

# God Has Spoken: A History of Christian Theology

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*God hath spoken—by his prophets,  
Spoken his unchanging word,  
Each from age to age proclaiming  
God the One, the righteous Lord:  
Mid the world's despair and turmoil  
One firm anchor holdeth fast,  
God is king, his throne eternal,  
God the first and God the last.*

*God hath spoken—by Christ Jesus,  
Christ, the everlasting Son,  
Brightness of the Father's glory,  
With the Father ever one;  
Spoken by the Word Incarnate,  
God of God, ere time began,  
Light of Light, to earth descending,  
Man, revealing God to man.*

*God yet speaketh—by his Spirit  
Speaketh to the hearts of men,  
In the age-long word expounding  
God's own message, now as then;  
Through the rise and fall of nations*

*One sure faith yet standing fast,  
God abides, his word unchanging,  
God the first and God the last.*

—George Wallace Briggs (1875-1959)

## Preface

Until the nineteenth century, there was no such thing as the “history of Christian doctrine.” The doctrines themselves were contained in the creeds and confessions of the church, but how they had come into being was seldom examined in any detail. Protestants were aware that there had been developments over time, since otherwise the sixteenth-century Reformation would have been incomprehensible. If no change of any kind was possible, the Reformation should have been rejected as an innovation that was incompatible with eternally revealed truth, which is just what their Roman Catholic adversaries argued. Claiming the authority of the apostle Peter as the appointed successor of Jesus and the first bishop of Rome, the popes and their supporters assumed that what they believed and taught had come directly from the Lord himself.

The Eastern Orthodox churches had never accepted papal jurisdiction over them. On the whole, they agreed with Rome about the *content* of the church’s theology, but not about the nature of the *authority* that had defined it. To them, Rome not only claimed a power that Jesus had not given to Peter, but it had corrupted the church’s teaching in the process. This was the significance of adding the word *filioque* (“and [from] the Son”) to the Nicene Creed’s statement that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (John 15:26). Did the pope have the power to authorize such an addition as this without the backing of a universal (“ecumenical”) church council? Rome said that he did, but the East replied that he did not. Each side believed that the other had misread the Bible, in particular the words of Jesus in Matthew 16:18-19:

... you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

It was the use made of this statement to undergird papal power that split the church apart. In 1054, papal legates excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople because he would not submit to their authority, and in the sixteenth century Rome did the same to the Protestants, who also looked back to the eleventh century as the time when things had started to go seriously wrong in the church.

It soon became apparent that the Protestant rejection of papal authority was not like that of the Eastern churches, but no one thought to appeal to history as an explanation for this difference. Change and development over time were dimly understood, but their significance was not properly appreciated. Martin Luther, for example, did not hesitate to tell his students that Paul's epistle to the Galatians was of special relevance to them because Germans and Galatians were both of Celtic stock, and so it was only to be expected that the problems of ancient Galatia would be paralleled in contemporary Germany! It was not until the nineteenth century that historical development was used to explain the divisions that had occurred over time and the emergence of the doctrines that the different churches held, either in common or in opposition to one another. Since none of those doctrines was clearly stated in the New Testament, the suspicion began to grow that the very concept of doctrine had evolved in postbiblical times and had been imposed on the church by a priesthood determined to secure its own power.

To men who believed that the Christian faith ought to be grounded on Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), this came to mean that theology (or "dogma," as they usually preferred to call it) was a corruption of the primitive faith. They believed that if dogma could be sidelined or even dismantled, Christians might come together again, not in the churches

(because they too were the product of postbiblical deviations) but in their hearts. Believers who demonstrated the spirit of Christ in their lives were more likely to persuade others of the truth of the gospel message than institutions which imposed their own orthodoxies on people who did not understand what they meant.

This was a one-sided view, of course, but the notion that what the church(es) taught was significantly different from what could be found in the Bible took root and gave birth to what we now call the “history of Christian doctrine.” Of course, by no means everyone agreed with the thesis that postbiblical developments were corruptions of Christ’s original teaching. That interpretation was promoted mainly among liberal Protestants, though over the course of the nineteenth century it became dominant in the Protestant world.

Roman Catholics, by contrast, initially found it hard to reconcile their beliefs with any notion of doctrinal development, but after the proclamation of papal infallibility in 1870 (which clearly was an innovation of sorts), the idea was taken over and used to explain why the papacy could introduce such apparent innovations and make them compulsory parts of Catholic belief. In Roman Catholic eyes, doctrine developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who worked through the pope in order to confront and confound the errors of the age. They agreed with liberal Protestants that some of their teaching had been unknown in the early days of Christianity but argued that it had been made clear to the church in response to changing historical circumstances. The history of Christian doctrine was therefore to be understood not as a corruption of the original message of the New Testament but as a work of the Holy Spirit, adapting and bringing to perfection over time the revelation that had been given once and for all in Jesus Christ.

Conservative Protestants, and eventually even the Eastern Orthodox churches, gradually accepted the concept of the historical development of doctrine along lines broadly

similar to the Roman Catholic view, but they interpreted the work of the Holy Spirit very differently. To them, the history of Christian doctrine was a struggle to maintain the truth of the gospel over against predators of different kinds—the popes, of course, but also the ancient heretics and the liberals of modern times.

Today, these nineteenth-century positions have been greatly modified, if not entirely abandoned, by all sides in the debate. No one now believes that Christian doctrine is a corruption of the teaching of Jesus, even if it is still widely claimed that much of it is different from anything he would have recognized. Similarly, very few people would now assert that what their particular church teaches is absolute truth to the exclusion of everything else. The concept of doctrinal orthodoxy still exists and is defended by conservatives from very different backgrounds, but everyone recognizes that it has often been formulated by political and other extraneous factors whose influence must be transcended if we are going to recover the sense of unity that lies beneath the surface of our divisions. Whether this recovery will lead to a reunion of the churches is doubtful, because the force of tradition and the staying power of institutions militate against it, but it can certainly be said that there is now a kind of spiritual ecumenism in the Christian world that brings people together across traditional barriers, both individually and in a plethora of parachurch organizations.

All this means that it is no longer possible to write a history of Christian doctrine whose main purpose is to debunk or defend a particular denominational tradition. We all have our preferences, of course, but anyone who argues that only the Baptists, or only the Roman Catholics (or the Reformed, the Eastern Orthodox, the Lutherans, or whoever) are right while everyone else is wrong is now regarded as a propagandist, not as a historian—and is dismissed accordingly. At the present time it is universally agreed that the historian must rise above his own bias and be as fair as he can be to others, accepting that even disagreeable facts must be analyzed and

explained in their context, even if he might privately wish that the past had been different.

To some extent, the course of recent secular history has helped make this more “objective” approach easier and more natural. If we look back over the twentieth century, which one of us does not wish that it had been different from what it was? No one in 1900 wanted world war, routine genocide (a word that did not then exist), or the invention of weapons of mass destruction, and no one wants them now. But we cannot pretend that they never happened, nor can we blame one side for having caused all the trouble. The Western Allies (the United Kingdom, France, and the United States) tried that on Germany after the First World War, and look what they got—the revenge of Adolf Hitler! We do not want to make that mistake again, and this feeling has rubbed off on church historians as much as on others. Responsibility for what happened in the past is shared by all involved, because human beings are inherently sinful, and no one should be more aware of this than Christians, whose business it is to preach sin, righteousness, and judgment to an unbelieving world.

Of course, if we are to write a history of Christian doctrine at all, it must have some unifying principle, and if denominational or ideological allegiance will no longer do, something must be found to take its place. One possible approach is to take individual doctrines and trace their history, which is basically what Gregg Allison has done in his recent book *Historical Theology* (Zondervan, 2011). This is useful for students who are asked to write a paper on the development of something like the doctrine of the atonement, for example, because the information relating to it is gathered in one place. It also corresponds to a general tendency in modern research, which likes to make its material manageable by chopping it into bite-sized chunks and examining each one of them in depth, often to the virtual exclusion of anything else. Thus we can study the Trinity or justification by faith as discrete doctrines that have developed over time

and look at how they have come to be what they are today, without getting bogged down in apparently irrelevant things like papal authority or original sin.

The trouble with that approach is that it oversimplifies and therefore distorts the history that it wants to explain. There has never been a time when people have held to individual doctrines as if the rest of theology did not exist. Even those who have stressed one particular thing—the sacraments, for example, or biblical inerrancy—have done so in a context that affects everything they believe. They may be accused of having distorted their theological inheritance by an undue emphasis on one part of it, but they have never believed that one point to the exclusion of the rest. Theology has always come as a complete package, even if the arrangement of its materials has changed over time and may now be quite different from what it once was.

Today we live in a climate where the doctrine of the Trinity has assumed a new prominence in theological discussion. Why this is so can be debated, but however we got to this point, this is where we are now. It therefore seems logical and appropriate to adopt a Trinitarian framework as the basis for explaining historical theology in the current context. Everyone agrees that the doctrine of the Trinity as we know it did not spring fully grown out of the New Testament. Whether we think that its emergence was a deformation of the original divine revelation or the natural outcome of godly reflection on it, no one can doubt that the result has commanded the assent of the vast majority of Christians over the centuries. Disputes there have certainly been, but every branch of the Christian church confesses that “we believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Furthermore, we also agree that each of these three persons is active in a distinct way. The Son came into the world as Jesus Christ; the Holy Spirit comes into the hearts of believers, giving them the power to cry “Abba, Father!”—and the Father is the one to whom our prayers are directed. Theologians differ about whether priority should be given to who

the persons are or to what they do. The former is the more logical approach, since the authority of what a person does depends on who that person is, although it is possible to argue that the first Christians saw what God was doing in their midst and only later figured out how each of the divine persons was involved. Nevertheless, an understanding of who God is must come before there can be a proper appreciation of what God does, an order that is borne out by the way Christian theology actually developed.

When Jesus proclaimed his relationship with the Father, he introduced a subtle but significant shift in the Jewish picture of God, which now had to allow for a Father-Son relationship that could embrace both a divine incarnation and the ongoing transcendence of the supreme being. Nevertheless, the early Christians gave a priority to the Father that was in direct continuity with the Old Testament, and the revelation of the Son did not entail any departure from its transcendent monotheism. It was the organizing principle on which everything else depended, but the confession of the Son as Lord made it necessary to determine what his relationship to the one God was. Similarly with the Holy Spirit. Was he to be regarded as a person like the Father and the Son, as a personification of the divine being, or simply as another name for the Father? Were Christians expected to relate to God as one, as three, or as some combination of the two, depending on the circumstances?

These questions were inherent in the New Testament revelation, but resolving them was not an immediate priority for the first generation of Christians. Awareness of their importance and the need to get to grips with them grew over time and became urgent when false teachers emerged who tried to lead the church astray by equating the Father with God and denying the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Some people today argue that these questions should never have been raised and that had they remained dormant the church would not have been divided in the way that it was, but this is naive and contrary to the teaching of the

New Testament, where Christians were told that they must move on from the milk of the word to its meat.<sup>1</sup> That meant coming to terms with problems that did not appear on the surface but that would threaten to destroy the gospel message if they were not resolved. Laying a firm foundation involved going beyond what was immediately visible, and that is what the church found itself obliged to do. One thing led to another, and in the course of church history different aspects of Christian doctrine came to the fore and demanded resolution. Each time this happened, theologians had to take another look at their inheritance and examine it from a different angle. Just as a piece of cut glass reveals different aspects of the light according to how it is held, so the New Testament appears in a new light when looked at in response to the different theological questions that have been put to it.

This is the essence of historical theology, whose task is to explain how and why this happened. Theological developments did not occur arbitrarily but appeared in a logical sequence over time. The resolution of one problem led naturally to the next one, a process that we can observe from the beginning of the church up to the present time. Whether we have now arrived at the “end” of Christian theological development is impossible to say. Our perspective can only be governed by where we are, because each generation has a complete theology of its own. Future ages may well have to recast the tradition in order to explain developments that are as yet hidden from our eyes, but this we cannot tell. It may also be that we have reached the end of the present age and that Christ will come again before that can happen. This we do not know either. All we can do now is look at where we have come from, try to understand where we are, and suggest where we might go from here. What happens next remains hidden in the mind and purposes of God.

If these basic principles are understood, the organization of this book will be easy to grasp. Christian theology began with its Jewish inheritance, which it appropriated *in toto*

and claimed was to be understood only in and through Jesus Christ. The nature of that inheritance and its impact on the early church must therefore be considered first. Next there comes the person of God the Father, whom Jesus introduced to his disciples. As good Jews, they knew about the one God, but they did not address him as their Father, and Jesus became known for this teaching. His signature cry was *Abba* (Aramaic for “father”)—it is one of the few words of his that has been preserved in the original language.

Christians who prayed to God as their Father had to stress that he was the God of the Old Testament—the Creator and the Redeemer are one. This was disputed by the so-called “Gnostics” but it was fundamental to the integrity of Christianity. The Father was not a superior deity who intervened in order to rescue the work of an inferior Creator, but was himself the Creator who stepped in to put right what had gone wrong with his creation.

After that was established, the identity of the Son was next on the theological agenda. The incarnation of the Son could not really be understood until it was agreed that created matter was not the work of an inferior deity, because in that case, God could not have become man without ceasing to be divine. The great disputes of the fourth and fifth centuries over the person of Christ arose out of attempts to express this great mystery in a way that would affirm both the divinity and the humanity of the incarnate Son without compromising the integrity of either. That was not an easy task and it produced many serious disagreements, but the end result was the great creedal theology that has commanded the assent of virtually the entire Christian world and has stood the test of time.

Once the person of the Son had been defined to most people’s satisfaction, the church had to move in two different directions. On the one hand, it had to link the person of the Son to his work, just as it had previously connected who the Father is to what the Father does. But it also had to move on to define the person of the Holy Spirit, who was neither

a second Son nor an attribute of the Father's divinity. Which of these two would be dealt with first was not logically determined in advance, and it is fair to say that the Eastern (Orthodox) churches generally moved on to the person of the Holy Spirit, whose identity and relationship to the other persons would preoccupy them for centuries, whereas the Western church (the ancestor of today's Roman Catholics and Protestants) concentrated more on the work of Christ. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) wrote on both subjects, but his treatise on the Holy Spirit was directed toward the controversy between the West (which he represented) and the East, whereas his discourse on Christ's atonement was intended for a purely Western audience, which gives us a good picture of how theology was developing in the eleventh century. It is also typical of the Western tradition that it is for his work on the atonement that Anselm is now famous, whereas his arguments for the double procession of the Holy Spirit have attracted far less attention.

By 1500 East and West had gone their separate ways because they could not agree about the Holy Spirit's identity. It was clear that what was central for the East was relatively peripheral in the West, where the procession of the Spirit from the Father (or from the Father and the Son) was something rarely discussed outside the polemics connected with East-West relations. What they concentrated on was the work of Christ, especially as this was communicated to the believer through his presence in the sacraments. The sixteenth-century Reformation had nothing to do with the double procession of the Holy Spirit but was preoccupied with the sacrifice of Christ: was it a once-for-all, unrepeated historical event, or did it miraculously reappear every time the priest celebrated Holy Communion? This was a question that few people in the East understood (let alone had an opinion about), but it split the Western church in two.

The disputes between papal loyalists, whom we now call Roman Catholics, and their opponents, whom we lump together as "Protestants" even though this term originally

applied only to Martin Luther and his immediate followers, was not really about the work of Christ, however. Rather, it was about the way the effects of his saving work were received in the church, and that was the work of the Holy Spirit. Did the Spirit work primarily through objective means like the papacy, the institutional church, the sacraments, and so on, as the Roman Catholics claimed, or did he work subjectively, in the hearts and minds of individual believers, as the Protestants insisted? To understand the difference, ask yourself the following question: “When did you become a Christian?” A faithful Catholic would answer, “When I was baptized,” but no true Protestant would say that. However important baptism may be, Protestants would insist that ceremonial water cannot make someone a believer. Without the inner working of the Holy Spirit, the outward rite we call “baptism” is of no intrinsic value. The same principle applies to everything else. A minister’s vocation is “valid” not because of his ordination but because of his calling by God. Anyone can be ordained by the church authorities, but not everyone is called by God, as both Protestants and Catholics recognize. But where most Protestants would accept the ministry of an independent person like John Bunyan or Billy Graham, whether he was properly “ordained” or not, they would be less inclined to sit under the ministry of an immoral preacher. Many Catholics, on the other hand, would be more likely to tolerate a bad priest than a do-it-yourself evangelist, because it is the authority of the church that counts for them, and not the personal holiness of its individual representatives.

Finally, in the modern world, the historical antagonisms between different groups of Christians have had to compete with something quite different. This is the suspicion that either there is no God at all, or that all religious beliefs point to the same transcendent deity. From the triumph of Christianity in the fourth century until about 1700, no theologian had been forced to argue the case for New Testament monotheism—the belief that there is one God who reveals himself in three persons—unless he was engaged in dialogue with

Jews or Muslims. Such dialogues did take place from time to time, but they were rare and peripheral to the main body of the church. For the most part, Christians persecuted Jews and fought against Muslims with no questions being asked on either side.

All this changed in the eighteenth century, when men brought up in “Christian” Europe and America began to challenge their own religious inheritance in the name of “reason.” First to go was the Trinity, which seemed to them to be illogical and even incomprehensible. From there it was a short step to open atheism, because if God was a distant power with no direct connection to everyday life on earth, what was the point of believing in him? Admittedly, many atheists hedged their bets and declared themselves to be “agnostics,” if only because they realized that disproving the existence of God was even harder than proving it, but the practical result was the same. God was removed from the mental furniture of educated Westerners, a situation that continues to the present time. Christians (and others) enjoy “religious freedom” in Western countries, but only to the extent that their beliefs do not matter. If a religious conviction interferes with the atheistic mind-set, then it must be silenced, or at least sidelined. You will not get a doctorate today if you claim (as Isaac Newton did) that your research is primarily intended to explore the mind of God at work in the universe!

It is in this Babylonian exile of the modern church that the doctrine of the Trinity has returned to center stage. Christians of different traditions have come together, realizing that if they do not hang together they will be hanged separately. Where this will lead (if anywhere) is impossible to say, and it is not the business of the historian to indulge in prophecy. All we can affirm is that this is the point that we have come to at the present time, and those of us who believe in the providence of God (as this author does) are confident that he is working out his purposes for us and for his church as much today as in the past. This was the

confidence of the late Archdeacon George Wallace Briggs, who after living through two world wars and an unprecedented “rise and fall of nations” could still write the forward-looking words of the hymn with which this preface began. The God who has spoken in the past continues to speak in the present, but his message is the same now as it has always been. The forms change over time and new developments occur in the way that the truth is expressed, but its substance remains unaltered. How this has happened and what it means for us today is what the following pages are all about.

The aim of this book is to make the history of Christian theology comprehensible to nonspecialists while at the same time providing a useful resource for those who want to take the subject further. Technical terms are explained in simple language, and background information is provided when it is necessary for understanding the subject and is unlikely to be part of the average person’s general knowledge. At the same time, original sources are given in the footnotes, where it is assumed that serious students will be able to consult works not only in Latin and Greek but also in French and German. Works in other languages (Danish, Dutch, Romanian, Russian, Swedish) are also cited when theological developments in those countries are being discussed. However, English translations are also noted when they are available.

In the main body of the text, quotations from other languages have been freshly translated, and biblical references have been taken from a form of the text that the original author of the quote would have been familiar with, not from a modern translation based on a critical edition.

This book began life at Moore Theological College in Sydney, an institution of higher learning that shines as a beacon of light in an Anglican Communion that is currently beset by the storm clouds of schism, heresy, and apostasy. Special thanks are due to the former principal John Woodhouse and his wife, Moya, for the warm hospitality which they have always shown the author, and to the current principal Mark

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As it happens, the volume reached completion on a return visit to Moore College, where a rapidly assembled team of critics put it through the final test of relevance to its intended audience. Special thanks are due to Joel Atwood, Matt Baker, Katherine Cole, Nick Davies, Matt Dodd, Tom Habib, Hank Lee, Matt Simpson, Mike Turner, Luke Wagenaar and Mike Weeks, who kept the author on his toes and did much to make this book accessible to its intended audience. It is to them and to the many godly men and women who over the years have passed through Moore College as teachers, staff, and students, that this book is humbly dedicated as a small token of my abiding affection for them. To them and to all who read this book, may the Lord God of Israel preserve and protect you in your earthly pilgrimage and bring you safely home to rest in his eternal glory.

Gerald Bray  
The Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist  
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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12-13.