Genesis 1: 2; Job 26: 12-13; 33: 4; Psalm 104: 27-31), even if the precise role of the Spirit is left unspecified. There is clearly an association between "Spirit" and the giving of life through creation.

3 *Spirit as charism* The technical term "charism" refers to the "filling of an individual with the spirit of God," by which the person in question is enabled to perform tasks which would otherwise be impossible. The gift of wisdom is often portrayed as a consequence of the endowment of the Spirit (Genesis 41: 38-9; Exodus 28: 3; 35: 31; Deuteronomy 34: 9). At times, the Old Testament attributes gifts of leadership or military prowess to the influence of the Spirit (Judges 14: 6,19; 15:14,15). However, the most pervasive aspect of this feature of the Spirit relates to the question of prophecy.

The Old Testament does not offer much in the way of clarification concerning the manner in which the prophets were inspired, guided, or motivated by the Holy Spirit. In the pre-exilic era, prophecy is often associated with ecstatic experiences of God, linked with wild behavior (1 Samuel 10: 6; 19: 24). Nevertheless, the activity of prophecy gradually became associated with the *message* rather than the *behavior* of the prophet. The prophet's credentials rest upon an endowment with the Spirit (Isaiah 61: 1; Ezekiel 2: 1-2; Micah 3: 8; Zechariah 7: 12), which authenticates the prophet's message - a message which is usually described as "the word (*dabhar*) of the Lord."

The Debate over the Divinity of the Holy Spirit

The early church found itself puzzled by the Spirit, and unable to make much in the way of theological sense of this area of doctrine. This is not to say that the Holy Spirit did not place a prominent role in the early church. The second-century writer Montanus, who is known to have been active during the period 135-75, is an example of a theologian operating in the early period of the church to focus on the activity of the

Spirit. The leading ideas of Montanus are known chiefly through the writings of his critics, with the result that our understanding of Montanism may be somewhat distorted. However, it is clear that Montanus placed considerable emphasis on the activity of the Holy Spirit in the present, and particularly on the role of the Spirit in relation to dreams, visions and prophetic revelations. It is even possible that Montanus may have identified himself with the Holy Spirit, seeing himself as the source of a divine revelation which was not otherwise available. However, the evidence for this assertion is ambiguous.

The relative absence of extensive discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in the first three centuries reflects the fact that theological debate centered elsewhere. The Greek patristic writers had, in their view, more important things to do than worry about the Spirit, when vital political and Christological debates were raging all around them. This point was made by the fourth-century writer Amphilochius of Iconium, who pointed out that the Arian controversy had first to be resolved before any serious discussion over the status of the Holy Spirit could get under way. The theological development of the early church was generally a response to public debates; once a serious debate got under way, doctrinal clarification was the inevitable outcome.

The debate in question initially centered upon a group of writers known as the *pneumatomachoi* or "opponents of the spirit," led by Eustathius of Sebaste. These writers argued that neither the person nor the works of the Spirit were to be regarded as having the status or nature of a divine person. In response to this, writers such as Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea made an appeal to the formula which had by then become universally accepted for baptism. Since the time of the New Testament (see Matthew 28: 18-20), Christians were baptized in the name of "the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Athanasius argued that this had momentous implications for an understanding of the status of the person of the Holy Spirit. In his *Letter to Serapion*, Athanasius declared that the baptismal formula clearly pointed to the Spirit sharing the same divinity as the Father and the Son. This argument eventually prevailed.

However, patristic writers were hesitant to speak openly of the Spirit as "God," in that this practice was not sanctioned by Scripture - a point discussed at some length by Basil of Caesarea in his treatise on the Holy Spirit (374-5). Even as late as 380, Gregory of Nazianzus conceded that many Orthodox Christian theologians were uncertain as to whether to treat the Holy Spirit "as an activity, as a creator, or as God." This caution can be seen in the final statement of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit formulated by a Council meeting at Constantinople in 381. The Spirit was here described, not as God, but as "the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, and is worshipped and glorified with the Father and Son." The language is unequivocal; the Spirit is to be treated as having the same dignity and rank as the Father and Son, even

term "God" is not to be used explicitly. The precise relation of the Spirit to Father and Son would subsequently become an item of debate in its own right, as the *filioque* controversy indicates (see pp. 313-16).

The following considerations seem to have been of decisive importance in establishing the divinity of the Holy Spirit during the later fourth century. First, as Gregory of Nazianzus stressed, Scripture applied all the titles of God to the Spirit, with the exception of "unbegotten." Gregory drew particular attention to the use of the word "holy" to refer to the Spirit, arguing that this holiness did not result from any external source, but was the direct consequence of the nature of the Spirit. The Spirit was to be considered as the one who sanctifies, rather than the one who requires to be sanctified.

Second, the functions which are specific to the Holy Spirit establish the divinity of the Spirit. Didymus the Blind (d. 398) was one of many writers to point out that the Spirit was responsible for the creating, renewing and sanctification of God's creatures. Yet how could one creature renew or sanctify another creature? Only if the Spirit was divine could sense be made of these functions. If the Holy Spirit performed functions which were specific to God, it must follow that the Holy Spirit shares in the divine nature. This point is stated with particular clarity by Basil of Caesarea:

All who are in need of sanctification turn to the Spirit; all those seek him who live by virtue, for his breath refreshes them and comes to their aid in the pursuit of their natural and proper end. Capable of perfecting others, the Spirit himself lacks nothing. He is not a being who needs to restore his strength, but himself supplies life . . . Souls in which the Spirit dwells, illuminated by the Spirit, themselves become spiritual and send forth their grace to others. From here comes foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of what is hidden, the sharing of the gifts of grace, heavenly citizenship, a place in the chorus of angels, joy without end, abiding in God, being made like God and - the greatest of them all - being made God.

For Basil, the Spirit makes creatures to be like God and to be God - and only one who is divine can bring this about.

Third, the reference to the Spirit in the baptismal formula of the church was interpreted as supporting the divinity of the Spirit. Baptism took place in the name of the "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28: 17-20). Athanasius and others argued that this formula established the closest of connections between the three members of the Trinity, making it impossible to suggest that the Father and Son shared in the substance of the Godhead, while the Spirit was nothing other than a creature. In a similar way, Basil of Caesarea argued that the baptismal formula clearly implied the inseparability of Father, Son and Spirit. This verbal

association, according to Basil, clearly had considerable theological implications.

The admission of the full divinity of the Spirit thus took place at a relatively late stage in the development of patristic theology. In terms of the logical advance of doctrines, the following historical sequence can be discerned. Stage 1: the recognition of the full divinity of Jesus Christ. Stage 2: the recognition of the full divinity of the Spirit. Stage 3: the definitive formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, embedding and clarifying these central insights, and determining their mutual relationship.

This sequential development is acknowledged by Gregory of Nazianzus, who pointed to a gradual progress in clarification and understanding of the mystery of God's revelation in the course of time. It was, he argued, impossible to deal with the question of the divinity of the Spirit until the issue of the divinity of Christ had been settled.

The Old Testament preached the Father openly and the Son more obscurely. The New Testament revealed the Son, and hinted at the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Now the Spirit dwells in us, and is revealed more clearly to us. It was not proper to preach the Son openly, while the divinity of the Father had not yet been admitted. Nor was it proper to accept the Holy Spirit before [the divinity of] the Son had been acknowledged ... Instead, by gradual advances and ... partial ascents, we should move forward and increase in clarity, so that the light of the Trinity should shine.

Augustine: The Spirit as Bond of Love

One of the most significant contributions to the development of the theology of the Holy Spirit (an area of theology occasionally referred to as *pneumatology*) is due to Augustine. Augustine had become a Christian partly through the influence of Marius Victorinus, who had himself converted to Christianity from a pagan background. Victorinus had a distinct approach to the role of the Spirit, as can be seen from a hymn which he had penned:

Help us, Holy Spirit, the bond (*copula*) of Father and Son,
When you rest, you are the Father; when you proceed, the Son;
In binding all in one, you are the Holy Spirit.

Although the theology of these lines seems modalist (to anticipate a Trinitarian heresy we shall explore presently: see p. 301), an idea of considerable importance is nevertheless expressed: that the Spirit is the "bond of Father and Son (*patris et filii copula*)."

It is this idea which Augustine will take up and develop with considerable skill in his treatise *On the Trinity*. Augustine insists upon the distinctiveness of the Spirit; nevertheless, despite this distinctive identity, the Spirit is what is common to the Father and Son. The Father is only the Father of the Son, and the Son only the Son of the Father; the Spirit, however, is the Spirit of both Father and Son, binding them together in a bond of love. In his discussion of this point, Augustine concedes that Scripture does not explicitly state that the Holy Spirit is love; however, in that God is love, and the Spirit is God, it seems to follow naturally that the Holy Spirit is love.

Scripture teaches us that he is the Spirit neither of the Father alone nor of the Son alone, but of both; and this suggests to us the mutual love by which the Father and the Son love one another. . . . Yet Scripture has not said: "the Holy Spirit is love." If it had, much of our inquiry would have been rendered unnecessary. Scripture does indeed say: "God is love" (1 John 4: 8, 16); and so leaves us to ask whether it is God the Father, or God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit, or God the Trinity itself, who is love.

Augustine's defense of the identification of the Holy Spirit and love is based on a complex argument, as follows. We can find authority for calling the Holy Spirit "love," by a careful examination of the apostle John's language (1 John 4: 7, 19). After saying "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God," he goes on to add, "and everyone who loves is born of God; he who does not love has not known God, for God is love." This makes it plain that the love which he calls "God" is the same love which he has said to be "of God." Love, then, is God of (or from) God (*Deus ergo ex deo est dilectio*). But since the Son is begotten from God the Father and the Spirit proceeds from God the Father, we must ask to which of them we should apply this saying that God is love. Only the Father is God without being "of God"; so that the love which is God and "of God" must be either the Son or the Holy Spirit. Now in what follows the writer refers to the love of God - not that by which we love him, but that by which "he loved us, and sent his Son as expiator for our sins" (1 John 4: 10); and on this he bases his exhortation to us to love one another, that so God may dwell in us, since God (as he has said) is love. And there follows at once, designed to express the matter more plainly, the saying: "hereby we know that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." Thus it is the Holy Spirit, of whom he has given us, who makes us dwell in God, and God in us. But that is the effect of love. The Holy Spirit himself therefore is the God who is love.

This idea of the Spirit as "bond of love" has important implications for Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity, and his doctrine of the church. We

shall explore the former in the following chapter; the latter merits discussion at this earlier stage.

Augustine regards the Spirit as the bond of unity between Father and Son on the one hand, and between God and believers on the other. The Spirit is a gift, given by God, which unites believers both to God and to other believers. The Holy Spirit forges bonds of unity between believers, upon which the unity of the church ultimately depends. The church is the "temple of the Holy Spirit," within which the Holy Spirit dwells. The same Spirit which binds together the Father and Son in the unity of the godhead also binds together believers in the unity of the church.

The Functions of the Spirit

What does the Holy Spirit do? The Christian tradition has generally understood the work of the Holy Spirit to focus on three broad areas: revelation, salvation, and the Christian life. In what follows, we shall provide a brief indication of the richness of the Christian understanding of the role of the Spirit in each of these three areas.

Revelation

There has been a widespread recognition of the pivotal role of the Spirit in relation to the making of God known to humanity. Irenaeus wrote of the "Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied, and our forebears learned of God and the righteous were led in the paths of justice." Similarly, in his 1536 commentary on the gospels, Martin Bucer argues that revelation cannot occur without the assistance of God's Spirit:

Before we believe in God and are inspired by the Holy Spirit, we are unspiritual and for that reason we are completely unable to apprehend anything relating to God. So all the wisdom and righteousness which we possess in the absence of the Holy Spirit are the darkness and shadow of death.

The task of the Holy Spirit is to lead into God's truth; without that Spirit, truth remains elusive.

The role of the Spirit in relation to the most important theological source of the Christian tradition is of particular importance. The doctrine of the "inspiration of Scripture" affirms that the Bible has a God-given authority by virtue of its origins. This doctrine, in various forms, is the common tradition of Christianity, and has its origins in the Bible itself, most notably the affirmation that "every Scripture is God-breathed (*theopneustos*)" (1 Timothy 3: 16). In Protestant theology, however, the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture serves an additional purpose -

that of insisting on the primacy of Scripture over the church. Whereas more Catholic writers point to the formation of the canon of Scripture as indicating the authority of the church over that of Scripture, Protestant writers argue that the church merely recognized an authority which was already present within Scripture itself. The Gallic Confession (1559) illustrates this point well.

We know these books to be canonical, and the sure rule of our faith, not so much by the common accord and consent of the Church, as by the testimony and inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to distinguish them from other ecclesiastical books which, however useful, can never become the basis for any articles of faith.

Yet it is not simply God's revelation which is linked with the work of the Spirit; the Spirit is also widely regarded as being involved in the human response to that revelation. Most Christian theologians have regarded faith itself as the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. John Calvin is one writer who draws attention to the pivotal role of the Spirit in revealing God's truth and applying or "sealing" this truth to humanity.

Now we shall have a right definition of faith if we say that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us, which is founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ, and is both revealed to our minds and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Salvation

We have already noted how patristic writers justified the divinity of the Spirit with reference to the functions of the Spirit. Many of those functions relate directly to the doctrine of salvation - for example, the role of the Spirit in sanctification, making humanity like God, and divinization. This point is particularly important within the eastern Christian tradition, with its traditional emphasis on deification; the western concept of salvation, which tends to be relational rather than ontological, nevertheless finds room for a role for the Spirit. Thus in Calvin's doctrine of the application of salvation, the Holy Spirit plays a major role in relation to the establishment of a living relationship between Christ and believer.

The Christian Life

For many writers, the Holy Spirit plays an especially important role in relation to the Christian life, both the individual and the corporate life. The fifth-century writer Cyril of Alexandria is one of many to stress the role of the Spirit in bringing unity within the church.

All of us who have received the one and the same Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit, are in a sense merged together with one another and with God.... Just as the power of the holy flesh of Christ united those in whom it dwells into one body, I think that, in much the same way, the one and undivided Spirit of God, who dwells in us all, leads us all into spiritual unity.

However, any properly Christian understanding of the role of the Spirit will go far beyond this, and will include reference to at least two other areas. First, the "making real" of God in personal and corporate worship and devotion. The importance of the role of the Spirit in relation to Christian prayer, spirituality and worship has been stressed by many writers, classic and modern. Second, the enabling of believers to lead a Christian life, particularly in relation to morality. In his 1536 gospels commentary, Martin Bucer draws attention to the necessity of the Spirit, if believers are to keep the law.

So those who believe are not under the law, because they have the Spirit within them, teaching them everything more perfectly than the law ever could, and motivating them much more powerfully to obey it. In other words, the Holy Spirit moves the heart, so that believers wish to live by those things which the law commands, but which the law could not achieve by itself.

Having discussed the doctrine of God in general, our attention now turns to the more complex area of the doctrine of the Trinity, which seeks to give expression to a sequence of distinctively Christian insights concerning God.

Questions for Chapter 7

- 1 "God reveals himself as Lord" (Karl Barth). What difficulties does this statement raise by its use of masculine language in relation to God?
- 2 Many Christians talk about having a "personal relationship" with God. What might they mean by this?
- 3 "God can do anything." How would you respond to this definition of divine omnipotence?
- 4 Why do so many Christians believe that God suffers? What difference does it make?

The Doctrine of Justification by Faith

At the heart of the Christian faith lies the idea that human beings, finite and frail though they be, can enter into a relationship with the living God. As we have seen, this idea is articulated in a number of metaphors or images, such as "salvation" and "redemption," initially in the writings of the New Testament (especially the Pauline letters) and subsequently in Christian theological reflection, based upon these texts. By the late Middle Ages, one image had come to be seen as especially significant: justification.

The term "justification" and the verb "to justify" came to signify "entering into a right relationship with God," or perhaps "being made righteous in the sight of God." The doctrine of justification came to be seen as dealing with the question of what an individual had to do in order to be saved. As contemporary sources indicate, this question came to be asked with increasing frequency as the sixteenth century dawned. The rise of humanism brought with it a new emphasis upon individual consciousness, and a new awareness of human individuality. In the wake of this dawn of the individual consciousness came a new interest in the doctrine of justification - the question of how human beings, *as individuals*, could enter into a relationship with God. How could a sinner hope to do this? This question lay at the heart of the theological concerns of Martin Luther, and came to dominate the early phase of the Reformation. In view of the importance of the doctrine to this period, we shall consider it in some detail, beginning with Luther's discussion of the doctrine.

Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough

In 1545, the year before he died, Luther contributed a preface to the first volume of the complete edition of his Latin writings, in which he described how he came to break with the church of his day. The preface was clearly written with the aim of introducing Luther to a readership which might not know how Luther came to hold the radical reforming views linked with his name. In this "autobiographical fragment" (as it is usually known), Luther aimed to provide those readers with background information about the development of his vocation as a reformer. After dealing with some historical preliminaries, taking his narrative up to the year 1519, he turned to describe his personal difficulties with the problem of the "righteousness of God":

I had certainly wanted to understand Paul in his letter to the Romans. But what prevented me from doing so was not so much cold feet as that one phrase in the first chapter: "the righteousness of God is revealed in it" (Romans 1:17). For I hated that phrase, "the righteousness of God," which I had been taught to understand as the righteousness by which God is righteous, and punishes unrighteous sinners. Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. I also could not believe that I had pleased him with my works. Far from loving that righteous God who punished sinners, I actually hated him . . . I was in desperation to know what Paul meant in this passage. At last, as I meditated day and night on the relation of the words "the righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written, the righteous person shall live by faith," I began to understand that "righteousness of God" as that by which the righteous person lives by the gift of God (faith); and this sentence, "the righteousness of God is revealed," to refer to a passive righteousness, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "the righteous person lives by faith." This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself. From that moment, I saw the whole face of Scripture in a new light. . . . And now, where I had once hated the phrase, "the righteousness of God," I began to love and extol it as the sweetest of phrases, so that this passage in Paul became the very gate of paradise to me.

What is Luther talking about in this famous passage, which vibrates with the excitement of discovery? It is obvious that his understanding of the phrase "the righteousness of God" has changed radically. But what is the nature of this change?

The basic change is fundamental. Originally Luther regarded the precondition for justification as a human work, something which the sinner had to perform, before he or she could be justified. Increasingly convinced, through his reading of Augustine, that this was an impossibility, Luther could only interpret the "righteousness of God" as a *punishing* righteousness. But in this passage, he narrates how he discovered a "new" meaning of the phrase - a righteousness which God *gives* to the sinner. In other words, God himself meets the precondition, graciously giving sinners what they require if they are to be justified. An analogy (not used by Luther) may help bring out the difference between these two approaches.

Let us suppose that you are in prison, and are offered your freedom on condition that you pay a heavy fine. The promise is real - so long as you can meet the precondition, the promise will be fulfilled. As we noted earlier, Pelagius works on the presupposition, initially shared by Luther, that you have the necessary money stacked away somewhere. As your

freedom is worth far more, you are being offered a bargain. So you pay the fine. This presents no difficulties, so long as you have the necessary resources. Luther increasingly came to share the view of Augustine - that sinful humanity just doesn't have the resources needed to meet this precondition. To go back to our analogy, Augustine and Luther work on the assumption that, as you don't have the money, the promise of freedom has little relevance to your situation. For both Augustine and Luther, therefore, the good news of the gospel is that you have been *given* the necessary money with which to buy your freedom. In other words, the precondition has been met for you by someone else.

Luther's insight, which he describes in this autobiographical passage, is that the God of the Christian gospel is not a harsh judge who rewards individuals according to their merits, but a merciful and gracious God who bestows righteousness upon sinners as a gift. The general consensus amongst Luther scholars is that his theology of justification underwent a decisive alteration at some point in 1515.

Luther on Justifying Faith

Central to Luther's insights was the doctrine of "justification by faith alone." The idea of "justification" is already familiar. But what about the phrase "by faith alone"? What is the nature of justifying faith?

"The reason why some people do not understand why faith alone justifies is that they do not know what faith is." In writing these words, Luther draws our attention to the need to inquire more closely concerning that deceptively simple word "faith." Three points relating to Luther's idea of faith may be singled out as having special importance to his doctrine of justification. Each of these points was taken up and developed by later writers, such as Calvin, indicating that Luther made a fundamental contribution to the development of Reformation thought at this point. These three points are:

- 1 Faith has a personal, rather than a purely historical, reference.
- 2 Faith concerns trust in the promises of God.
- 3 Faith unites the believer to Christ.

We shall consider each of these points individually.

- 1 First, faith is not simply historical knowledge. Luther argues that a faith which is content to believe in the historical reliability of the gospels is not a faith which justifies. Sinners are perfectly capable of trusting in the historical details of the gospels; but these facts of themselves are not adequate for true Christian faith. Saving faith involves believing and

trusting that Christ was born *pro nobis*, born for us personally, and has accomplished for us the work of salvation.

2 Second, faith is to be understood as "trust" (*fiducia*). The notion of trust is prominent in the Reformation conception of faith, as a nautical analogy used by Luther indicates. "Everything depends upon faith. The person who does not have faith is like someone who has to cross the sea, but is so frightened that he does not trust the ship. And so he stays where he is, and is never saved, because he will not get on board and cross over." Faith is not merely believing that something is true; it is being prepared to act upon that belief, and relying upon it. To use Luther's analogy: Faith is not simply about believing that a ship exists - it is about stepping into it, and entrusting ourselves to it.

3 In the third place, faith unites the believer with Christ. Luther stated this principle clearly in his 1520 work, *The Liberty of a Christian*, cited earlier in this connection. Faith is not assent to an abstract set of doctrines, but is a union between Christ and the believer. It is the response of the whole person of the believer to God, which leads in turn to the real and personal presence of Christ in the believer. "To know Christ is to know his benefits," wrote Philip Melancthon, Luther's colleague at Wittenberg. Faith makes both Christ and his benefits - such as forgiveness, justification, and hope - available to the believer.

The doctrine of "justification by faith" thus does not mean that the sinner is justified because he or she believes, on account of that faith. This would be to treat faith as a human action or work. Luther insists that God provides everything necessary for justification, so that all that the sinner needs to do is to receive it. God is active, and humans are passive, in justification. The phrase "justification *by* grace *through* faith" brings out the meaning of the doctrine more clearly: The justification of the sinner is based upon the grace of God, and is received through faith. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is an affirmation that God does everything necessary for salvation. Even faith itself is a gift of God, rather than a human action. God himself meets the precondition for justification. Thus, as we saw, the "righteousness of God" is not a righteousness which judges whether or not we have met the precondition for justification, but the righteousness which is given to us so that we may meet that precondition.

The Notion of Forensic Justification

One of the central insights of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone is that the individual sinner is incapable of self-justification.

God who takes the initiative in justification, providing all the resources necessary to justify that sinner. One of those resources is the "righteousness of God." in other words, the righteousness on the basis of which the sinner is justified is not his own righteousness, but a righteousness which is given to him by God. Augustine had made this point earlier; Luther, however, gives it a subtle new twist, which leads to the development of the concept of "forensic justification."

The point at issue is difficult to explain, and centers on the question of the location of justifying righteousness. Both Augustine and Luther are agreed that God graciously gives sinful humans a righteousness which justifies them. But where is that righteousness located? Augustine argued that it was to be found within believers; Luther insisted that it remained outside believers. For Augustine, the righteousness in question is internal; for Luther, it is external.

For Augustine, God bestows justifying righteousness upon the sinner, in such a way that it becomes part of his or her person. As a result, this righteousness, although originating from *outside* the sinner, becomes part of his or her person. For Luther, the righteousness in question remains outside the sinner: It is an "alien righteousness" (*iustitia aliena*). God treats, or "reckons," this righteousness *as if* it were part of the sinner's person. In his Romans lectures of 1515-16, Luther developed the idea of the "alien righteousness of Christ," imputed - not imparted - to us by faith, as the grounds of justification. His comments on Romans 4: 7 are especially important:

Since the saints are always conscious of their sin, and seek righteousness from God in accordance with his mercy, they are always reckoned as righteous by God. Thus in their own eyes, and as a matter of fact, they are unrighteous. But God reckons them as righteous on account of their confession of their sin. In fact, they are sinners; however, they are righteous by the reckoning of a merciful God. Without knowing it, they are righteous; knowing it, they are unrighteous. They are sinners in fact, but righteous in hope.

Believers are righteous on account of the alien righteousness of Christ, which is imputed to them - that is, treated as if it were theirs through faith. Earlier, we noted that an essential element of Luther's concept of faith is that it unites the believer to Christ, justifying faith thus allows the believer to link up with the righteousness of Christ, and be justified on its basis. Christians are thus "righteous by the imputation of a merciful God."

Through faith, the believer is clothed with the righteousness of Christ, in much the same way, Luther suggests, as Ezekiel 16: 8 speaks of God covering our nakedness with his garment. For Luther, faith is the right (or righteous) relationship to God. Sin and righteousness thus co-exist;

we remain sinners inwardly, but are righteous extrinsically, in the sight of God. By confessing our sins in faith, we stand in a right and righteous relationship with God. From our own perspective we are sinners; but in the perspective of God, we are righteous.

Luther does not necessarily imply that this co-existence of sin and righteousness is a permanent condition. The Christian life is not static, as if - to use a very loose way of speaking - the relative amounts of sin and righteousness remained constant throughout. Luther is perfectly aware that the Christian life is dynamic, in that the believer grows in righteousness. Rather, his point is that the existence of sin does not negate our status as Christians. God shields our sin through his righteousness. This righteousness is like a protective covering, under which we may battle with our sin. This approach accounts for the persistence of sin in believers, while at the same time accounting for the gradual transformation of the believer and the future elimination of that sin. But it is not necessary to be perfectly righteous to be a Christian. Sin does not point to unbelief, or a failure on the part of God; rather, it points to the continued need to entrust one's person to the gentle care of God. Luther thus declares, in a famous phrase, that a believer is "at one and the same time righteous and a sinner" (*simul iustus et peccator*); righteous in hope, but a sinner in fact; righteous in the sight and through the promise of God, yet a sinner in reality.

These ideas were subsequently developed by Luther's follower Philip Melancthon to give the doctrine now generally known as "forensic justification." Where Augustine taught that the sinner is *made righteous* in justification, Melancthon taught that he is *counted as righteous* or *pronounced to be righteous*. For Augustine, "justifying righteousness" is *imparted*; for Melancthon, it is *imputed*. Melancthon drew a sharp distinction between the event of being *declared* righteous and the process of being *made* righteous, designating the former "justification" and the latter "sanctification" or "regeneration." For Augustine, both were simply different aspects of the same thing. According to Melancthon, God pronounces the divine judgment - that the sinner is righteous - in the heavenly court (*in foro divino*). This legal approach to justification gives rise to the term "forensic justification," from the Latin word *forum* ("marketplace" or "courtyard") - the place traditionally associated with the dispensing of justice in classical Rome.

The importance of this development lies in the fact that it marks a complete break with the teaching of the church up to that point. From the time of Augustine onward, justification had always been understood to refer to both the event of being declared righteous and the process of being made righteous. Melancthon's concept of forensic justification diverged radically from this. As it was taken up by virtually all the major reformers subsequently, it came to represent a standard difference be-

tween the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches from that point onward. In addition to their differences on how the sinner was justified, there was now an additional disagreement on what the word "justification" designated in the first place. As we shall see, the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic church's definitive response to the Protestant challenge, reaffirmed the views of Augustine on the nature of justification, and censured the views of Melancthon as woefully inadequate.

Calvin on Justification

The model of justification which would eventually gain the ascendancy in the later Reformation was formulated by Calvin in the 1540s and 1550s. The basic elements of his approach can be summarized as follows. Faith unites the believer to Christ in a "mystic union." (Here, Calvin reclaims Luther's emphasis upon the real and personal presence of Christ within believers, established through faith.) This union with Christ has a twofold effect, which Calvin refers to as "a double grace." First, the believer's union with Christ leads directly to his or her *justification*. Through Christ, the believer is declared to be righteous in the sight of God. Second, on account of the believer's union with Christ - and *not* on account of his or her justification - the believer begins the process of being made like Christ through regeneration. Calvin asserts that both justification and regeneration are the results of the believer's union with Christ through faith.

The Council of Trent on Justification

By 1540, Luther had become something of a household name throughout Europe. His writings were being read and digested, with various degrees of enthusiasm, even in the highest ecclesiastical circles in Italy. Something had to be done, if the Catholic church was to re-establish its credibility in relation to this matter. The Council of Trent, summoned in 1545, began the long process of formulating a comprehensive response to Luther. High on its agenda was the doctrine of justification.

The sixth session of the Council of Trent was brought to its close on 13 January 1547. The Tridentine Decree on Justification sets out the Roman Catholic teaching on justification with a considerable degree of clarity. Trent's critique of Luther's doctrine of justification can be broken down into four main sections:

- 1 The nature of justification.
- 2 The nature of justifying righteousness.

- 3 The nature of justifying faith.
- 4 The assurance of salvation.

We shall consider each of these four matters individually.

1 *The nature of justification* In his earlier phase, around the years 1515—19, Luther tended to understand justification as a process of becoming, in which the sinner was gradually conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ through a process of internal renewal (see pp. 441-2). In his later writings, however, dating from the mid-1530s and beyond, perhaps under the influence of Melancthon's more forensic approach to justification (see p. 442), Luther tended to treat justification as a matter of being declared to be righteous, rather than a process of becoming righteous. Increasingly, he came to see justification as an event, which was complemented by the distinct process of regeneration and interior renewal through the action of the Holy Spirit. Justification alters the outer status of the sinner in the sight of God (*coram Deo*), while regeneration alters the sinner's inner nature.

Trent strongly opposed this view, and vigorously defended the idea, originally associated with Augustine, that justification is the process of regeneration and renewal within human nature, which brings about a change in both the outer status and the inner nature of the sinner. The fourth chapter of the Decree provides the following precise definition of justification:

The justification of the sinner may be briefly defined as a translation from that state in which a human being is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ our Savior. According to the gospel, this translation cannot come about except through the cleansing of regeneration, or a desire for this, as it is written, "Unless someone is born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he or she cannot enter into the Kingdom of God" (John 3: 5).

Justification thus includes the idea of regeneration. This brief statement is amplified in the seventh chapter, which stresses that justification "is not only a remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inner person through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts by which an unrighteous person becomes a righteous person." This point was given further emphasis through canon 11, which condemned anyone who taught that justification takes place "either by the sole imputation of the righteousness of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of grace and charity ... or that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God."

In brief, then, Trent maintained the medieval tradition, stretching back to Augustine, which saw justification as comprising both an event and a process - the event of being declared to be righteous through the work of Christ, and the process of being made righteous through the internal work of the Holy Spirit. Reformers such as Melancthon and Calvin distinguished these two matters, treating the word "justification" as referring only to the process of being declared to be righteous; the accompanying process of internal renewal, which they termed "sanctification" or "regeneration," they regarded as theologically distinct.

Serious confusion thus resulted: Roman Catholics and Protestants used the same word "justification" to mean very different things. Trent used the term "justification" to mean what, to Protestants, was *both* justification *and* sanctification.

2 *The nature of justifying righteousness* Luther placed emphasis upon the fact that sinners possessed no righteousness in themselves. They had nothing within them which could ever be regarded as the basis of God's gracious decision to justify them. Luther's doctrine of the "alien righteousness of Christ" (*iustitia Christi aliena*) made it clear that the righteousness which justified sinners was outside them. It was imputed, not imparted; external, not internal.

Early critics of the Reformation argued, following Augustine, that sinners were justified on the basis of an internal righteousness, graciously infused or implanted within their persons by God. This righteousness was itself given as an act of grace; it was not something merited. But, they argued, there had to be something within individuals which could allow God to justify them. Luther dismissed this idea. God can justify individuals directly, rather than through an intermediate gift of righteousness.

Trent strongly defended the Augustinian idea of justification on the basis of an internal righteousness. The seventh chapter makes this point perfectly clear:

The single formal cause [of justification] is the righteousness of God - not the righteousness by which he himself is righteous, but the righteousness by which he makes us righteous, so that, when we are endowed with it, we are "renewed in the spirit of our mind," and are not only counted as righteous, but are called, and are in reality, righteous... . Nobody can be righteous except God communicates the merits of the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ to him or her, and this takes place in the justification of the sinner.

The phrase "single formal cause" needs explanation. A "formal" cause is the *direct*, or most immediate, cause of something. Trent is thus stating that the direct cause of justification is the righteousness which God

graciously imparts to us - as opposed to more distant causes of justification, such as the "efficient cause" (God), or the "meritorious cause" (Jesus Christ).

But the use of the word "single" should also be noted. One proposal for reaching agreement between Roman Catholic and Protestant, which gained especial prominence at the Colloquy of Ratisbon in 1541, was that *two* causes of justification should be recognized - an external righteousness (the Protestant position) and an internal righteousness (the Roman Catholic position). This compromise seemed to hold some potential. Trent, however, had no time for it. The use of the word "single" was deliberate, intended to eliminate the idea that there could be more than one such cause. The *only* direct cause of justification was the interior gift of righteousness.

3 *The nature of justifying faith* Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone came in for severe criticism. Canon 12 condemns a central aspect of Luther's notion of justifying faith, when it rejects the idea that "justifying faith is nothing other than confidence in the mercy of God, which remits sin for the sake of Christ." In part, this rejection of Luther's doctrine of justification reflects the ambiguity, noted above (p. 445), concerning the meaning of the term "justification." Trent was alarmed that anyone should believe that they could be justified - in the Tridentine sense of the term - by faith, without any need for obedience or spiritual renewal. Trent, interpreting "justification" to mean *both* the beginning of the Christian life *and* its continuation and growth, believed that Luther was suggesting that simply trusting in God (without any requirement that the sinner be changed and renewed by God) was the basis of the entire Christian life.

In fact, Luther meant nothing of the sort. He was affirming that the Christian life was begun through faith, and faith alone; good works followed justification, and did not cause that justification in the first place. Trent itself was perfectly prepared to concede that the Christian life was begun through faith, thus coming very close indeed to Luther's position. As chapter 8 of the Decree on Justification declares, "we are said to be justified by faith, because faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God." This is perhaps a classic case of a theological misunderstanding, resting upon the disputed meaning of a major theological term.

4 *The assurance of salvation* For Luther, as for the reformers in general, one could rest assured of one's salvation. Salvation was grounded upon the faithfulness of God to his promises of mercy; to fail to have confidence in salvation was, in effect, to doubt the reliability and trustworthiness of God. Yet this must not be seen as a supreme confidence in God,

untroubled by doubt. Faith is not the same as certainty; although the theological foundation of Christian faith may be secure, the human perception of and commitment to this foundation may waver.

The Council of Trent regarded the reformers' doctrine of assurance with considerable skepticism. Chapter 9 of the Decree on Justification, entitled "Against the Vain Confidence of Heretics," criticized the "ungodly confidence" of the reformers. While no one should doubt God's goodness and generosity, the reformers erred seriously when they taught that "nobody is absolved from sins and justified, unless they believe with certainty that they are absolved and justified, and that absolution and justification are effected by this faith alone." Trent insisted that "nobody can know with a certainty of faith which is not subject to error, whether they have obtained the grace of God."

Trent's point seems to be that the reformers were seen to be making human confidence or boldness the grounds of justification, so that justification rested upon a fallible human conviction, rather than upon the grace of God. The reformers, however, saw themselves as stressing that justification rested upon the promises of God; a failure to believe boldly in such promises was tantamount to calling the reliability of God into question.

In the present section, we have considered the importance of the doctrine of justification to the sixteenth-century Reformation, when this doctrine came to the fore as an issue of controversy. It remains an issue of controversy, although in a different context. Our attention now turns to some developments relating to the doctrine of justification in recent New Testament scholarship.

Justification in Recent New Testament Scholarship

In recent years, a considerable debate on the relation of Paul's views on justification to those of first-century Judaism has developed, centering upon the writings of E. P. Sanders. His first major work to address this theme was *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), followed several years later by the more important *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (1983). Sanders' work represents a demand for a complete reappraisal of our understanding of Paul's relation to Judaism. Sanders noted that Paul has too often been read through Lutheran eyes.

According to the Lutheran interpretation of Paul (which, in marked contrast to the Reformed standpoint, linked with Bullinger and Calvin, stresses the divergence between the law and the gospel), Paul criticized a totally misguided attempt on the part of Jewish legalists to find favor and acceptance in the sight of God by earning righteousness through