

Early Christian Theology: The Patristic Period, c.100–451

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The patristic period is one of the most exciting and creative periods in the history of Christian thought. In recent years, the term “early Christian period” has come to be used to refer to this important era in historical theology, with major journals increasingly using this term – for example, the influential *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, which is the official publication of the North American Patristics Society (NAPS). This book continues to use the older term “patristic” as this is still widely used. However, the term “early Christian theology” is also used, and readers should be aware that they will encounter both ways of referring to this important historical period in the literature.

This period is also of importance for theological reasons. Every mainstream Christian body – including the Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic churches – regards the patristic period as a definitive landmark in the development of Christian doctrine. Each of these theological traditions regards themselves as continuing, extending, and, where necessary, criticizing the views of the early-church writers. For example, the leading seventeenth-century Anglican writer Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626) declared that orthodox Christianity was based upon two testaments, three creeds, four gospels, and the first five centuries of Christian history. In what follows, we shall explore the basic features of this important period in the history of Christian thought.

A Clarification of Terms

As noted earlier, the term “early Christian theology” is now used increasingly to refer to the period between c.100 and 451. Older textbooks use the term “patristic” to refer to this field of studies. The term “patristic” comes from the Latin word *pater*, meaning “father,” and designates both the period of the church fathers and the distinctive ideas that came to develop within this period. The term is non-inclusive; no generally acceptable inclusive term has yet to emerge in the literature, although there is a growing tendency to refer to this as the “early Christian period.” The following related terms are frequently encountered and should be noted.

The Patristic Period

This is a vaguely defined entity, which is often taken to designate the period from the closing of the New Testament writings (c.100) to the definitive Council of Chalcedon (451).

Patristics

This term is usually understood to mean the branch of theological study that deals with the study of “the fathers (*patres*).” It is now being displaced by the alternative term “early Christian theology.”

Patrology

This term once literally meant “the study of patristic writers” (in much the same way as “theology” meant “the study of God (*theos*).”) Many now use the phrase “early Christian theology” to refer to this field of studies. In recent years, the word “patrology” has shifted its meaning. It now refers to a manual of patristic literature, such as the four-volume work *Patrology* by the noted German scholar Johannes Quasten (1900–1987). This work allows its readers easy access to the leading ideas of early Christian writers, and introduces and assesses some of the problems of interpretation associated with them.

Difficulties in Approaching Early Christian Theology

The patristic period is obviously of considerable importance to Christian theology. Many modern students of theology, however, find some aspects of early Christian theology to be inaccessible and difficult to understand. Four main reasons can be given for this situation:

1. Some of the debates of the early Christian period seem hopelessly irrelevant to us today. Although they were clearly viewed as intensely important at the time, it is often very difficult for a modern reader to empathize with the issues and understand why they attracted such attention. It is interesting to contrast the patristic period with the Reformation era, which addressed many issues that are a continuing concern for the modern church. Many teachers of theology find that their students are able to relate to the concerns of this later period much more easily, as they continue to be relevant and important issues today.
2. Many of the patristic debates hinge upon philosophical issues and only make sense if the reader has some familiarity with the philosophical debates of the period – especially the various schools of Platonism spread throughout the Mediterranean world of the early Christian period. Whereas at least some students of Christian theology have some familiarity with the ideas found in Plato’s dialogues, these ideas were subject to considerable development and criticism in the Mediterranean world during the patristic period. Middle Platonism and Neo-Platonism differ significantly from one another, and from Plato’s original ideas. The strangeness of many of the philosophical ideas of the period acts as another barrier to its study, making it difficult for students beginning the study of theology to fully appreciate what is going on in some of the patristic debates.
3. The early Christian period is characterized by immense doctrinal diversity. It was an age of flux, during which landmarks and standards – including documents such as the Nicene Creed and dogmas such as the two natures of Christ – emerged gradually, as early Christian writers explored various conceptualizations of the core themes of faith. Students familiar with the relative stability of other periods in Christian doctrine (such as the Reformation, in which the person of Christ was not a major issue) often find this feature of the patristic period disconcerting.

4. The period saw a major division arise, for both political and linguistic reasons, between the eastern Greek-speaking and the western Latin-speaking church. Many scholars discern a marked difference in theological temperament between theologians of the east and west: the former are often philosophically inclined and given to theological speculation, whereas the latter are often hostile to the intrusion of philosophy into theology and regard theology as the exploration of the doctrines set out in Scripture. The famous rhetorical question of the western theologian Tertullian (c.160–c.225), “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? or the Academy with the church?” illustrates this point. Many students of patristic theology find this bifurcation difficult and tend to focus on either the thought of the eastern Greek-speaking or the western Latin-speaking church.

The Historical Background to Early Christian Theology

The patristic period was of major importance in clarifying a number of issues. A task of initial importance for early Christian theologians was sorting out the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. This is clearly an important issue for Paul, as his letters in the New Testament make clear. A set of doctrinal and practical issues came to the fore in the first century of Christian history. Must Gentile (that is, non-Jewish) Christians be circumcised? Were certain foods or practices to be seen as “unclean”? How was the Old Testament to be correctly interpreted? However, other issues soon came to the fore. One that was of especial importance in the second century is that of apologetics – the reasoned defense and justification of the Christian faith against its critics – such as Greek philosophers.

During the first period of Christian history, the church was sporadically persecuted by the Roman state. Its primary concern was to survive in this hostile cultural environment; there was limited place for theological disputes when the existence of the Christian church seemed to be under threat. This helps us to understand why apologetics came to be of such importance to the early church. Writers such as Justin Martyr (c.100–c.165) tried to explain and defend the beliefs and practices of Christianity to a hostile pagan public, partly to reduce this cultural hostility and partly in the hope of converting them. Although this early period produced some outstanding theologians – such as Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130–c.200) in the west and Origen (c.185–c.254) in the east – theological debate could only begin in earnest once the church had ceased to be persecuted.

The Historical Importance of the City of Rome

Rome was the administrative center of an empire that embraced the whole Mediterranean region. Indeed, the Romans tended to refer to the Mediterranean as “Mare Nostrum” – “our sea.” The region of Judea, in which Christianity had its origins, was part of this vast empire – and a rather insignificant part at that. Although the languages spoken in this region of the empire were Aramaic (a language closely related to Hebrew) and Greek,

Latin was used for administrative purposes. John's gospel makes reference to the charge against Jesus to the effect that he claimed to be "king of the Jews" being written in all three languages (John 19:19–20). In many paintings and representations of the crucifixion of Jesus, this inscription is represented by four letters: INRI – the initial letters of the Latin phrase *Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*, meaning "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Christianity had its origins in Palestine – more specifically, the region of Judea, especially the city of Jerusalem. Christianity regarded itself as a continuation and development of Judaism, and initially flourished in regions with which Judaism was traditionally associated, supremely Palestine. However, it rapidly spread to neighboring regions in which Judaism had a presence, partially through the efforts of early Christian evangelists such as Paul of Tarsus. By the end of the first century, Christianity appears to have become established throughout the eastern Mediterranean world, and even to have gained a significant presence in the city of Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire.

It is not clear when Christianity first began to gain a presence in Rome, although many scholars believe that this development dates from the 40s. Paul's letter to the Romans, usually dated to around 57, refers to a number of individuals with Latin names, such as Urbanus, Aquila, Rufus, and Julia. This suggests that a number of Romans may have converted to Christianity by this stage. The bulk of the names mentioned by Paul are Greek, however, reflecting the fact that Christianity seems initially to have been the religion of a Greek-speaking minority. There is evidence that Mark's gospel may have been written in Rome at some point around 64, on the eve of Nero's persecution of Christians in the city. For example, Mark 12:42 notes that two Greek copper coins make one quadran, a Roman coin not in circulation in the eastern part of the empire. Similarly, Mark 15:16 explains that a Greek word corresponds to the Latin *praetorium*. These explanations suggest that Mark is explaining unfamiliar ideas or terms to a Roman audience.

The Problem of Persecution

Since becoming established in Rome in the 40s, Christianity had an ambiguous legal status. On the one hand, it was not legally recognized, and so did not enjoy any special rights; on the other, it was not forbidden. However, its growing numerical strength led to periodic attempts to suppress it by force. Sometimes these persecutions were local, restricted to regions such as North Africa; sometimes, they were sanctioned throughout the Roman Empire as a whole. A particularly significant period of persecution dates from the accession of the Emperor Decius in 249. His first major act of hostility toward Christianity was the execution of Fabian, bishop of Rome, in January 250.

The Edict of Decius, issued in June 250, commanded provincial governors and magistrates to ensure that there was universal observance of the requirement to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods and to the emperor. A certificate (*libellus pacis*) was issued to those who offered such sacrifices. The Edict seems to have been widely ignored, but was nevertheless enforced in some regions. Thousands of Christians were martyred during this difficult period. Some offered sacrifices to the gods in order to get hold of the required certificates; some were able to obtain the certificates without actually offering sacrifices.

The Decian persecution ended in June 251, when Decius was killed on a military expedition. The persecution led to many Christians lapsing or abandoning their faith in the face of persecution. Division arose immediately within the church over how these individuals should be treated: did such a lapse mark the end of their faith or could they be reconciled to the church by penance? Opinions differed sharply, and serious disagreement and tension resulted. Very different views were promoted by Cyprian of Carthage and Novatian. Both of these writers were martyred during the persecution instigated by the Emperor Valerian in 257–258.

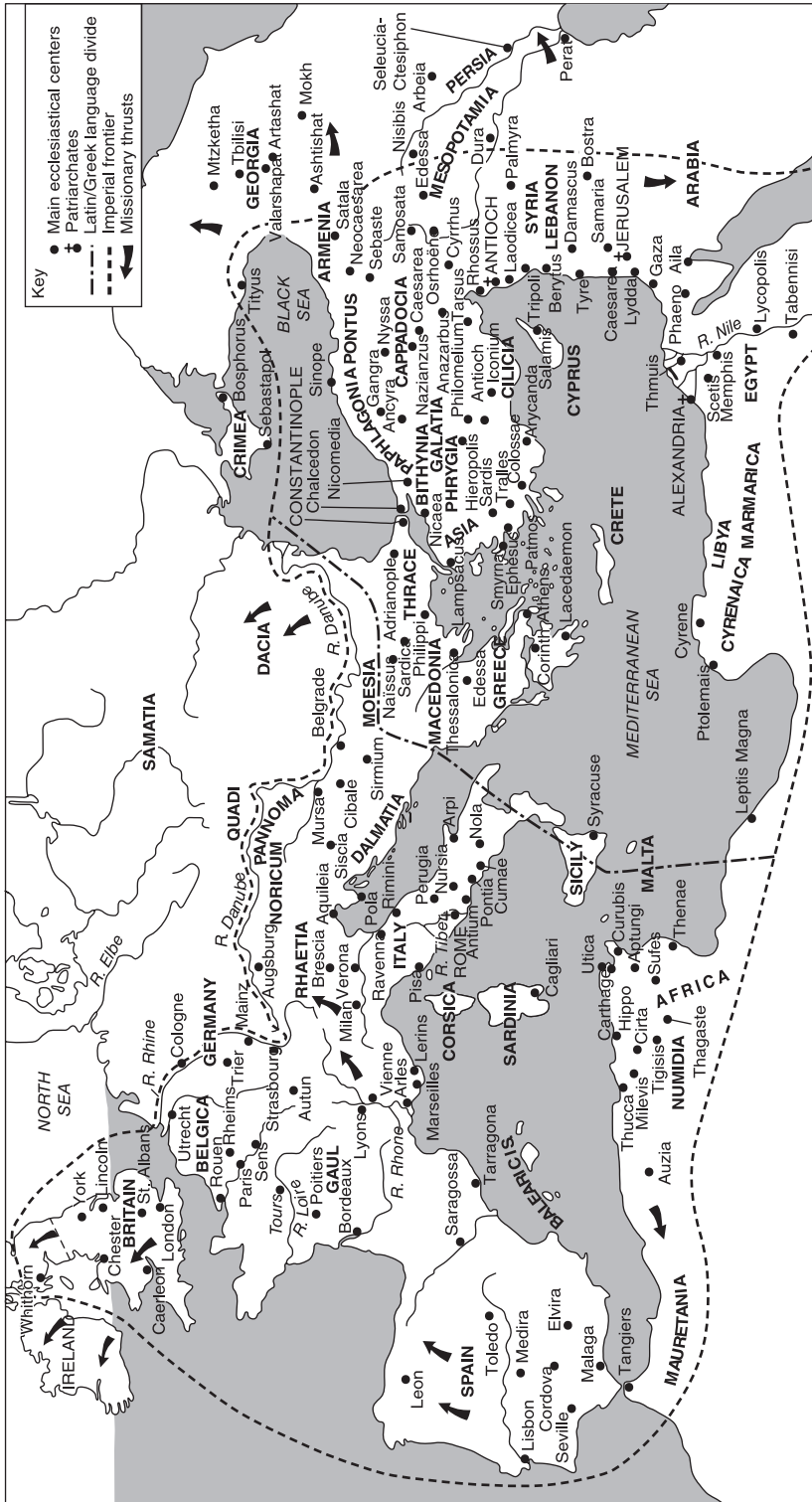
One of the most severe outbursts of persecution came about in February 303, under the Emperor Diocletian. An edict was issued ordering the destruction of all Christian places of worship, the surrender and destruction of all their books, and the cessation of all acts of Christian worship. Christian civil servants were to lose all privileges of rank or status and to be reduced to the status of slaves. Prominent Christians were forced to offer sacrifice according to traditional Roman practices. It is an indication of how influential Christianity had become that Diocletian forced both his wife and daughter, who were known to be Christians, to comply with this order. The persecution continued under successive emperors, including Galerius, who ruled the eastern region of the empire.

In 311, Galerius ordered the cessation of the persecution. It had been a failure and had merely hardened Christians in their resolve to resist the reimposition of classical Roman pagan religion. Galerius issued an edict that permitted Christians to live normally again and “hold their religious assemblies, provided that they do nothing which would disturb public order.” The edict explicitly identified Christianity as a “religion” and offered it the full protection of the law. The legal status of Christianity, which had been ambiguous up to this point, was now resolved. The church no longer existed under a siege mentality.

The Conversion of Constantine

Christianity was now a legal religion; it was, however, merely one among many such religions. The conversion of the Emperor Constantine changed this irreversibly and brought about a complete change in the situation of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. Constantine was born to pagan parents in 285. (His mother would eventually become a Christian, apparently through her son’s influence.) Although he showed no particular attraction to Christianity in his early period, Constantine certainly seems to have regarded toleration as an essential virtue. Following Maxentius’ seizure of power in Italy and North Africa, Constantine led a body of troops from western Europe in an attempt to gain authority in the region. The decisive battle took place on October 28, 312 at the Milvian Bridge, to the north of Rome. Constantine defeated Maxentius and was proclaimed emperor. Shortly afterwards, he declared himself to be a Christian.

This point is affirmed by both Christian and pagan writers. What is not clear is precisely why or when this conversion took place. Some Christian writers (such as Lactantius and Eusebius) suggest that the conversion may have taken place before the decisive battle, with Constantine seeing a heavenly vision ordering him to place the sign of the cross on his soldiers’ shields. Whatever the reasons for the conversion, and whether it dates from before or after the battle of Milvian Bridge, the reality and consequences of this conversion



Map 1.1 The Roman Empire and the church in the fourth century (note that modern rather than ancient place names are used)

are not in doubt. Gradually, Rome became Christianized. On his own instructions, the statue of the emperor erected in the Forum depicts Constantine bearing a cross – “the sign of suffering that brought salvation,” according to the inscription provided by Constantine. In 321, Constantine decreed that Sundays should become public holidays. Christian symbols began to appear on Roman coins. Christianity was now more than just legitimate; it was on its way to becoming the established religion of the empire.

The Development of Public Theological Debate

As a result of the growing acceptance of Christianity in Roman imperial culture during the fourth century, constructive theological debate became a public affair. Apart from a brief period of uncertainty during the reign of Julian the Apostate (361–363), the church could now count upon the support of the state. Theology thus emerged from the hidden world of secret church meetings to become a matter of public interest and concern throughout the Roman Empire. Increasingly, doctrinal debates became a matter of both political and theological importance. Constantine wished to have a united church throughout his empire and was thus concerned that doctrinal differences should be debated and settled as a matter of priority. As the church at Rome became increasingly powerful, tensions began to develop between the Christian leadership at Rome and at Constantinople, foreshadowing the later schism between the western and eastern churches arising out of these respective centers of power.

As Christianity became an established presence in the Mediterranean world, the stable conditions needed for serious theological reflection emerged. As a result, the later patristic period (from about 310 to 451) may be regarded as a high-water mark in the history of Christian theology. Theologians now enjoyed the freedom to work without the threat of persecution and were able to address a series of issues of major importance to the consolidation of the emerging theological consensus within the churches. That consensus involved extensive debate and a painful learning process in which the church discovered that it had to come to terms with disagreements and continuing tensions. Nonetheless, a significant degree of consensus, eventually to be enshrined in the ecumenical creeds, can be discerned as emerging within this formative period.

Centers of Early Christian Theological Reflection

In addition to Rome and Constantinople, a number of regions emerged as significant centers of theological reflection during the patristic period. Three may be singled out as having especial importance, the first two of which were Greek-speaking and the third Latin-speaking.

1. The city of Alexandria, in modern-day Egypt, which emerged as a center of Christian theological education. A distinctive style of theology came to be associated with this city, reflecting its long-standing association with the Platonic tradition. The student will find reference to “Alexandrian” approaches in areas such as Christology and

biblical interpretation (see pp. 48–56), reflecting both the importance and distinctiveness of the style of Christianity associated with the area.

2. The city of Antioch in ancient Syria and the region of Cappadocia in modern-day Turkey. A strong Christian presence came to be established in this northern region of the eastern Mediterranean at an early stage. Some of Paul's missionary journeys related to this region and Antioch features significantly at several points in the history of the very early church, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Antioch itself soon became a leading center of Christian thought. Like Alexandria, it became associated with particular approaches to Christology and biblical interpretation. The term "Antiochene" is often used to designate this distinct theological style. The "Cappadocian fathers" were also an important theological presence in this region in the fourth century, notable especially for their contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity.
3. Western North Africa, especially the area of modern-day Algeria. In the late classical period, this was the site of Carthage, a major Mediterranean city and at one time a political rival to Rome for dominance in the region. During the period when Christianity expanded in this region, it was a Roman colony. Major writers of the region include Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, and Augustine of Hippo.

This is not to say that other cities in the Mediterranean were devoid of significance. Milan and Jerusalem were also centers of Christian theological reflection, even if neither was destined to achieve quite the significance of their rivals.

Key Theologians

During the course of this work, reference will be made to a significant number of theologians from the patristic period. The following six early Christian writers, however, are of especial importance and deserve to be singled out for special mention.

Justin Martyr (c.100–c.165)

Justin is perhaps the greatest of the Apologists – the Christian writers of the second century who were concerned to defend Christianity in the face of intense criticism from pagan sources. In his "First Apology," Justin argued that traces of Christian truth were to be found in the great pagan writers. His doctrine of the *logos spermatikos* ("seed-bearing word") allowed him to affirm that God had prepared the way for his final revelation in Christ through hints of its truth in classical philosophy. Justin provides us with an important early example of a theologian who attempts to relate the gospel to the outlook of Greek philosophy, a trend especially associated with the eastern church.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130–c.200)

Irenaeus is believed to have been born in Smyrna (in modern-day Turkey), although he subsequently settled in Rome. He became Bishop of Lyons around 178, a position that he

held until his death two decades later. Irenaeus is noted especially for his vigorous defense of Christian orthodoxy in the face of a challenge from Gnosticism (see p. 30). His most significant work, “Against all Heresies” (*Adversus omnes Haereses*), represents a major defense of the Christian understanding of salvation, and especially of the role of tradition in remaining faithful to the apostolic witness in the face of non-Christian interpretations.

Origen (c.185–c.254)

One of the most important defenders of Christianity in the third century, Origen provided an important foundation for the development of eastern Christian thought. His major contributions to the development of Christian theology can be seen in two general areas. In the field of biblical interpretation, Origen developed the notion of allegorical interpretation, arguing that the surface meaning of Scripture was to be distinguished from its deeper spiritual meaning. In the field of Christology, Origen established a tradition of distinguishing between the full divinity of the Father and a lesser divinity of the Son. Some scholars see Arianism as a natural consequence of this approach. Origen also adopted with some enthusiasm the idea of apocatastasis or universal restoration, according to which every creature – including both humanity and Satan – will be saved.

Tertullian (c.160–c.225)

Tertullian was originally a pagan from the North African city of Carthage, who converted to Christianity in his thirties. He is often regarded as the father of Latin theology, on account of the major impact that he had upon the western church. He defended the unity of the Old and New Testaments against Marcion, who had argued that they related to different gods. In doing so, he laid the foundations for a doctrine of the Trinity. Tertullian was strongly opposed to making Christian theology or apologetics dependent upon extra-scriptural sources. He is amongst the most forceful early exponents of the principle of the sufficiency of Scripture, denouncing those who appeal to secular philosophies (such as those of the Athenian Academy) for a true knowledge of God.

Athanasius (c.296–c.373)

Athanasius’ significance relates primarily to Christological issues, which became of major importance during the fourth century. Possibly while still in his twenties, Athanasius wrote the treatise *De incarnatione* (“On the incarnation”), a powerful defense of the idea that God assumed human nature in the person of Jesus Christ. This issue proved to be of central importance in the Arian controversy (see pp. 43–8), to which Athanasius made a major contribution. Athanasius pointed out that if, as Arius argued, Christ was not fully God, a series of devastating implications followed. First, it was impossible for God to redeem humanity, as no creature could redeem another creature. Second, it followed that the Christian church was guilty of idolatry, as Christians

regularly worshipped and prayed to Christ. As “idolatry” can be defined as “worship of a human construction or creation,” it followed that this worship was idolatrous. Such arguments eventually carried the day and led to the rejection of Arianism.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

Aurelius Augustinus, usually known as “Augustine of Hippo” – or just plain “Augustine” – is widely regarded as one of the greatest and most influential writers of the Christian church throughout its long history. Augustine is thought to have been a Berber, a native North African, who was attracted to the Christian faith through the preaching of Bishop Ambrose of Milan, and underwent a dramatic conversion experience. Having reached the age of 32 without satisfying his burning wish to know the truth, Augustine was agonizing over the great questions of human nature and destiny in a garden in Milan. He heard some children nearby singing a song based on the Latin words *Tolle, lege* (“take up and read”). Feeling that this was divine guidance, he found the New Testament document nearest to hand – Paul’s letter to the Romans, as it happened – and read the fateful words “clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:14). This was the final straw for Augustine, whose paganism had become increasingly difficult to maintain. As he later recalled, “a light of certainty entered my heart, and every shadow of doubt vanished.” From that moment onward, Augustine dedicated his enormous intellectual abilities to the defense and consolidation of the Christian faith, writing in a style that was both passionate and intelligent, appealing to both heart and mind.

Possibly suffering from some form of asthma, Augustine left Italy to return to North Africa, and was made bishop of Hippo (in modern Algeria) in 395. The remaining thirty-five years of his life witnessed numerous controversies of major importance to the future of the Christian church in the west, and Augustine’s contribution to the resolution of each of these was decisive. His careful exposition of the New Testament, particularly the letters of Paul, gained him a reputation that continues today, as the “second founder of the Christian faith” (Jerome). When the Dark Ages finally lifted over western Europe, Augustine’s substantial body of theological writings would form the basis of a major program of theological renewal and development, consolidating his influence over the western church.

A major part of Augustine’s contribution lies in the development of theology as an academic discipline. The early church cannot really be said to have developed any “systematic theology.” Its primary concern was to defend Christianity against its critics (as in the apologetic works of Justin Martyr) and to clarify central aspects of its thinking against heresy (as in the anti-Gnostic writings of Irenaeus). Nevertheless, major doctrinal development took place during the first four centuries, especially in relation to the doctrine of the person of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Augustine’s contribution was to achieve a synthesis of Christian thought, supremely in his major treatise *De civitate Dei*, “On the City of God.” Like Charles Dickens’s famous novel, Augustine’s “City of God” is a tale of two cities – the city of the world and the city of God. The work is apologetic in tone: Augustine is sensitive to the charge that the fall of Rome was due to its having abandoned classic paganism in favor of Christianity.

Yet as he defended Christianity against such charges, he inevitably ended up by giving a systematic presentation and exposition of the main lines of Christian belief.

However, in addition, Augustine may also be argued to have made key contributions to three major areas of Christian theology: the doctrine of the church and sacraments, arising from the Donatist controversy (see pp. 66–71); the doctrine of grace, arising from the Pelagian controversy (see pp. 71–6); and the doctrine of the Trinity (see pp. 56–66). Interestingly, Augustine never really explored the area of Christology (that is, the doctrine of the person of Christ), which would unquestionably have benefited from his considerable wisdom and acumen.

Key Theological Developments

The following areas of theology were the subject of particular discussion during the patristic period.

The Relation of Christian Faith and Classical Culture

The later patristic period saw considerable thought being given to an issue of major importance for Christian theology – the extent to which Christian writers could make use of existing secular approaches to rhetoric, literature, and poetry in developing a Christian literature. Initially, there was considerable hostility toward the use of such approaches. The secular establishment seemed dedicated to the eradication of Christianity. How, then, could Christian writers use its cultural norms with any degree of integrity? To employ the cultural values of an oppressor seemed to be tantamount to capitulation to those opposed to Christianity.

Yet with the conversion of Constantine, a distinct change of mood appears to have gained the ascendancy. No longer was classical Roman culture seen as embodying the values of an oppressor. At worst, the classical culture of the period was to be seen as neutral; increasingly, many came to see it as an ally. The issue of the interaction of Christianity and classical culture now assumed a new significance. Rome was now the servant of the gospel; might not the same be true of its culture? If the Roman state could be viewed positively by Christians, why not also its cultural heritage? It seemed as if a door had opened upon some very interesting possibilities. Prior to 313, this possibility could only have been dreamt of. After 313, its exploration became a matter of urgency for leading Christian thinkers.

The approach developed by Augustine of Hippo in the final years of the Roman empire gained wide support. This can perhaps be best described as the “critical appropriation of classical culture.” For Augustine, the situation is comparable to Israel fleeing from captivity in Egypt at the time of the Exodus. Although they left the idols of Egypt behind them, they carried the gold and silver of Egypt with them, in order to make better and proper use of such riches, which were thus liberated in order to serve a higher purpose than before.

In much the same way, the philosophy and culture of the ancient world could be appropriated by Christians, where this seemed right, and thus allowed to serve the cause

of the Christian faith. Appropriation involved a filtering process, retaining what was good and rejecting what was useless or burdensome. This gave intellectual justification to the growing tendency to make extensive use of secular literary resources and to encourage a process of engagement and appropriation that can be seen as underlying the emergence of a significant Christian literature.

The Extent of the New Testament Canon

From its outset, Christian theology recognized itself to be grounded in Scripture. There was, however, some uncertainty as to what the term “Scripture” actually designated. The patristic period witnessed a process of decision-making, in which limits were laid down to the textual boundaries of the New Testament – a process usually known as “the fixing of the canon.” The word “canon” derives from the Greek word *kanōn* meaning “a straight rule” or “a fixed reference point.” The “canon of Scripture” refers to a limited and defined group of writings, which are accepted as authoritative within the Christian church. The term “canonical” is used to refer to scriptural writings accepted to be within the canon. Thus the Gospel of Luke is referred to as “canonical,” whereas the Gospel of Thomas is “extra-canonical” (that is, lying outside the canon of Scripture).

For the writers of the New Testament, the term “Scripture” meant primarily a writing of the Old Testament. However, within a short period, early Christian writers (such as Justin Martyr) were referring to the “New Testament” (to be contrasted with the “Old Testament”) and insisting that both were to be treated with equal authority. By the time of Irenaeus, it was generally accepted that there were four gospels; by the late second century, there was a consensus that the gospels, Acts, and letters had the status of inspired Scripture. Thus, Clement of Alexandria recognized four gospels, the Acts, fourteen letters of Paul (the letter to the Hebrews being regarded as Pauline), and Revelation. Tertullian declared that alongside the “law and the prophets” were the “evangelical and apostolic writings” (*evangelicae et apostolicae litterae*), which were both to be regarded as authoritative within the church. Gradually, agreement was reached on the list of books that were recognized as inspired Scripture and the order in which they were to be arranged. In 367, Athanasius circulated his thirty-ninth Festal Letter, which identifies the 27 books of the New Testament, as we now know it, as being canonical.

Debate centered especially on a number of books. The western church had hesitations about including Hebrews, in that it was not specifically attributed to an apostle; the eastern church had reservations about Revelation. Four of the smaller books (2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude) were often omitted from early lists of New Testament writings. Some writings now outside the canon were regarded with favor in parts of the church, although they ultimately failed to gain universal acceptance as canonical. Examples of this include the first letter of Clement (an early bishop of Rome, who wrote around 96) and the *Didache*, a short early Christian manual on morals and church practices, probably dating from the first quarter of the second century.

The arrangement of the material was also subject to considerable variation. Agreement was reached at an early stage that the gospels should have the place of honor within the canon, followed by the Acts of the Apostles. The eastern church tended to place the

seven “Catholic letters” (that is, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude) before the fourteen Pauline letters (Hebrews being accepted as Pauline), whereas the western church placed Paul’s letters immediately after Acts and followed them with the Catholic letters. Revelation ended the canon in both east and west, although its status was subject to debate for some time within the eastern church.

What criteria were used in drawing up the canon? The basic principle appears to have been that of the recognition rather than the imposition of authority. In other words, the works in question were recognized as already possessing authority, rather than having an arbitrary authority imposed upon them. For Irenaeus, the church does not create the canon; it acknowledges, conserves, and receives canonical Scripture on the basis of the authority that is already inherent to it. Some early Christians appear to have regarded apostolic authorship as of decisive importance; others were prepared to accept books that did not appear to have apostolic credentials. However, although the precise details of how the selection was made remain unclear, it is certain that the canon was closed within the western church by the beginning of the fifth century. The issue of the canon would not be raised again until the time of the Reformation.

The Role of Tradition

The early church was confronted with a major challenge from a movement known as Gnosticism. This diverse and complex movement, not dissimilar to the modern New Age phenomenon, achieved considerable influence in the late Roman Empire. The basic ideas of Gnosticism do not concern us at this point; what is of relevance here is that Gnosticism appeared very similar to Christianity on many points. For this reason, it was viewed as a major challenge by many early Christian writers, especially Irenaeus. Furthermore, Gnostic writers had a tendency to interpret New Testament passages in a manner that dismayed Christian leaders and prompted questions about the correct manner of interpretation of Scripture.

In such a context, an appeal to tradition became of major importance. The word “tradition” literally means “that which has been handed down or over,” although it can also refer to “the act of handing down or over.” Irenaeus insisted that the “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*) was faithfully preserved by the apostolic church and that it had found its expression in the canonical books of Scripture. The church had faithfully proclaimed the same gospel from the time of the Apostles until the present day. The Gnostics had no such claim to continuity with the early church. They had merely invented new ideas and were improperly suggesting that these were “Christian.” Irenaeus thus emphasized the continuity of the teaching and preaching office of the church and its officials (especially its bishops). Tradition came to mean “a traditional interpretation of Scripture” or “a traditional presentation of the Christian faith,” which is reflected in the creeds of the church and its public doctrinal pronouncements. This fixing of the creeds as a public expression of the teaching of the church is of major importance, as will become clear in the following section.

Tertullian adopted a related approach. Scripture, he argued, is capable of being understood clearly, provided that it is read as a whole. However, he conceded that controversy over the interpretation of certain passages was inevitable. Heretics, he observed

gloomily, can make Scripture say more or less anything that they like. For this reason, the tradition of the church was of considerable importance, as it indicated the manner in which Scripture had been received and interpreted within the church. The right interpretation of Scripture was thus to be found where true Christian faith and discipline had been maintained. A similar view was taken by Athanasius, who argued that Arius' Christological mistakes would never have arisen if he had remained faithful to the church's interpretation of Scripture.

Tradition was thus seen as a legacy from the Apostles, by which the church was guided and directed toward a correct interpretation of Scripture. It was not seen as a "secret source of revelation" in addition to Scripture, an idea that Irenaeus dismissed as "Gnostic." Rather, it was seen as a means of ensuring that the church remained faithful to the teaching of the Apostles, instead of adopting idiosyncratic interpretations of Scripture.

The Fixing of the Ecumenical Creeds

The English word "creed" derives from the Latin word *credo*, "I believe," with which the Apostles' Creed – probably the most familiar of all the creeds – begins. The term "creed" has come to refer to a statement of faith, summarizing the main points of Christian belief, which is common to all Christians. For this reason, the term "creed" is never applied to statements of faith associated with specific denominations. These latter are often referred to as "confessions" (such as the Lutheran Augsburg Confession or the Reformed Westminster Confession of Faith). A "confession" pertains to a denomination and includes specific beliefs and emphases that are seen as being of defining importance for this specific denomination; a "creed," however, pertains to the entire Christian church, offering a statement of beliefs that every Christian would recognize and accept. A "creed" has come to be recognized as a concise, formal, and universally accepted and authorized statement of the main points of Christian faith.

The patristic period saw two creeds coming to be treated with particular authority and respect throughout the church. The stimulus to their development appears to have been the felt need to provide a convenient summary of Christian faith suitable for public occasions, of which perhaps the most important was baptism. The early church tended to baptize its converts on Easter Day, using the period of Lent as a time of preparation and instruction for this moment of public declaration of faith and commitment. An essential requirement was that each convert who wished to be baptized should declare his or her faith in public. It seems that creeds began to emerge as a uniform declaration of faith that converts could use on such occasions.

The Apostles' Creed is probably the most familiar form of the creed known to western Christians. It falls into three main sections, dealing with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. There is also material relating to the church, judgment, and resurrection.

The Nicene Creed (more strictly known as the "Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed") is a longer creedal statement that includes additional material relating to the person of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. In response to the controversies concerning the divinity of Christ, this creed includes strong affirmations of his unity with God, including the expressions "God from God" and "being of one substance with the Father."

The Apostles' Creed

The document known as the "Apostles' Creed" is widely used in the western church as a succinct summary of the leading themes of the Christian faith. Its historical evolution is complex, with its origins lying in declarations of faith that were required of those who wanted to be baptized. The 12 individual statements of this creed, which seems to have assumed its final form in the eighth century, are traditionally ascribed to individual apostles, although there is no historical justification for this belief. During the twentieth century, the Apostle's Creed has become widely accepted by most churches, eastern and western, as a binding statement of Christian faith despite the fact that its statements concerning the "descent into hell" and the "communion of saints" (here printed within square brackets) are not found in eastern versions of the work.

1. I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of the heavens and earth;
2. and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;
3. who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary;
4. suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; [he descended to hell;]
5. on the third day he was raised from the dead;
6. he ascended into the heavens, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
7. from where he will come to judge the living and the dead.
8. I believe in the Holy Spirit;
9. in the holy Catholic church [the communion of saints];
10. the forgiveness of sins;
11. the resurrection of the flesh;
12. and eternal life.

The development of the creeds was an important element in the move toward achieving a doctrinal consensus within the early church. One area of doctrine that witnessed considerable development and controversy related to the person of Christ, to which we may now turn.

The Two Natures of Jesus Christ

The two doctrines to which the patristic period may be argued to have made a decisive contribution relate to the person of Christ (an area of theology that, as we noted, is generally designated "Christology") and the nature of the Godhead. These two developments are organically related to one another. By 325, the early church had come to the conclusion that Jesus was "of one substance" (*homoousios*) with God. (The term *homoousios* can also be translated as "one in being" or "consubstantial.") The implications of this Christological statement were twofold: in the first place, it consolidated at the intellectual level the spiritual importance of Jesus Christ to Christians; in the second, however, it posed a powerful challenge to simplistic conceptions of God. For if Jesus is recognized as "being of the same substance" as God, then the entire doctrine of God has to be reconsidered in the light of this belief. For this reason, the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity dates from after the emergence of a Christological consensus within the church. Only when the divinity of Christ could be treated as an agreed and assured starting point could theological speculation on the nature of God begin.

The Christological debates of the early church took place largely in the eastern Mediterranean world and were conducted in the Greek language, and often in the light of the presuppositions of major Greek schools of philosophy. In practical terms, this means that many of the central terms of the Christological debates of the early church are Greek, often with a history of use within the Greek philosophical tradition.

The main features of patristic Christology will be considered in some detail on pp. 43–56, to which the reader is referred. At this early stage, however, we may summarize the main landmarks of the patristic Christological debate in terms of two schools, two debates, and two councils, as follows.

1. *Schools.* The Alexandrian school tended to place emphasis upon the divinity of Christ and interpret that divinity in terms of “the word becoming incarnate.” A scriptural text that was of central importance to this school is John 1:14, “the word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” This emphasis upon the idea of incarnation led to the festival of Christmas being seen as especially important. The Antiochene school, however, placed a corresponding emphasis upon the humanity of Christ and attached especial importance to his moral example (see pp. 51–6).
2. *Debates.* The Arian controversy of the fourth century is widely regarded as one of the most significant in the history of the Christian church. Arius (c.250–c.336) argued that the scriptural titles for Christ, which appeared to point to his being of equal status with God, were merely courtesy titles. Christ was to be regarded as a creature, although nevertheless as pre-eminent amongst other creatures. This provoked a hostile response from Athanasius, who argued that the divinity of Christ was of central importance to the Christian understanding of salvation (an area of theology known as “soteriology”). Arius’s Christology was, he declared, inadequate soteriologically. Arius’s Christ could not redeem fallen humanity. In the end, Arianism (the movement associated with Arius) was declared to be heretical. This was followed by the Apollinarian debate, which centered on Apollinaris of Laodicea (c.310–c.390). A vigorous opponent of Arius, Apollinaris argued that Christ could not be regarded as being totally human. In Christ’s case, the human spirit was replaced by the divine logos. As a result, Christ did not possess full humanity. This position was regarded as severely deficient by writers such as Gregory of Nazianzus, in that it implied that Christ could not fully redeem human nature (see pp. 51–6).
3. *Councils.* The Council of Nicea (325) was convened by Constantine, the first Christian emperor, with a view to sorting out the destabilizing Christological disagreements within his empire. This was the first “ecumenical council” (that is, an assembly of Christians drawn from the entire Christian world, whose decisions are regarded as normative for the churches). Nicea (now the city of Iznik in modern-day Turkey) settled the Arian controversy by affirming that Jesus was *homoousios* (“one in being” or “of one substance”) with the Father, thus rejecting the Arian position in favor of a vigorous assertion of the divinity of Christ. The Council of Chalcedon (451), the fourth ecumenical council, confirmed the decisions of Nicea, and responded to new debates that had subsequently erupted over the humanity of Christ.

The Doctrine of the Trinity

Once the Christological debates of the early church had been settled, the consequences of those decisions could then be explored. In this intensely creative and interesting period of Christian theology, the doctrine of the Trinity began to emerge in a recognizable form. The basic feature of this doctrine is that there are three persons within the Godhead – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and that these are to be regarded as equally divine and of equal status. The co-equality of Father and Son was established through the Christological debates leading up to the Council of Nicea; the divinity of the Spirit was established in the aftermath of this, especially through the writings of Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea.

The main thrust of the Trinitarian debates increasingly came to concern the manner in which the Trinity was to be understood, rather than its fundamental validity. Two quite distinct approaches gradually emerged, one associated with the eastern and the other with the western churches.

The eastern position, which continues to be of major importance within the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches of today, was developed especially by a group of three writers, based in modern-day Turkey. Basil of Caesarea (c.330–379), Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389), and Gregory of Nyssa (c.330–c.395), collectively known as the “Cappadocian fathers,” began their reflections on the Trinity by considering the different ways in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are experienced. The western position, especially associated with Augustine of Hippo, began from the unity of God and proceeded to explore the implications of the love of God for our understanding of the nature of the Godhead. These positions will be explored in greater detail later (see pp. 56–65).

The doctrine of the Trinity represents a rare instance of a theological issue of concern to both the eastern and western churches. Our attention now shifts to two theological debates that were specifically linked with the western church and have both come to be particularly associated with Augustine of Hippo.

The Doctrine of the Church

A major controversy within the western church centered on the question of the holiness of the church. The Donatists were a group of native African Christians, based in modern-day Algeria, who resented the growing influence of the Roman church in northern Africa. The Donatists argued that the church was a body of saints, within which sinners had no place. The issue became of especial importance on account of the persecution undertaken by the emperor Diocletian in 303, which persisted until the conversion of Constantine in 313. During this persecution, in which the possession of Scripture was illegal, a number of Christians handed their copies of Scripture in to the authorities. These were immediately condemned by others who had refused to cave in under such pressure. After the persecution died down, many of these *traditores* – a Latin word meaning “those who handed over [their Scriptures]” – rejoined the church. The Donatists argued for their exclusion.

Augustine argued otherwise, declaring that the church must expect to remain a “mixed body” of saints and sinners, refusing to weed out those who had lapsed under

persecution or for other reasons. The validity of the church's ministry and preaching did not depend upon the holiness of its ministers, but upon the person of Jesus Christ. The personal unworthiness of a minister did not compromise the validity of the sacraments. This view, which rapidly became normative within the church, has had a deep impact upon Christian thinking about the nature of the church and its ministers.

The Donatist debate, which will be explored in greater detail elsewhere (pp. 66–71), was the first to center on the question of the doctrine of the church (known as “ecclesiology”) and related questions, such as the way in which sacraments function. Many of the issues raised by the controversy would surface again at the time of the Reformation, when ecclesiological issues would once more come to the fore (see pp. 133–56). The same may be said of the doctrine of grace, to which we now turn.

The Doctrine of Grace

The doctrine of grace had not been an issue of significance in the development of theology in the Greek-speaking eastern church. However, an intense controversy broke out over this question in the second decade of the fifth century. Pelagius, a British ascetic monk based at Rome, argued forcefully for the need for human moral responsibility. Alarmed at the moral laxity of the Roman church, he insisted upon the need for constant self-improvement, in the light of the Old Testament law and the example of Christ. In doing so, he seemed to his opponents – chief among whom was Augustine – to deny any real place to divine grace in the beginning or continuation of the Christian life. Pelagianism came to be seen as a religion of human autonomy, which held that human beings are able to take the initiative in their own salvation.

Augustine reacted forcefully against Pelagianism, insisting upon the priority of the grace of God at every stage in the Christian life, from its beginning to its end. Human beings did not, according to Augustine, possess the necessary freedom to take the initial steps toward salvation. Far from possessing “freedom of the will,” humans were in possession of a will that was corrupted and tainted by sin, and which biased them toward evil and away from God. Only the grace of God could counteract this bias toward sin. So forceful was Augustine's defense of grace that he later became known as “the doctor of grace” (*doctor gratiae*).

A central theme of Augustine's thought is the fallenness of human nature. The imagery of “the Fall” derives from Genesis 3 and expresses the idea that human nature has “fallen” from its original pristine state (although Genesis 3 does not use the specific language of “falling”). The present state of human nature is thus not what it is intended to be by God. The created order no longer directly corresponds to the “goodness” of its original integrity. It has lapsed. It has been spoiled and ruined – but not irredeemably, as the doctrines of salvation and justification affirm. The image of a “Fall” conveys the idea that creation now exists at a lower level than that intended for it by God.

According to Augustine, it follows that all human beings are now contaminated by sin from the moment of their birth. In contrast to many twentieth-century existentialist philosophies (such as that of Martin Heidegger), which affirm that “fallenness” (*Verfallenheit*) is an option that we choose (rather than something that is chosen for us), Augustine portrays sin as inherent to human nature. It is an integral, not an optional, aspect of our

being. This insight, which is given more rigorous expression in Augustine's doctrine of original sin, is of central importance to his doctrines of sin and salvation. In that doctrine, all are sinners and all require redemption, and all have fallen short of the glory of God and all require to be redeemed.

For Augustine, humanity, left to its own devices and resources, could never enter into a relationship with God. Nothing that a man or woman could do was sufficient to break the stranglehold of sin. To use an image that Augustine was fortunate enough never to have encountered, it is like a narcotic addict trying to break free from the grip of heroin or cocaine. The situation cannot be transformed from within – and so, if transformation is to take place, it must come from outside the human situation. According to Augustine, God intervenes in the human dilemma. He need not have done so, but out of his love for fallen humanity, he entered into the human situation in the person of Jesus Christ in order to redeem it.

Augustine held "grace" to be the unmerited or undeserved gift of God, by which God voluntarily breaks the hold of sin upon humanity. Redemption is possible only as a divine gift. It is not something that we can achieve ourselves, but is something that has to be done for us. Augustine thus emphasizes that the resources of salvation are located outside of humanity, in God himself. It is God who initiates the process of salvation, not men or women.

For Pelagius, however, the situation looked very different. Pelagius taught that the resources of salvation are located within humanity. Individual human beings have the capacity to save themselves. They are not trapped by sin, but have the ability to do all that is necessary to be saved. Salvation is something that is earned through good works and places God under an obligation to humanity. Pelagius marginalizes the idea of grace, understanding it in terms of demands made of humanity by God in order that salvation may be achieved – such as the Ten Commandments or the moral example of Christ. The ethos of Pelagianism could be summed up as "salvation by merit," whereas Augustine taught "salvation by grace."

It will be obvious that these two different theologies involve very different understandings of human nature. For Augustine, human nature is weak, fallen, and powerless; for Pelagius, it is autonomous and self-sufficient. For Augustine, humanity must depend upon God for salvation; for Pelagius, God merely indicates what has to be done if salvation is to be attained, and then leaves men and women to meet those conditions unaided. For Augustine, salvation is an unmerited gift; for Pelagius, salvation is a justly earned reward.

One aspect of Augustine's understanding of grace needs further comment. As human beings were incapable of saving themselves, and as God gave his gift of grace to some (but not all), it followed that God had "preselected" those who would be saved. Developing hints of this idea to be found in the New Testament, Augustine developed a doctrine of predestination. The term "predestination" refers to God's original or eternal decision to save some, but not others. It was this aspect of Augustine's thought that many of his contemporaries, not to mention his successors, found unacceptable. It need hardly be said that there is no direct equivalent in Pelagius' thought.

The Council of Carthage (418) decided for Augustine's views on grace and sin, and condemned Pelagianism in uncompromising terms. However, Pelagianism, in various forms, continued to be a point of contention for some time to come. As the patristic era

came to its close, with the Dark Ages settling over western Europe, many of the issues remained unresolved. They would be taken up again during the Middle Ages, and supremely at the time of the Reformation (see pp. 164–75).

Key Names, Words, and Phrases

By the end of this chapter you will have encountered the following terms, which will recur during the work. Ensure that you are familiar with them! They have been capitalized as you are likely to encounter them in normal use.

Apollinarianism	ecclesiology
Arianism	ecumenical council
Augustinianism	extra-canonical
canon	incarnation
canonical	patristic
Cappadocian fathers	patrology
Christological	Pelagian
Christology	Pelagianism
creed	soteriology
Donatist	Trinity
Donatism	Trinitarian
ecclesiological	

Questions

1. Locate the following cities or regions on map 1.1 (p. 23): Alexandria; Antioch; Cappadocia; Constantinople; Hippo; Jerusalem; Rome.
2. Now find the Latin/Greek dividing line on the same map. Latin was the main language west of that line and Greek east of it. Identify the predominant language in each of the cities mentioned in question 1.
3. Which language would you associate with the following writers: Athanasius; Augustine of Hippo; Origen; Tertullian?
4. The following movements were of major importance during the patristic period: Arianism; Donatism; Gnosticism; Pelagianism. Associate the controversies centering on each of these movements with one of the following theologians: Athanasius; Augustine of Hippo; Irenaeus of Lyons. (Note that one of these theologians is associated with more than one controversy.)
5. Why was there relatively little interest in the doctrine of the church in this early period?

Case Studies

Case Study 1.1 The Bible and Tradition

The interpretation of the Bible has been of central importance throughout Christian history. There have always been those who believed that an issue of Christian doctrine could be settled simply by an appeal to the Bible. However, the great theological debates of the patristic period showed that this approach was more complex than some had realized. Arianism and Pelagianism – both of which would be condemned as heretical, although for very different reasons – appealed to an impressive array of biblical texts in support of their teachings. Their opponents, however, argued that their interpretation of these texts was incorrect. It was not enough simply to quote the Bible; it was necessary to interpret it in an orthodox manner. But who decides what is an orthodox interpretation and what is not? What resources can be appealed to in an attempt to establish the correct interpretation of a biblical passage?

Such debates have taken place throughout the history of Christian thought, but were of particular importance at the time of the Reformation. However, the patristic period saw an especially important answer to such questions being formulated. For many patristic writers, an appeal to tradition was of major importance in challenging unorthodox interpretations of Scripture or teachings. In what follows, we shall explore the contributions of three writers to this debate: Irenaeus (second century), Tertullian (third century), and Vincent of Lérins (fifth century). We begin, however, by noting the way in which the idea of “tradition” is embedded in the New Testament itself.

In its earliest period, Christianity was spread through the oral transmission of a more or less fixed body of teaching. The term “tradition” derives from the Latin word *traditio*, which literally means “handing down” or “handing over.” The study of early Christianity indicates that the basic elements of the Christian faith were “handed over” from one teacher to another. Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, speaks of “passing on” certain key themes to his audience (1 Corinthians 15:1–4), a clear reference to the verbal transmission of central elements of the Christian message, especially the death and resurrection of Christ.

It is also known that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are based on collections of material that were transmitted orally, before they were finally committed to writing in what are now known as the “synoptic gospels.” Thus, the opening of Luke’s gospel makes reference to using reports “just as they were handed over to us by those who were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word from the beginning” (Luke 1:1–2). The general consensus within New Testament scholarship is that four sources can be discerned for the synoptic gospels:

1. Mark’s gospel itself, which seems to be used as a source by Matthew and Luke. Thus, 90 percent of the contents of Mark’s gospel are included in Matthew and 53 percent of Mark can be found in Luke. Mark’s material is written in a style that suggests that it is older than the style found in the corresponding passages in Matthew or Luke, using many semitic phrases. It is very difficult to explain this observation on the basis of any hypothesis other than that Matthew and Luke both based themselves on Mark, and “tidied up” his style.

2. Material common to both Matthew and Luke. This section of material, which is about 200 verses in length, is generally referred to as “Q.” There is no evidence that Q was a complete gospel in itself or that it existed as an independent written source.
3. Material found only in Matthew (usually known as “M”).
4. Material found only in Luke (usually known as “L”).

The most widely accepted explanation of the way in which the three synoptic gospels were compiled was developed in detail in its current form at the University of Oxford in the opening decade of the twentieth century. Its most celebrated statements can be found in B. H. Streeter’s *Four Gospels* (1924) and W. Sanday’s *Studies in the Synoptic Problem* (1911). Streeter’s work represents a collection of papers reflecting the work of the Oxford gospel seminar, which met nine times a year over a period of 15 years. Although this theory is sometimes known as “the Oxford hypothesis,” it is more commonly referred to as “the two-source theory.” Its basic features can be set out as follows.

Mark was the first gospel to be written down. It was available to both Matthew and Luke, who used it as a source, altering the style of the language as appropriate, but retaining Mark’s ordering of the material. Matthew was written after Mark, but before Luke. Both Matthew and Luke had access to the source known as Q. In addition, Matthew had access to another source known as M and Luke had access to a different source known as L. Although this theory acknowledges four sources (Mark, Q, M, and L), it is known as the “two-source” theory on account of the importance of Mark and Q in relation to its approach.

This theory has found much support in modern New Testament scholarship. However, it is by no means the only theory to command support. For example, some scholars deny the existence of Q and argue that Luke simply used Matthew as a source. J. J. Griesbach developed an influential hypothesis, according to which Matthew was written first, followed by Luke (who used Matthew). Finally, Mark was written, making use of both Matthew and Luke. It must also be stressed that the “synoptic problem” concerns our understanding of the way in which the oral traditions concerning Jesus were passed down to us. It does not call their historical accuracy or theological reliability into question, but allows a deeper understanding of the formative period of the gospel traditions, in which the words and deeds of Jesus were passed down and handed over during the period c.30–60.

Our concern in this case study, however, relates to a slightly different issue concerning the idea of “tradition,” which became of major importance during the second century. A movement known as “Gnosticism” emerged as a major threat to the Christian church during this period, partly on account of the fact that its teachings were at least superficially similar to those of Christianity itself. Many Gnostic writers argued that salvation was achieved through access to a secret teaching, which alone ensured that believers would be saved. The “secret knowledge” in question, for some Gnostic writers, was almost like a form of “cosmic password.” When someone died, their spirit was liberated from its physical prison and it was free to begin its long and complex journey to its final and glorious destination. To get there, it needed to get past a series of potential obstacles, for which the “secret knowledge” was required.

Some Gnostic writers argued that this secret oral teaching had been passed down from the apostles and that it was to be found in a “veiled” form in the Bible. Only those who knew how to read the Bible in a certain way could gain access to this knowledge, which was not publicly available. Only those who were initiated into the mysteries of Gnosticism could therefore hope to benefit from the salvation that the New Testament offered.

It was clearly of major importance for the Christian church to rebut this teaching. It implied that, while the church had access to the Bible, it did not have access to the special way of reading and interpreting the Bible, which was required if its true meaning was to be understood. Perhaps more importantly, the salvation that the New Testament promised was only available to those who had access to the secret traditions of Gnosticism. In response to the threat from Gnosticism, a “traditional” method of understanding certain passages of Scripture began to develop. Second-century patristic theologians such as Irenaeus of Lyons began to develop the idea of an authorized way of interpreting certain texts of Scripture, which he argued went back to the time of the apostles themselves. Scripture could not be allowed to be interpreted in any arbitrary or random way: it had to be interpreted within the context of the historical continuity of the Christian church. The parameters of its interpretation were historically fixed and given. “Tradition” here means simply “a traditional way of interpreting Scripture within the community of faith.” This is what is known as a single-source theory of tradition.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130–c.200). Probably a native of Asia Minor, who was elected bishop of the southern French city of Lyons around 178. He is chiefly noted for his major writing *adversus haereses* (“Against the heresies”), which defended the Christian faith against Gnostic misrepresentations and criticisms.

To understand Irenaeus at this point, we shall examine a passage from his major work *Against Heresies*, in which he engages with the Gnostic threat through an appeal to tradition. Irenaeus here argues that the living Christian community possessed a tradition of interpreting Scripture that was denied to heretics. By their historical succession from the apostles, the bishops ensure that their congregations remain faithful to their teachings and interpretations.

Everyone who wishes to perceive the truth should consider the apostolic tradition, which has been made known in every church in the entire world. We are able to number those who are bishops appointed by the apostles, and their successors in the churches to the present day, who taught and knew nothing of such things as these people imagine. For if the apostles had known secret mysteries which they taught privately and secretly to the perfect, they would have passed them down to those to whom they entrusted the churches. ... Therefore, as there are so many demonstrations of this fact, there is no need to look anywhere else for the truth which we can easily obtain from the church. The apostles have, as it were, deposited this truth in all its fullness in this depository, so that whoever wants to may draw from this water of life. This is the gate of life; all others are thieves and robbers.

The Gnostics had argued that they had access to a secret oral tradition, which allowed them to discern the true meaning of passages in the Bible. Irenaeus contrasts this with the publicly accessible Christian tradition, which is “made known in every church in the entire world.” Irenaeus argues that the teachings of the apostles, which secure salvation for those who accept them, are made known through the public teaching of the church. The apostolic teaching “in all its fullness” has been “deposited” – that is, made available and accessible – through the church.

Note how Irenaeus points out a problem with the Gnostic position. If the Gnostics are dependent on a “secret tradition,” deriving from the apostles, how can they be sure that it has been passed down correctly? To whom was it entrusted? And who did these people pass it on to subsequently? Irenaeus stresses that, in the case of the Christian church, the immediate and subsequent successors to the apostles are known and can be named. Irenaeus sees the bishops as visible embodiments of the institutional and doctrinal continuity between the apostles and the contemporary church. The apostles chose to entrust their teaching to named successors within the church.

Irenaeus ends by using a text from the Gospel of John to make his point. “Jesus said again, ‘I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers’” (John 10:7–8). What is the point that Irenaeus is making here? How does this imagery help him to clinch his point?

Tertullian (c.160–c.225). A major figure in early Latin theology, who produced a series of significant controversial and apologetic writings. He is particularly noted for his ability to coin new Latin terms to translate the emerging theological vocabulary of the Greek-speaking eastern church.

A similar point is made by the Roman theologian Tertullian, in an early third-century analysis of the sources of theology dedicated to demonstrating the weaknesses of the heretical positions. Tertullian here lays considerable emphasis upon the role of tradition and apostolic succession in the defining of Christian theology. Orthodoxy depends upon remaining historically continuous with and theologically dependent upon the apostles. The heretics, in contrast, cannot demonstrate any such continuity.

If the Lord Jesus Christ sent out the apostles to preach, no preachers other than those who are appointed by Christ are to be received, since “no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son has revealed him,” and the Son appears to have revealed him to no one except the apostles who he sent to preach what he had revealed to them. What they preached – that is, what Christ revealed to them – ought, by this ruling, to be established only by those churches that those apostles founded by their preaching and, as they say, by the living voice, and subsequently through their letters. If this is true, all doctrine that is in agreement with those apostolic churches, the sources and originals of the faith, must be accounted as the truth, since it indubitably preserves what the churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, and Christ from God.

Tertullian's argument lays considerable emphasis on the importance of historical continuity. Note how he stresses the importance of the link between apostles and bishops, and especially the way in which he demands that those who claim to represent "apostolic" teaching must be able to verify their historical links with the apostles.

The debate over authentic Christian teaching continued well into the fifth century. One major concern focused on the idea of doctrinal innovation. What was the church to make of teachings that claimed to be based on Scripture, but seemed to represent new teachings? The controversies within the early church often seemed to end up introducing new teachings, rather than simply defending older teachings.

Vincent of Lérins (died before 450). A French theologian who settled on the island of Lérins. He is particularly noted for his emphasis on the role of tradition in guarding against innovations in the doctrine of the church and is credited with the formulation of the so-called "Vincentian canon."

A major contribution to this question was made in 434 by Vincent of Lérins, based in the south of France, and sometimes known by the pseudonym "Peregrinus." Writing in the aftermath of the Pelagian controversy, Vincent of Lérins expressed his belief that the controversies of that time had given rise to theological innovations, such as new ways of interpreting certain biblical passages. It is clear that he regarded Augustine's doctrine of double predestination (which arose as a response to Pelagius' views on grace) as a case in point, but how could such doctrinal innovations be identified? In response to this question, he argues for a triple criterion by which authentic Christian teaching may be established: ecumenicity (being believed everywhere), antiquity (being believed always), and consent (being believed by all people). This triple criterion is often described as the "Vincentian canon," the word "canon" here having the sense of "rule" or "norm" (see p. 29).

Holy Scripture, on account of its depth, is not accepted in a universal sense. The same statements are interpreted in one way by one person, in another by someone else, with the result that there seem to be as many opinions as there are people. ... Therefore, on account of the number and variety of errors, there is a need for someone to lay down a rule for the interpretation of the prophets and the apostles in such a way that is directed by the rule of the Catholic church. Now in the Catholic church itself the greatest care is taken that we hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all people (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*).

The problem that Vincent hopes to resolve is this: how are authentically Christian teachings to be distinguished from those of heretics? An initial answer to this question might seem to be that these teachings can be identified on account of their faithfulness to Scripture. However, Vincent makes the point that Scripture is interpreted in different ways by different people. A simple appeal to the Bible is therefore not good enough; something additional is needed, to allow the church to determine which of the possible interpretations of a biblical passage is to be preferred. For this reason, Vincent argues

for the need for a “rule for the interpretation of the prophets and the apostles.” He finds this “rule” in what has since come to be known as the *consensus fidelium* – “the consensus of the faithful” – which has, according to Vincent, three basic elements. A belief or way of interpreting Scripture must have been accepted “everywhere, always, and by everyone.” In other words, it must not be limited to a certain geographical region, a specific period of time, or a small (and potentially unrepresentative) group of people.

Vincent’s definition – often referred to as the “Vincentian Canon” – proved highly influential and is often reflected in later writings dealing with this theme. By the end of the patristic period, the idea of interpreting the Bible within the living tradition of the Christian church was seen as an essential antidote to heresy and had become part of the accepted way of doing theology.

Case Study 1.2 The Arian Controversy: The Divinity of Christ

The patristic period saw considerable attention being paid to the doctrine of the person of Christ. The debate was conducted primarily within the eastern church; interestingly, Augustine of Hippo never wrote anything of consequence on Christology. The period proved to be definitive, laying down guidelines for the discussion of the person of Christ that remained normative until the dawn of the Enlightenment debates on the relation of faith and history, to be considered in a later case study (see Case Study 4.1).

The task confronting the patristic writers was basically the development of a unified Christological scheme, which would bring together and integrate the various Christological hints and statements, images and models, found within the New Testament – some of which have been considered briefly above. That task proved to be complex. The first period of the development of Christology centered on the question of the divinity of Christ and may be regarded as focusing on the question of whether Jesus Christ may legitimately be described as “God.” That Jesus Christ was human appeared to be something of a truism to most early patristic writers. It was self-evidently true and did not require justification. What required explanation about Christ concerned the manner in which he differed from, rather than approximated to, other human beings.

Two early viewpoints were quickly rejected as heretical. Ebionitism, a primarily Jewish sect that flourished in the early first centuries of the Christian era, regarded Jesus as an ordinary human being, the human son of Mary and Joseph. This reduced Christology was regarded as totally inadequate by its opponents and was soon discarded. More significant was the diametrically opposed view, which came to be known as Docetism, from the Greek verb *dokein* (to seem or appear). This approach – which scholars suggest is probably best regarded as a tendency within theology rather than a definite theological position – argued that Christ was totally divine and that he merely appeared to be human. The sufferings of Christ are thus apparent rather than real. Docetism held a particular attraction for the Gnostic writers of the second century, during which period it reached its zenith. By this time, however, other viewpoints were in the process of emerging, which would eventually eclipse this tendency.

Justin Martyr represents one such viewpoint. Justin Martyr, amongst the most important of the second-century Apologists, was especially concerned to demonstrate that the

Christian faith represented the fulfilment of the insights of both classical Greek philosophy and Judaism. Adolf von Harnack summarized the manner in which Justin achieved this objective: he argued that “Christ is the *Logos* and *Nomos*” (*Nomos* is the Greek term for “Law,” here referring to the *Torah*). Of particular interest is the Logos-Christology that Justin develops, in which he exploits the apologetic potential of the idea of the “Logos,” current in both Stoicism and the Middle Platonism of the period. The Logos (a Greek term that is usually translated as “word” – that is, as it is found at John 1:14) is to be thought of as the ultimate source of all human knowledge. The one and the same Logos is known by both Christian believers and pagan philosophers; the latter, however, only have partial access to it, whereas Christians have full access to it, on account of its manifestation in Christ. Justin allows that pre-Christian secular philosophers, such as Heraclitus or Socrates, thus had partial access to the truth, on account of the manner in which the Logos is present in the world.

Justin Martyr (c.100–c.165). One of the most noted of the Christian apologists of the second century, with a concern to demonstrate the moral and intellectual credibility of Christianity in a pagan world. His “First Apology” stresses the manner in which Christianity brings to fulfillment the insights of classical philosophy.

An idea of especial importance in this context is that of the *logos spermatikos*, which appears to derive from Middle Platonism. The divine Logos sowed seeds throughout human history; it is therefore to be expected that this “seed-bearing Logos” will be known, even if only in part, by non-Christians. Justin is therefore able to argue that Christianity builds upon and fulfills the hints and anticipations of God’s revelation, which is to be had through pagan philosophy. The Logos was known temporarily through the theophanies (that is, appearances or manifestations of God) in the Old Testament; Christ brings the Logos to its fullest revelation. The world of Greek philosophy is thus set firmly in the context of Christianity: it is a prelude to the coming of Christ, who brings to fulfillment what it had hitherto known only in part.

It is in the writings of Origen that the Logos-Christology appears to find its fullest development. In the incarnation, the human soul of Christ is united with the Logos. On account of the closeness of this union, Christ’s human soul comes to share in the properties of the Logos. Nevertheless, Origen insists that, although both the Logos and Father are co-eternal, the Logos is subordinate to the Father. Although both the Logos and Father are co-eternal, the Logos is subordinate to the Father.

Origen (c.185–c.254). A leading representative of the Alexandrian school of theology, especially noted for his allegorical exposition of Scripture and his use of Platonic ideas in theology, particularly Christology. The originals of many of his works, which were written in Greek, have been lost, with the result that some are known only in Latin translations of questionable reliability.

We noted above that Justin Martyr argued that the Logos was accessible to all, even if only in a fragmentary manner. Its full disclosure only came in Christ. Related ideas can be found in other writers to adopt the Logos-Christology, including Origen. Origen adopts an illuminationist approach to revelation, in which God's act of revelation is compared to being enlightened by the "rays of God," which are caused by "the light which is the divine Logos." For Origen, both truth and salvation are to be had outside the Christian faith.

What has been said thus far is intended to be an introduction to one of the most important landmark theological debates of the patristic period – the Arian controversy of the fourth century. The Arian controversy remains a landmark in the development of classical Christology and deserves a fuller discussion. It must be noted that certain aspects of the history of the controversy remain obscure, and are likely to remain so, despite the best efforts of historians to clarify them. What concerns us here are the theological aspects of the debate, which are comparatively well understood. However, it must be stressed that we know Arius' views mainly in the form in which they have been mediated to us by his opponents, which raises questions about the potential bias of their presentations. What follows is an attempt to present Arius' distinctive Christological ideas as fairly as possible, on the basis of the relatively few reliable sources now available to us.

Arius emphasizes the self-subsistence of God. God is the one and only source of all created things; nothing exists that does not ultimately derive from God. This view of God, which many commentators have suggested is due more to Hellenistic philosophy than to Christian theology, clearly raises the question of the relation of the Father to the Son. In his *Against the Arians*, Arius' critic Athanasius represents him as making the following statements on this point:

God was not always a father. There was a time when God was all alone, and was not yet a father; only later did he become a father. The Son did not always exist. Everything created is out of nothing ... so the Logos of God came into existence out of nothing. There was a time when he was not. Before he was brought into being, he did not exist. He also had a beginning to his created existence.

Arius (c.250–c.336). The originator of Arianism, a form of Christology that refused to concede the full divinity of Christ. Little is known of his life and little has survived of his writings. With the exception of a letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, his views are known mainly through the writings of his opponents.

These statements are of considerable importance and bring us to the heart of Arianism. The following points are of especial significance.

1. The Father is regarded as existing before the Son. "There was when he was not." This decisive affirmation places Father and Son on different levels and is consistent with

Arius' rigorous insistence that the Son is a creature. Only the Father is "unbegotten"; the Son, like all other creatures, derives from this one source of being. However, Arius is careful to emphasize that the Son is like every other creature. There is a distinction of rank between the Son and other creatures, including human beings. Arius has some difficulty in identifying the precise nature of this distinction. The Son, he argued, is "a perfect creature, yet not as one among other creatures; a begotten being, yet not as one among other begotten beings." The implication seems to be that the Son outranks other creatures, while sharing their essentially created and begotten nature.

2. Arius stresses the unknowability of God to creatures, with the result that the Father must be unknown to the Son (who is, as we have noted, a creature). Arius emphasizes the utter transcendence and inaccessibility of God. God cannot be known by any other creature. Yet, as we noted above, the Son is to be regarded as a creature, however elevated above all other creatures. Arius presses home his logic, arguing that the Son cannot know the Father. "The one who has a beginning is in no position to comprehend or lay hold of the one who has no beginning." This important affirmation rests upon the radical distinction between Father and Son. Such is the gulf fixed between them that the latter cannot know the former unaided. In common with all other creatures, the Son is dependent upon the grace of God if the Son is to perform whatever function has been ascribed to him. It is considerations such as these that have led Arius' critics to argue that, at the levels of revelation and salvation, the Son is in precisely the same position as other creatures.
3. Arius argued that the biblical passages that seemed to speak of Christ's status in terms of divinity were merely using language in an honorific manner. (The technical term for this way of using language is "catachrestic.") Arius' opponents were easily able to bring forward a series of biblical passages pointing to the fundamental unity between Father and Son. On the basis of the controversial literature of the period, it is clear that the Fourth Gospel was of major importance to this controversy, with John 3:35, 10:30, 12:27, 14:10, 17:3, and 17:11 being discussed frequently. Arius' response to such texts is significant: the language of "sonship" is variegated in character and metaphorical in nature. To refer to Christ as the "Son of God" is an honorific, rather than theologically precise, way of speaking. Although Jesus Christ is referred to as "Son" in Scripture, this metaphorical way of speaking is subject to the controlling principle of a God who is totally different in essence from all created beings – including the Son.

Arius' position can therefore be summarized as follows:

1. The Son is one of God's creatures, who, like all other creatures, owes his existence to the will of God.

2. The term “Son” is thus a metaphor, an honorific term intended to underscore the rank of the Son among other creatures. The Son is supreme among God’s creatures. Yet this does not imply that Father and Son share the same being or status.
3. The status of the Son is itself a consequence of the will of the Father; it is not a consequence of the nature of the Son, but of the will of the Father.

Athanasius had little time for Arius’ subtle distinctions. For Athanasius, Arius’ doctrine of the creaturehood of the Son had two decisive consequences, each of which showed up serious problems within Arius’s Christology.

First, Athanasius makes the point that it is only God who can save. God, and God alone, can break the power of sin and bring us to eternal life. An essential feature of being a creature is that one requires to be redeemed. No creature can save another creature. Only the creator can redeem the creation. Having emphasized that it is God alone who can save, Athanasius then makes the logical move, which the Arians found difficult to counter. The New Testament and the Christian liturgical tradition alike regard Jesus Christ as Saviour. Yet, as Athanasius emphasized, only God can save. Arius and his followers accepted that Christ was savior, but denied he was God. For Athanasius, this meant it was an incoherent position. If Christ was not divine, he could not save us.

Athanasius (c.296–373). One of the most significant defenders of orthodox Christology during the period of the Arian controversy. Elected as bishop of Alexandria in 328, he was deposed on account of his opposition to Arianism. Although he was widely supported in the west, his views were only finally recognized at the Council of Constantinople (381) after his death.

The only possible solution, Athanasius argues, is to accept that Jesus is God incarnate. The logic of his argument at times goes something like this:

1. No creature can redeem another creature.
2. According to Arius, Jesus Christ is a creature.
3. Therefore, according to Arius, Jesus Christ cannot redeem humanity.

At times, a slightly different style of argument can be discerned, resting upon the statements of Scripture and the Christian liturgical tradition.

1. Only God can save.
2. Jesus Christ saves.
3. Therefore Jesus Christ is God.

Salvation, for Athanasius, involves divine intervention. Athanasius thus draws out the meaning of John 1:14 by arguing that the “word became flesh”: in other words, God entered into our human situation, in order to change it.

The second point that Athanasius makes is that Christians worship and pray to Jesus Christ. This represents an excellent case study of the importance of Christian practices of worship and prayer for Christian theology. By the fourth century, prayer to and adoration of Christ were standard features of the way in which public worship took place. These were not innovations, but pervasive practices within the early Christian churches that can be traced back to the apostles. The Roman imperial administrator Pliny the Younger reported this practice in the early second century, when he spoke of Christians “singing a hymn to Christ as to a god.” Athanasius points out that Arius’s insistence that Christ is a creature means that the apostolic practice of worshipping Christ can only amount to idolatry. If Christ is a creature, then Christians are guilty of worshipping a creature instead of God – in other words, they had lapsed into idolatry. Christians, Athanasius stresses, are totally forbidden to worship anyone or anything except God himself. Athanasius thus argued that Arius seemed to be guilty of making nonsense of the way in which Christians prayed and worshiped. Athanasius argued that Christians were right to worship and adore Jesus Christ because, by doing so, they were recognizing him for what he was – God incarnate.

The Arian controversy had to be settled somehow, if peace was to be established within the church. Debate came to center upon two terms as possible descriptions of the relation of the Father to the Son. The Greek technical term *homoiousios*, meaning “of like substance” or “of like being,” was seen by many as representing a judicious compromise, allowing the proximity between Father and Son to be asserted without requiring any further speculation on the precise nature of their relation. However, the rival term *homoousios*, “of the same substance” or “of the same being,” eventually gained the upper hand. Though differing by only one letter from the alternative term, it embodied a very different understanding of the relationship between Father and Son. The fury of the debate prompted the British historian Edward Gibbon to comment in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that never had there been so much energy spent over a single vowel. The Nicene Creed – or, more accurately, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed – of 381 declared that Christ was “of the same substance” with the Father. This affirmation has since widely become regarded as a benchmark of Christological orthodoxy within all the mainstream Christian churches, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox.

The present case study has explored a controversy that arose concerning the issue of Christology. The following case study explores a debate which arose specifically within the Alexandrian Christological school, centering on the teachings of Apollinaris of Laodicea.

Case Study 1.3 The Alexandrian Christological School: The Apollinarian Controversy

In an earlier case study (Case Study 1.2), we considered Athanasius’ response to Arius’s views on the identity of Christ. In doing so, we began to touch on some of the features

of the Alexandrian school of Christology. It is therefore appropriate to explore these in more detail and discuss one debate that illustrated the tensions within the school. In a later case study (Case Study 1.4), we shall explore the views of the rival Antiochene school.

The outlook of the Alexandrian school, of which Athanasius is a leading representative, is strongly soteriological in character. Jesus Christ is the redeemer of humanity, where “redemption” means “being taken up into the life of God” or “being made divine,” a notion traditionally expressed in terms of “deification.” Christology gives expression to what this soteriological insight implies. We could summarize the trajectory of Alexandrian Christology along the following lines: if human nature is to be deified, it must be united with the divine nature. God must become united with human nature in such a manner that the latter is enabled to share in the life of God. This, the Alexandrians argued, was precisely what happened in and through the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ. God became human, in order that humanity might become divine. Salvation depends on the divine status of Christ as savior.

Alexandrian writers thus placed considerable emphasis upon the idea of the Logos assuming human nature. The term “assuming” is important; a distinction is drawn between the Logos “dwelling within humanity” (as in the case of the Old Testament prophets) and the Logos taking human nature upon itself (as in the incarnation of the Son of God). Particular emphasis came to be placed upon John 1:14 (“the word became flesh”), which came to embody the fundamental insights of the school and the liturgical celebration of Christmas. To celebrate the birth of Christ was to celebrate the coming of the Logos to the world and assuming human nature in order to redeem it.

This clearly raised the question of the relation of the divinity and humanity of Christ. Cyril of Alexandria is one of many writers within the school to emphasize the reality of their union in the incarnation. The Logos existed “without flesh” before its union with human nature; after that union, there is only one nature, in that the Logos united human nature to itself. This emphasis upon the one nature of Christ distinguishes the Alexandrian from the Antiochene school, which was more receptive to the idea of two natures within Christ. Cyril, writing in the fifth century, states this point as follows:

We do not affirm that the nature of the Logos underwent a change and became flesh, or that it was transformed into a whole or perfect human consisting of flesh and body; rather, we say that the Logos ... personally united itself to human nature with a living soul, became a human being, and was called the Son of Man, but not of mere will or favour.

Cyril of Alexandria (died 444). A significant writer, who was appointed patriarch of Alexandria in 412. He became involved in the controversy over the Christological views of Nestorius and produced major statements and defenses of the orthodox position on the two natures of Christ.

This raised the question of what kind of human nature had been assumed. We may return to the fourth century to explore this point further. Apollinaris of Laodicea had anxieties about the increasingly widespread belief that the Logos assumed human nature *in its entirety*. It seemed to him that this implied that the Logos was contaminated by the weaknesses of human nature. How could the Son of God be allowed to be tainted by purely human directive principles? The sinlessness of Christ would be compromised, in Apollinaris' view, if he were to possess a purely human mind; after all, the human mind was the source of sin and rebellion against God. Only if the human mind were to be replaced by a purely divine motivating and directing force could the sinlessness of Christ be maintained. For this reason, Apollinaris argued that, in Christ, a purely human mind and soul were replaced by a divine mind and soul: "the divine energy fulfills the role of the animating soul and of the human mind" in Christ. The human nature of Christ is thus incomplete.

This can be seen clearly from a letter written by Apollinaris to the bishops at Diocoesarea, which sets out the leading features of his Christology. The most important is the unequivocal assertion that the Word did not assume a "changeable" human mind in the incarnation, which would have led to the Word being trapped in human sin. Rather, it assumed "an immutable and heavenly divine mind." As a result, Christ cannot be said to be totally human.

We confess that the Word of God has not descended upon a holy man, which was what happened in the case of the prophets. Rather, the Word himself has become flesh without having assumed a human mind – that is, a changeable mind, which is enslaved to filthy thoughts – but which exists as an immutable and heavenly divine mind.

Apollinaris of Laodicea (c.310–c.390). A vigorous defender of orthodoxy against the Arian heresy, who was appointed bishop of Laodicea at some point around 360. He is chiefly remembered for his Christological views, which were regarded as an over-reaction to Arianism and widely criticized at the Council of Constantinople (381).

This idea appalled many of Apollinaris' colleagues. The Apollinarian view of Christ may have had its attractions for some; others, however, were shocked by its soteriological implications. It was pointed out above (p. 47) that soteriological considerations are of central importance to the Alexandrian approach. How could human nature be redeemed, it was asked, if only part of human nature had been assumed by the Logos? Perhaps the most famous statement of this position is set out by Gregory of Nazianzus in his Letter 101, in which he stressed the redemptive importance of the assumption of human nature in its totality at the incarnation.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389), also known as "Gregory Nazianzen." He is particularly remembered for his "Five Theological Orations," written around 380, and a compilation of extracts from the writings of Origen, which he entitled the *Philokalia*.

In this letter, written in Greek at some point in 380 or 381, Gregory mounts a frontal assault on the central thesis of Apollinarianism: that Christ was not fully human, in that he possessed “an immutable and heavenly divine mind,” rather than a human mind. For Gregory, this amounts to a denial of the possibility of redemption. Only what is assumed by the Word in the incarnation can be redeemed. If Christ did not possess a human mind, humanity is not redeemed.

We do not separate the humanity from the divinity; in fact, we assert the dogma of the unity and identity of the Person, who previously was not just human but God, the only Son before all ages, who in these last days has assumed human nature also for our salvation. ... If anyone has put their trust in him as a human being lacking a human mind, they are themselves mindless and not worthy of salvation. For what has not been assumed has not been healed; it is what is united to his divinity that is saved. ... Let them not grudge us our total salvation, or endue the Saviour with only the bones and nerves and mere appearance of humanity.

Gregory here stresses that Jesus Christ is both perfect God and a perfect human person. Even though human nature has fallen, through the impact of sin, it remains capable of being redeemed. And if the whole of human nature is to be redeemed, it follows that the whole of that human nature must be assumed. Gregory thus affirms the use of the term “Theotokos” to refer to Mary. For Gregory, the use of this title (which can be translated literally as “bearer of God,” but is often translated in a more popular form as “Mother of God”) is a necessary consequence of the incarnation. To deny this title is to deny the reality of the incarnation – a point that is of especial importance in relation to the controversy that broke out within the Antiochene school over the teaching of Nestorius on this matter, which we shall consider in a later case study.

The central theme of the passage can be summed up in the assertion: “what has not been assumed has not been healed.” For Gregory, only those aspects of human nature that have been united to the divinity in the incarnation are saved. If we are to be saved in the totality of our human nature, that totality must be brought into contact with the divinity. If Christ is only partly or apparently human, then salvation is not possible.

In the present case study, we have explored a major controversy within one of the two dominant patristic schools of Christology. In the following case study, we shall examine a highly significant debate that broke out within the Antiochene school.

Case Study 1.4 The Antiochene Christological School: The Nestorian Controversy

In an earlier case study (Case Study 1.3), we noted the development of the Alexandrian school of Christology and traced the trajectory of a major controversy within it. In the present case study, we shall repeat this exercise, focusing on the rival school of Antioch.

The school of Christology that arose in ancient Syria (modern-day Turkey) differed considerably from its Egyptian rival at Alexandria. One of the most significant points of difference concerns the context in which Christological speculation was set. The Alexandrian writers were motivated primarily by soteriological considerations. Concerned that deficient understandings of the person of Christ were linked with inadequate conceptions of salvation, they used ideas derived from secular Greek philosophy to ensure a picture of Christ that was consistent with the full redemption of humanity. The idea of the “Logos” was of particular importance here, especially when linked with the notion of incarnation.

The Antiochene writers differed at this point. Their concerns were moral, rather than purely soteriological, and they drew much less significantly on the ideas of Greek philosophy. The basic trajectory of much Antiochene thinking on the identity of Christ can be traced along the following lines. On account of their disobedience, human beings exist in a state of corruption, from which they are unable to extricate themselves. If redemption is to take place, it must be on the basis of a new obedience on the part of humanity. Because humanity is unable to break free from the bonds of sin, God is obliged to intervene. This leads to the coming of the redeemer as one who unites humanity and divinity, and thus to the re-establishment of an obedient people of God.

The two natures of Christ are vigorously defended. Christ is at one and the same time both God and a human being. Against the Alexandrian criticism that this was to deny the unity of Christ, the Antiochenes responded that they upheld that unity, while simultaneously recognizing that the one redeemer possessed both a perfect human and perfect divine nature. There is a “perfect conjunction” between the human and divine natures in Christ. The complete unity of Christ is thus not inconsistent with his possessing two natures, divine and human. Theodore of Mopsuestia stressed this, in asserting that the glory of Jesus Christ “comes from God the Logos, who assumed him and united him to himself. ... And because of this exact conjunction which this human being has with God the Son, the whole creation honors and worships him.”

So how did the Antiochene theologians envisage the mode of union of divine and human natures in Christ? We have already seen the “assumption” model, which had gained the ascendancy at Alexandria, by which the Logos assumed human flesh. What model was employed at Antioch? The answer could be summarized as follows:

Alexandria: Logos assumes a general human nature.

Antioch: Logos assumes a specific human being.

Theodore of Mopsuestia often implies that the Logos did not assume “human nature” in general, but a specific human being. Instead of assuming a general or abstract human nature, Theodore appears to suggest that the Logos assumed a specific concrete human individual. This seems to be the case in his work *On the Incarnation*: “In coming to indwell, the Logos united the assumed (human being) as a whole to itself, and made him

to share with it in all the dignity which the one who indwells, being the Son of God by nature, possesses.”

So how are the human and divine natures related? Antiochene writers were convinced that the Alexandrian position led to the “mingling” or “confusion” of the divine and human natures of Christ. Instead, they devised a manner of conceptualizing the relationship between the two natures that maintained their distinct identities. This “union according to good pleasure” involves the human and divine natures of Christ being understood to be rather like watertight compartments within Christ. They never interact or mingle with one another. They remain distinct, being held together by the good pleasure of God. The “hypostatic union” – that is, the union of the divine and human natures in Christ – rests in the will of God.

Nestorius (died c.451). A major representative of the Antiochene school of theology, who became patriarch of Constantinople in 428. His vigorous emphasis upon the humanity of Christ seemed to his critics to amount to a denial of his divinity. Nestorius’ failure to endorse the term Theotokos led to him being openly charged with heresy. Although far more orthodox than his opponents allowed, the extent of Nestorius’ orthodoxy remains unclear and disputed.

Theodore of Mopsuestia (c.350–428). A leading representative of the Antiochene school, noted especially for his biblical exegesis. He became bishop of Mopsuestia in 392. His views on Christology were criticized at the time by Alexandrian writers and were subsequently condemned at the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Constantinople (553).

This might seem to suggest that Theodore of Mopsuestia regards the union of the divine and human natures as being a purely moral union, like that of a husband and wife. It also leads to a suspicion that the Logos merely puts on human nature as one would put on a coat: the action involved is temporary and reversible, and involves no fundamental change to anyone involved. However, the Antiochene writers do not seem to have intended these conclusions to be drawn. Perhaps the most reliable way of approaching their position is to suggest that their desire to avoid confusing the divine and human natures within Christ led them to stress their distinctiveness – yet, in so doing, to inadvertently weaken their link in the hypostatic union.

This became a matter of controversy on account of the way in which Nestorius chose to express his Christological views, which seemed to his critics to amount to a doctrine of “two sons” – that is, that Jesus Christ was not a single person, but two, one human and one divine. Yet this is explicitly excluded by the leading writers of the school, such as Nestorius. Christ is, according to Nestorius, “the common name of the two natures.”

Christ is indivisible in that he is Christ, but he is twofold in that he is both God and a human being. He is one in his sonship, but is twofold in that which takes and that which is taken. ... For we do not acknowledge two Christs or two sons or “only-begottens” or Lords; not one son and another son, not a first “only-begotten” and a new “only-begotten,” not a first and second Christ, but one and the same.

Nestorius’ views created something of a scandal, as contemporary reports indicate. What follows is an extract from a history of the church compiled around this time by Socrates, also known as “Scholasticus.” While there is probably a degree of bias in the reporting of Nestorius’ actions and words, what is found in this passage corresponds well with what is known of the situation at this time. Notice how the controversy focuses on whether Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, may properly be referred to as *Theotokos* (“God-bearer”). Nestorius is here depicted as confused about whether to use the term or not, hesitant as to what its use affirms, yet fearful as to what its denial might imply.

[Nestorius] adopted a controversial attitude, and totally rejected the term *Theotokos*. The controversy on the matter was taken one way by some and another way by others, with the result that the ensuing discussion divided the church, and began to look like people fighting in the dark, with everyone coming out with the most confused and contradictory assertions. Nestorius acquired the popular reputation of asserting that the Lord was nothing more than a human being, and attempting to impose the teaching of Paul of Samosata and Photinus on the church. This led to such a great outcry that it was thought necessary to convene a general council to rule on the matter in dispute.

To understand the point at issue here, we need to explore an aspect of Christology known as the doctrine of the “communication of attributes,” a notion often discussed in terms of the Latin phrase *communicatio idiomatum*. The issue involved can be explored as follows. By the end of the fourth century, the following propositions had gained widespread acceptance within the church:

1. Jesus is fully human.
2. Jesus is fully divine.

If both these statements are simultaneously true, it was argued, then what was true of the humanity of Jesus must also be true of his divinity – and vice versa. An example might be the following:

Jesus Christ is God;
 Mary gave birth to Jesus;
 Therefore Mary is the Mother of God.

This kind of argument became increasingly commonplace within the late fourth-century church; indeed, it often served as a means of testing the orthodoxy of a theologian. A failure to agree that Mary was the “Mother of God” became seen as tantamount to a

refusal to accept the divinity of Christ. This can be seen, for example, in Gregory of Nyssa's response to Apollinaris, noted in Case Study 1.3.

How far can this principle be pressed? For example, consider the following line of argument:

Jesus suffered on the cross;
 Jesus is God;
 Therefore God suffered on the cross.

The first two statements are orthodox, and commanded widespread assent within the church, but the conclusion drawn from them was widely regarded as unacceptable. It was axiomatic to most patristic writers that God could not suffer. The patristic period witnessed theologians agonizing over the limits that could be set to this approach. Thus Gregory of Nazianzus insisted that God must be considered to suffer; otherwise the reality of the incarnation of the Son of God was called into question. However, it was the Nestorian controversy that highlighted the importance of the issues.

By the time of Nestorius, the title *Theotokos* had become widely accepted within both popular piety and academic theology. Nestorius was, however, alarmed at some of its implications. It seemed to deny the humanity of Christ. Why not call Mary *anthropotokos* ("bearer of humanity") or even *Christotokos* ("bearer of the Christ")? His suggestions were met with outrage and indignation, on account of the enormous theological investment that had come to be associated with the term *theotokos*. Nestorius may be regarded as making an entirely legitimate point; however, the manner in which he made it caused considerable offence.

The controversy was unquestionably heightened by a simmering political controversy over the status of the patriarchate of Constantinople. Those hostile to its growing status within the Christian world (especially those linked with the rival city of Alexandria) seized on Nestorius' comments and exploited their potentially controversial nature to challenge the status of the patriarchate. This kind of hostility can be seen in the response of Cyril of Alexandria to Nestorius, to which we now turn.

In an important section of his Letter 17, written around 430, Cyril condemns 12 propositions associated with the Antiochene school of Christology. Although Cyril regards these views as heretical, there are points at which it seems that his primary concern is to establish the supremacy of the Alexandrian over the Antiochene position. The first three statements are particularly significant.

If any one does not acknowledge that Emmanuel is truly God and that the holy Virgin is, in consequence, "Theotokos," for she gave birth in the flesh to the Word of God who has become flesh, let them be condemned.

If any one does not acknowledge that the Word of God the Father was substantially united with flesh, and with his own flesh is one Christ, that is, one and the same God and human being together, let them be condemned.

If any one divides the persons in the one Christ after their union, joining them together in a mere conjunction in accordance with their rank, or a conjunction effected by authority or power, instead of a combination according to a union of natures, let them be condemned.

The following points are of especial interest.

1. The first point focuses on the use of the term *Theotokos*, in effect making a willingness to use this term a litmus test for orthodoxy in relation to the doctrine of the incarnation. For Cyril, anyone who refuses to use this term is, in effect, denying the reality of the divinity of Christ and is therefore heretical.
2. The second point insists upon a physical union of some kind between humanity and divinity in Christ. Cyril is here critiquing the Antiochene model of incarnation, in which the humanity and divinity were understood to be fully present in Christ, yet in a non-interactive mode. For Cyril, only the model of “assumption,” in which the divine nature “assumes” the human, can do justice to the orthodox teaching.
3. Cyril therefore condemns, in his third point, the idea of a “union according to good pleasure,” which was characteristic of the Antiochene school. Dismissing this as a mere “conjunction” rather than a genuine union, Cyril argues that this is totally ineffective in safeguarding the vital theological and spiritual principles at stake in the doctrine of the incarnation.

Cyril of Alexandria (died 444). A significant writer, who was appointed patriarch of Alexandria in 412. He became involved in the controversy over the Christological views of Nestorius, and produced major statements and defenses of the orthodox position on the two natures of Christ.

It will be clear that Christology was an issue of major importance during the patristic period. As a result of the debates of the period, the contours of the Christian consensus on the matter began to emerge and advance the agenda of theological debate. It is widely agreed that, once the Christological issue had been settled, the next issue to be debated was the distinctive Christian doctrine of God. This naturally brings us to the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the subject of the following case study.

Case Study 1.5 The Trinity: Early Developments and Controversies

The development of the doctrine of the Trinity is best seen as organically related to the evolution of Christology. It became increasingly clear that there was a consensus to the effect that Jesus was “of the same substance (Greek: *homoousios*)” as God, rather than just “of similar substance (Greek: *homoiousios*).” However, if Jesus was God, in any meaningful sense of the word, what did this imply about God? If Jesus was God, were there now two Gods? Or was a radical reconsideration of the nature of God appropriate? Historically, it is possible to argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is closely linked with the development of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ. The more emphatic the church became that Christ was God, the more it came under pressure to clarify how Christ related to God.

The starting point for Christian reflections on the Trinity is the New Testament witness to the presence and activity of God in Christ and through the Spirit. For Irenaeus, the whole process of salvation, from its beginning to its end, bore witness to the action of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Irenaeus made use of a term that featured prominently in future discussions of the Trinity: “the economy of salvation.” That word “economy” needs clarification. The Greek word *oikonomia* basically means “the way in which one’s affairs are ordered” (the relation to the modern sense of the word will thus be clear). For Irenaeus, the term “economy of salvation” means “the way in which God has ordered the salvation of humanity in history.”

At the time, Irenaeus was under considerable pressure from Gnostic critics, who argued that the creator god was quite distinct from (and inferior to) the redeemer god. In the form favoured by Marcion, this idea took the following form: the Old Testament god is a creator god and totally different from the redeemer god of the New Testament. As a result, the Old Testament should be shunned by Christians, who should concentrate their attention upon the New Testament. Irenaeus vigorously rejected this idea. He insisted that the entire process of salvation, from the first moment of creation to the last moment of history, was the work of the one and the same God. There was a single economy of salvation, in which the one God – who was both creator and redeemer – was at work to redeem his creation.

In his *Demonstration of the Preaching of the Apostles*, Irenaeus insisted upon the distinct yet related roles of Father, Son, and Spirit within the economy of salvation. He affirmed his faith in:

God the Father uncreated, who is uncontained, invisible one God, creator of the universe ... and the Word of God, the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who ... in the fullness of time, to gather all things to himself, became a human among humans, to ... destroy death, bring life, and achieve fellowship between God and humanity. ... And the Holy Spirit ... was poured out in a new way on our humanity to make us new throughout the world in the sight of God.

This passage sets out a clear statement of the idea of an “economic Trinity” – that is to say, an understanding of the nature of the Godhead in which each person is responsible for an aspect of the economy of salvation. Far from being a rather pointless piece of theological speculation, the doctrine of the Trinity is grounded directly in the complex human experience of redemption in Christ and is concerned with the explanation of this experience.

Tertullian gave the theology of the Trinity its distinctive vocabulary; he also shaped its distinctive form. God is one; nevertheless, God cannot be regarded as something or someone who is totally isolated from the created order. The economy of salvation demonstrates that God is active in his creation. This activity is complex; on analysis, this divine action reveals both a unity and a distinctiveness. Tertullian argues that substance is what unites the three aspects of the economy of salvation; person is what distinguishes them. The three persons of the Trinity are distinct, yet not divided, different yet not separate or independent of each other. The complexity of the human experience

of redemption is thus the result of the three persons of the Godhead acting in distinct yet coordinated manners in human history, without any loss of the total unity of the Godhead.

By the second half of the fourth century, the debate concerning the relation of the Father and Son gave every indication of having been settled. The recognition that Father and Son were “of one being” settled the Arian controversy and established a consensus within the church over the divinity of the Son, but further theological construction was necessary. What was the relation of the Spirit to the Father and to the Son? There was a growing consensus that the Spirit could not be omitted from the Godhead. The Cappadocian fathers, especially Basil of Caesarea, defended the divinity of the Spirit in such persuasive terms that the foundation was laid for the final element of Trinitarian theology to be put in its place. The divinity and co-equality of Father, Son, and Spirit had been agreed; it now remained to develop Trinitarian models to allow this understanding of the Godhead to be visualized.

Basil of Caesarea (c.330–379). Also known as “Basil the Great,” this fourth-century writer was based in the region of Cappadocia, in modern Turkey. He is particularly remembered for his writings on the Trinity, especially the distinctive role of the Holy Spirit. He was elected bishop of Caesarea in 370.

In general, eastern theology tended to emphasize the distinct individuality of the three persons or hypostases and safeguard their unity by stressing the fact that both the Son and the Spirit derived from the Father. The relation between the persons or hypostases is ontological, grounded in what those persons are. Thus the relation of the Son to the Father is defined in terms of “being begotten” and “sonship.” As we shall see, Augustine moves away from this approach, preferring to treat the persons in relational terms. We shall return to these points presently, in discussing the filioque controversy.

The western approach, however, was more marked by its tendency to begin from the unity of God, especially in the work of revelation and redemption, and to interpret the relation of the three persons in terms of their mutual fellowship. It is this position which is characteristic of Augustine, and which we shall explore later in this case study.

The eastern approach might seem to suggest that the Trinity consists of three independent agents, doing quite different things. This possibility was excluded by two later developments, which are usually referred to by the terms “mutual interpenetration (Greek: *perichoresis*)” and “appropriation.” Although these ideas find their full development at a later stage in the development of the doctrine, they are unquestionably hinted at in both Irenaeus and Tertullian, and find more substantial expression in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. We may usefully consider both these ideas at this stage.

Gregory of Nyssa (c.330–c.395). One of the Cappadocian fathers, noted especially for his vigorous defense of the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation during the fourth century.

The Greek term *perichoresis* – translated into Latin as *circumincessio* or English as “mutual interpenetration” – came into general use in the sixth century. It refers to the manner in which the three persons of the Trinity relate to one another. The concept of *perichoresis* allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. An image often used to express this idea is that of “a community of being,” in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them.

The idea of “appropriation” is related to *perichoresis* and follows on from it. The modalist heresy (to be discussed presently) argued that God could be considered as existing in different “modes of being” at different points in the economy of salvation, so that, at one point, God existed as Father and created the world; at another, God existed as Son and redeemed it. The doctrine of appropriation insists that the works of the Trinity are a unity; every person of the Trinity is involved in every outward action of the Godhead. Thus Father, Son, and Spirit are all involved in the work of creation, which is not to be viewed as the work of the Father alone. For example, Augustine of Hippo pointed out that the Genesis creation account speaks of God, the Word, and the Spirit (Genesis 1:1–3), thus indicating that all three persons of the Trinity were present and active at this decisive moment in salvation history. Yet it is appropriate to think of creation as the work of the Father. Despite the fact that all three persons of the Trinity are implicated in creation, it is properly seen as the distinctive action of the Father. Similarly, the entire Trinity is involved in the work of redemption. It is, however, appropriate to speak of redemption as being the distinctive work of the Son.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Widely regarded as the most influential Latin patristic writer, Augustine was converted to Christianity at the northern Italian city of Milan in the summer of 386. He returned to North Africa, and was made bishop of Hippo in 395. He was involved in two major controversies – the Donatist controversy, focusing on the church and sacraments, and the Pelagian controversy, focusing on grace and sin. He also made substantial contributions to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and the Christian understanding of history.

Taken together, the concepts of *perichoresis* and appropriation allow us to think of the Godhead as a “community of being,” in which all is shared, united, and mutually exchanged. Father, Son, and Spirit are not three isolated and diverging compartments of a Godhead, like three subsidiary components of an international corporation. Rather,

they are differentiations within the Godhead, which become evident within the economy of salvation and the human experience of redemption and grace. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that beneath the surface of the complexities of the history of salvation and our experience of God lies one God, and one God only.

Modalism

The term “modalism” was introduced by the German historian of dogma, Adolf von Harnack, to describe the common element of a group of Trinitarian heresies, associated with Noetus and Praxeas in the late second century and Sabellius in the third. Each of these writers was concerned to safeguard the unity of the godhead, fearing a lapse into some form of tritheism as a result of the doctrine of the Trinity. (As will become clear, this fear was amply justified.) This vigorous defense of the absolute unity of God (often referred to as “monarchianism,” from the Greek term meaning “a single principle of authority”) led these writers to insist that the one and only God revealed himself in different ways at different times. The divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit is to be explained in terms of three different ways or modes of divine revelation (hence the term “modalism”). The following Trinitarian sequence is thus proposed:

1. The one God is revealed in the manner of creator and lawgiver. This aspect of God is referred to as “the Father.”
2. The same God is then revealed in the manner of a savior, in the person of Jesus Christ. This aspect of God is referred to as “the Son.”
3. The same God is then revealed in the manner of the one who sanctifies and gives eternal life. This aspect of God is referred to as “the Spirit.”

There is thus no difference, save that of appearance and chronological location, between the three entities in question.

The Cappadocian Approach to the Trinity

The Cappadocian fathers played a pivotal role in establishing the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, a decision that was formally endorsed by the Council of Constantinople in 381. Once this decisive theological step had been taken, the way was open to a full statement of the doctrine of the Trinity. With the recognition of the identity of substance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the door was opened to exploring their mutual relationship within the Trinity. Once more, the Cappadocians played a decisive role in this major theological development.

The Cappadocian approach to the Trinity is best understood as a defense of the divine unity, coupled with a recognition that the one Godhead exists in three different “modes of being.” The formula that expresses this approach best is “one substance (ousia) in three persons (hypostaseis).” The one indivisible Godhead is common to all three per-

sons of the Trinity. This one Godhead exists simultaneously in three different “modes of being” – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One of the most distinctive features of this approach to the Trinity is the priority assigned to the Father. Although the Cappadocian writers stress that they do not accept that either the Son or Spirit is subordinate to the Father, they nevertheless explicitly state that the Father is to be regarded as the source or fountainhead of the Trinity. The being of the Father is imparted to both the Son and the Spirit, although in different ways: the Son is “begotten” of the Father and the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father. Gregory of Nyssa thus writes of “the one person of the Father, from whom the Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds.”

So how can the one substance be present in three persons? The Cappadocians answered this question by appealing to the relation between a universal and its particulars – for example, humanity and individual human beings. Thus Basil of Caesarea argues that the one substance within the Trinity can be conceived as analogous to a universal and the three persons to particulars. A common human nature, shared by all people, does not mean that all human beings are identical; it means that they retain their individuality, even though they share this common nature. Gregory of Nyssa states this as follows:

Peter, James and John are called three humans, even though they share a single common humanity. ... So how do we compromise our belief, by saying on the one hand that the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit have a single godhead, while on the other hand denying that we are talking about three gods?

Thus each of the three persons within the Trinity has a distinctive characteristic. According to Basil of Caesarea, the distinctives of each of the persons are as follows: the Father is distinguished by fatherhood, the Son by sonship, and the Spirit by the ability to sanctify. For Gregory of Nazianzus, the Father is distinguished by “being ingenerate” (agennesis, a difficult word that conveys the idea of “not being begotten” or “not deriving from any other source”), the Son by “being generate” (*genesis*, which could also be translated as “being begotten” or “deriving one’s origins from someone else”), and the Spirit by “being sent” or “proceeding.” The difficulty with this analogy for modern readers is that it seems to hint at tritheism. While Gregory’s Platonism allows him to think of “Peter, James, and John” as different instances of the same human nature, the more natural way of interpreting the illustration today is in terms of three distinct and independent individuals.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329–89), also known as “Gregory Nazianzen.” He is particularly remembered for his “Five Theological Orations,” written around 380, and a compilation of extracts from the writings of Origen, which he entitled the *Philokalia*.

Augustine's Model of the Trinity

Augustine takes up many elements of the emerging consensus on the Trinity. This can be seen in his vigorous rejection of any form of subordinationism (that is, treating the Son and Spirit as inferior to the Father within the Godhead). Augustine insists that the action of the entire Trinity is to be discerned behind the actions of each of its persons. Thus humanity is not merely created in the image of God; it is created in the image of the Trinity. An important distinction is drawn between the eternal Godhead of the Son and the Spirit, and their place in the economy of salvation. Although the Son and Spirit may appear to be posterior to the Father, this judgment only applies to their role within the process of salvation. Although the Son and Spirit may appear to be subordinate to the Father in history, in eternity all are co-equal. This is an important anticipation of the later distinction between the essential Trinity, grounded in God's eternal nature, and the economic Trinity, grounded in God's self-revelation within history.

Perhaps the most distinctive element of Augustine's approach to the Trinity concerns his understanding of the person and place of the Holy Spirit; we shall consider specific aspects of this in a later section, as part of our discussion of the filioque controversy. However, Augustine's conception of the Spirit as the love that unites the Father and Son together demands attention at this early stage.

Having identified the Son with "wisdom," Augustine proceeds to identify the Spirit with "love." He concedes that he had no explicit biblical grounds for this identification; nevertheless, he regards it as a reasonable inference from the biblical material. The Spirit "makes us dwell in God, and God in us." This explicit identification of the Spirit as the basis of union between God and believers is important, as it points to Augustine's idea of the Spirit as the giver of community. The Spirit is the gift of God that binds us to him. There is, Augustine argues, therefore a corresponding relation within the Trinity itself. God already exists in the kind of relation to which he wishes to bring us, and just as the Spirit is the bond of union between God and the believer, so the Spirit exercises a comparable role within the Trinity, binding the persons together. "The Holy Spirit ... makes us dwell in God, and God in us. But that is the effect of love. So the Holy Spirit is God who is love."

This argument is supplemented by a general analysis of the importance of love within the Christian life. Augustine, basing himself loosely on 1 Corinthians 13:13 ("These three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love"), argues along the following lines:

1. God's greatest gift is love;
2. God's greatest gift is the Holy Spirit;
3. Therefore the Holy Spirit is love.

Augustine brings these lines of argument together in the following passage:

Love is of God, and its effect in us is that we dwell in God and he in us. This we know, because he has given us his Spirit. Now the Spirit is God who is love. If, among God's gifts, there is none greater than love and if there is no greater gift than the Holy Spirit, we naturally conclude that the one who is said to be both God and of God is love.

This style of analysis has been criticized for its obvious weaknesses, not least in leading to a curiously depersonalized notion of the Spirit. The Spirit appears as a sort of glue, binding Father and Son together and binding both to believers. The idea of “being bound to God” is a central feature of Augustine’s spirituality and it is perhaps inevitable that this concern will appear prominently in his discussion of the Trinity.

One of the most distinctive features of Augustine’s approach to the Trinity is his development of “psychological analogies.” The reasoning that lies behind the appeal to the human mind in this respect can be summarized as follows. It is not unreasonable to expect that, in creating the world, God has left a characteristic imprint upon that creation. But where is that imprint (vestigium) to be found? It is reasonable to expect that God would plant this distinctive imprint upon the height of his creation. Now the Genesis creation accounts allow us to conclude that humanity is the height of God’s creation. Therefore, Augustine argues, we should look to humanity in our search for the image of God.

However, Augustine then takes a step that many observers feel to have been unfortunate. On the basis of his neo-Platonic worldview, Augustine argues that the human mind is to be regarded as the apex of humanity. It is therefore to the individual human mind that the theologian should turn when looking for “traces of the Trinity” in creation. The radical individualism of this approach, coupled with its obvious intellectualism, means that he chooses to find the Trinity in the inner mental world of individuals, rather than – for example – in personal relationships (an approach favored by medieval writers, such as Richard of St. Victor). Furthermore, a first reading of *On the Trinity* suggests that Augustine seems to regard the inner workings of the human mind as telling us as much about God as the economy of salvation. Although Augustine stresses the limited value of such analogies, he himself appears to make more use of them than this critical appraisal would warrant.

Augustine discerns a triadic structure to human thought and argues that this structure of thought is grounded in the being of God. He himself argues that the most important such triad is that of mind, knowledge, and love, although the related triad of memory, understanding, and will is also given considerable prominence. The human mind is “an image” – inadequate, to be sure, but still an image – of God. So just as there are three such faculties in the human mind, which are not ultimately totally separate and independent entities, so there can be three “persons” in God.

There are some obvious weaknesses here. As has often been pointed out, the human mind cannot be reduced to three entities in quite this neat and simplistic manner. In the end, however, it must be pointed out that Augustine’s appeal to such “psychological analogies” is actually illustrative, rather than constitutive. They are intended to be visual aids (although visual aids that are grounded in the doctrine of creation) to insights that may be obtained from Scripture and reflection on the economy of salvation. Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity is not ultimately grounded in his analysis of the human mind, but in his reading of Scripture, especially of the Fourth Gospel.

The *Filioque* Controversy

One of the most significant events in the early history of the church was agreement throughout the Roman Empire, both east and west, on the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed was intended to bring doctrinal stability to the church in a period of considerable importance in its history. Part of that agreed text referred to the Holy Spirit “proceeding from the Father.” By the ninth century, however, the western church routinely altered this phrase, speaking of the Holy Spirit “proceeding from the Father and the Son.” The Latin term *filioque* (meaning “and from the Son”) has since come to refer to this addition, now normative within the western churches, and the theology that it expresses. This idea of a “double procession” of the Holy Spirit was a source of intense irritation to Greek writers: not only did it raise serious theological difficulties for them but it also involved tampering with the supposedly inviolable text of the creeds. Many scholars see this bad feeling as contributing to the split between the eastern and western churches, which took place around 1054. Although this development (and the resulting controversy) took place after 451, the resulting debate was the inevitable outcome of the ideas documented in this case study, making it entirely proper to discuss this debate at this point.

The *filioque* debate is of importance, both as a theological issue in itself and also as a matter of some importance in the contemporary relations between the eastern and western churches. We therefore propose to explore the issues in some detail. The basic issue at stake is whether the Spirit may be said to proceed from the Father alone, or from the Father and the Son. The former is associated with the eastern church, and is given its most weighty exposition in the writings of the Cappadocian fathers; the latter is associated with the western church, and is developed with particular clarity in Augustine’s treatise *On the Trinity*.

The Greek patristic writers insisted that there was only one source of being within the Trinity. The Father alone was the sole and supreme cause of all things, including the Son and the Spirit within the Trinity. The Son and the Spirit derive from the Father, but in different manners. In searching for suitable terms to express this relationship, theologians eventually fixed on two quite distinct images: the Son is begotten of the Father, while the Spirit proceeds from the Father. These two terms are intended to express the idea that both Son and Spirit derive from the Father, but are derived in different ways. The vocabulary is clumsy, reflecting the fact that the Greek words involved are difficult to translate into modern English.

To assist in understanding this complex process, the Greek fathers used two images. The Father pronounces his word; at the same time as he utters this word, he breathes out in order to make this word capable of being heard and received. The imagery used here, which is strongly grounded in the biblical tradition, is that of the Son as the Word of God and the Spirit as the breath of God. An obvious question arises here: why should the Cappadocian fathers, and other Greek writers, spend so much time and effort on distinguishing Son and Spirit in this way? The answer is important. A failure to distinguish the ways in which Son and Spirit derive from the one and the same Father would lead to God having two sons, which would have raised insurmountable problems.

Within this context, it is unthinkable that the Holy Spirit should proceed from the Father and the Son. Why? Because it would totally compromise the principle of the Father as the

sole origin and source of all divinity. It would amount to affirming that there were two sources of divinity within the one Godhead, with all the internal contradictions and tensions that this would generate. If the Son were to share in the exclusive ability of the Father to be the source of all divinity, this ability would no longer be exclusive. For this reason, the Greek church regarded the western idea of a “double procession” of the Spirit with something approaching stark disbelief. The Greek tradition, however, was not entirely unanimous on this point. Cyril of Alexandria had no hesitation in speaking of the Spirit as “belonging to the Son,” and related ideas were not slow to develop within the western church.

This understatement of the procession of the Spirit from Father and Son was developed and given its classic statement by Augustine. Possibly building upon the position hinted at by Hilary, Augustine argued that the Spirit had to be thought of as proceeding from the Son. One of his main proof texts was John 20:22, in which the risen Christ is reported as having breathed upon his disciples, and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Augustine explains this as follows:

Nor can we say that the Holy Spirit does not also proceed from the Son. After all, the Spirit is said to be the Spirit of both the Father and the Son [John 20:22 is then cited]. . . . The Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but also from the Son.

In making this statement, Augustine thought that he was summarizing a general consensus within both the eastern and western churches. Unfortunately, his knowledge of Greek does not appear to have been good enough to allow him to appreciate that the Greek-speaking Cappadocian writers adopted a rather different position. Nevertheless, there are points at which Augustine is obviously concerned to defend the distinctive role of the Father within the Godhead:

God the Father alone is the one from whom the Word is born, and from whom the Spirit principally proceeds. Now I have added the word “principally,” because we find that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Son. Nevertheless, the Father gave the Spirit to the Son. It was not as if the Son already existed and possessed the Spirit. Whatever the Father gave to the only-begotten Word, he gave by begetting him. Therefore he begot him in such a way that the common gift should be the Spirit of both.

So what did Augustine think he was doing, in understanding the role of the Spirit in this way? The answer lies in his distinctive understanding of the Spirit as the “bond of love” between Father and Son. Augustine developed the idea of relation within the Godhead, arguing that the persons of the Trinity are defined by their relations to one another. The Spirit is thus to be seen as the relation of love and fellowship between the Father and Son, a relation that Augustine believed to be foundational to the Fourth Gospel’s presentation of the unity of will and purpose of Father and Son.

We can summarize the root differences between the two approaches as follows:

1. The Greek (or eastern) intention was to safeguard the unique position of the Father as the sole source of divinity. In that both the Son and Spirit derive from him,

although in different but equally valid manners, their divinity is in turn safeguarded. To the Greeks, the Latin approach seemed to introduce two separate sources of divinity into the Godhead and to weaken the vital distinction between Son and Spirit. The Son and Spirit are understood to have distinct, yet complementary, roles, whereas the western tradition sees the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ.

2. The Latin (or western) intention was to ensure that the Son and Spirit were adequately distinguished from one another, yet shown to be mutually related to one another. The strongly relational approach adopted the idea of “person,” which made it inevitable that the Spirit would be treated in this way. Sensitive to the Greek position, later Latin writers stressed that they did not regard their approach as presupposing two sources of divinity in the Godhead. The Council of Lyons stated that “the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, yet not as from two origins but as from one origin.” However, the doctrine remained a source of contention and continues to be an issue of dispute today.

Case Study 1.6 The Church: The Donatist Controversy

As we noted in our introductory historical overview of the patristic period, under the Roman Emperor Diocletian (284–313) the Christian church was subject to various degrees of persecution. The origins of the persecution date from 303; it finally ended with the victory of Constantine and the issuing of the Edict of Milan in 313. Under an edict of February 303, Christian books were ordered to be burned and churches demolished. Those Christian leaders who handed over their books to be burned came to be known as *traditores* – “those who handed over [their books].” The modern English word “traitor” derives from the same root. Once such *traditor* or “traitor” was Felix of Aptunga, who later consecrated Caecilian as bishop of Carthage in 311.

Many local Christians were outraged that such a person should have been allowed to be involved in this consecration and declared that they could not accept the authority of Caecilian as a result. The hierarchy of the catholic church was tainted as a result of this development. The church ought to be pure and should not be permitted to include such people. By the time Augustine returned to Africa in 388, a breakaway faction had established itself as the leading Christian body in the region, with especially strong support from the local African population. Sociological issues clouded theological debate; the Donatists tended to draw their support from the indigenous population, whereas the Catholics drew theirs from Roman colonists.

The theological issues involved are of considerable importance, and relate directly to a serious tension within the theology of a leading figure of the African church in the third century – Cyprian of Carthage. In his *The Unity of the Catholic Church* (251), Cyprian defended two major related beliefs.

1. Schism (that is, the deliberate breaking away from the church) is totally and absolutely unjustified. The unity of the church cannot be broken, for any pretext whatsoever. To step outside the bounds of the church is to forfeit any possibility of salvation.

2. It therefore follows that a lapsed or schismatic bishop is deprived of all ability to administer the sacraments or act as a minister of the Christian church. By passing outside the sphere of the church, they have lost their spiritual gifts and authority. They should therefore not be permitted to ordain priests or bishops. Any whom they have ordained must be regarded as invalidly ordained; any whom they have baptized must be regarded as invalidly baptized.

Cyprian of Carthage (died 258). A Roman rhetorician of considerable skill who was converted to Christianity around 246 and elected bishop of the North African city of Carthage in 248. He was martyred in that city in 258. His writings focus particularly on the unity of the church and the role of its bishops in maintaining orthodoxy and order.

Cyprian's arguments against schism are set out with particular clarity and are worth noting in a little detail, based on the following passage from *The Unity of the Catholic Church*:

Anyone who cuts themselves off from the Church and is joined to an adulteress is separated from the promises of the Church, and anyone who leaves the Church of Christ behind cannot benefit from the rewards of Christ. Such people are strangers, outcasts, and enemies. You cannot have God as father unless you have the Church as mother. ... This sacrament of unity, this inseparable bond of peace, is shown in the gospel when the robe of the Lord Jesus Christ was neither divided at all or torn, but they cast lots for the clothing of Christ ... so the clothing was received whole and the robe was taken unspoiled and undivided. ... That garment signifies the unity which comes "from the part above," that is, from heaven and from the Father, a unity which could not be torn at all by those who received and possessed it, but it was taken undivided in its unbreakable entirety. Anyone who rends and divides the Church of Christ cannot possess the clothing of Christ.

Note how Cyprian argues that there is only one church. Anyone who chooses to leave the church in schism therefore moves outside the boundaries of the church and ceases to have any connection with it. It is impossible to benefit from Christ's salvation without being a member of the church. This is summed up in the famous slogan: "You cannot have God as father unless you have the Church as mother." At this point, Cyprian uses a particularly striking image to stress the indivisibility of the church. The church, he declares, is like the seamless robe in which Christ was clothed as he walked to his crucifixion. Cyprian here alludes to the incident in the gospels, in which those who crucified Jesus threw lots for his robe, in that they did not wish to tear it (see John 19:23–24). Cyprian argues that the church is analogous to that robe: it cannot be torn or divided.

It will be clear, then, that Cyprian rigorously excludes schism. But what happens if a bishop lapses under persecution and subsequently repents? Cyprian's theory is open to two lines of interpretation at this point:

1. By lapsing, the bishop has committed the sin of apostasy (literally, "falling away"). He has therefore placed himself outside the bounds of the church and can no longer be regarded as administering the sacraments validly.

2. By his repentance, the bishop has been restored to grace and is able to continue administering the sacraments validly.

The Donatists adopted the first such position, the Catholics (as their opponents came to be known) the second.

As a result, the Donatists believed that the entire sacramental system of the Catholic church had become corrupted. It was therefore necessary to replace *traditores* with people who had remained firm in their faith under persecution. It was also necessary to rebaptize and reordain all those who had been baptized and ordained by *traditores*. Inevitably, this resulted in the formation of a breakaway faction. By the time of Augustine, the breakaway faction was larger than the church that it had originally broken away from.

Yet Cyprian had totally forbidden schism of any kind. One of the greatest paradoxes of the Donatist schism is that the schism resulted from principles that were due to Cyprian – yet contradicted those very same principles. As a result, both the Donatists and Catholics appealed to Cyprian as an authority – but to very different aspects of his teaching. The Donatists stressed the outrageous character of apostasy; the Catholics equally emphasized the impossibility of schism. A stalemate resulted. That is, until Augustine of Hippo arrived, and became bishop of Hippo in the region. Augustine was able to resolve the tensions within the legacy of Cyprian and put forward an “Augustinian” view of the church, which has remained enormously influential ever since. In what follows, we shall outline the main features of this distinctive approach.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Widely regarded as the most influential Latin patristic writer, Augustine was converted to Christianity at the northern Italian city of Milan in the summer of 386. He returned to North Africa and was made bishop of Hippo in 395. He was involved in two major controversies – the Donatist controversy, focusing on the church and sacraments, and the Pelagian controversy, focusing on grace and sin. He also made substantial contributions to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and the Christian understanding of history.

First, Augustine emphasizes the sinfulness of Christians. The church is not meant to be a society of saints, but a “mixed body” of saints and sinners. Augustine finds this image in two biblical parables: the parable of the net that catches many fishes and the parable of the wheat and the tares (note that “tares” is the traditional older English word for “weeds”; we shall use the two terms interchangeably in the following discussion). It is this latter parable (Matthew 13:24–31) that is of especial importance and requires further discussion.

The parable tells of a farmer who sowed seed and discovered that the resulting crop included both wheat and tares – grain and weeds. What could be done about it? To attempt to separate the wheat and the weeds while both were still growing would be to court disaster, probably involving damaging the wheat while trying to get rid of the weeds. However, at the harvest, all the plants – wheat and tares – are cut down and

sorted without any danger of damaging the wheat. The separation of the good and the evil thus takes place at the end of time, not in history.

For Augustine, this parable refers to the church in the world. It must expect to find itself including both saints and sinners, but to attempt a separation in this world is premature and improper. That separation will take place in God's own time, at the end of history. No human can make that judgment or separation in God's place. So in what sense is the church holy? For Augustine, the holiness in question is not that of its members, but of Christ. The church cannot be a congregation of saints in this world, in that its members are contaminated with original sin. However, the church is sanctified and made holy by Christ – a holiness that will be perfected and finally realized at the last judgment. In addition to this theological analysis, Augustine makes the practical observation that the Donatists failed to live up to their own high standards of morality. The Donatists, Augustine suggests, were just as capable as Catholics of getting drunk or beating people.

Second, Augustine argues that schism and *traditio* (the handing over of Christian books or any form of lapse from faith) are indeed both sinful – but that, for Cyprian, schism is by far the more serious sin. The Donatists are thus guilty of serious misrepresentation of the teaching of the great North African martyr bishop.

Augustine thus argues that Donatism is fatally flawed. The church is, and is meant to be, a mixed body. Sin is an inevitable aspect of the life of the church in the present age and is neither the occasion nor the justification for schism.

Yet the Donatist controversy concerned more than a theoretical understanding of the nature of the church. It affected aspects of everyday Christian ministry, on account of the Donatist insistence that only certain untainted persons could administer the sacraments properly. The Donatists refused to recognize that a traditor could administer the sacraments properly. Accordingly, they argued that baptisms, ordinations, and eucharists administered by such ministers were invalid.

This attitude rested in part upon the authority of Cyprian of Carthage. Cyprian had argued that no true sacraments exist outside the church. Heretical baptism was thus not valid, as heretics did not accept the faith of the church and were thus outside its bounds. Logically unassailable though Cyprian's views may have been, they failed to allow for the situation that arose during the Donatist controversy – that is, ministers who are of orthodox faith, but whose personal conduct is held to be unworthy of their calling. Were doctrinally orthodox yet morally inferior ministers entitled to administer the sacraments? And were such sacraments valid or not?

Pressing Cyprian's views beyond their apparent intended limits, the Donatists argued that ecclesiastical actions could be regarded as invalid on account of subjective imperfections on the part of the person administering them. The Donatists thus held that those who were baptized or ordained by Catholic priests or bishops who had not joined the Donatist movement required to be rebaptized and reordained at the hands of Donatist ministers. The sacraments derive their validity from the personal qualities of the person who administers them.

Responding to this approach, Augustine argued that Donatism laid excessive emphasis upon the qualities of the human agent and gave insufficient weight to the grace of Jesus

Christ. It is, he argued, impossible for fallen human beings to make distinctions concerning who is pure and impure, worthy or unworthy. This view, which is totally consistent with his understanding of the church as a “mixed body” of saints and sinners, holds that the efficacy of a sacrament rests, not upon the merits of the individual administering it, but upon the merits of the one who instituted them in the first place – Jesus Christ. The validity of sacraments is independent of the merits of those who administer them.

Having said this, Augustine qualifies it in an important context. A distinction must be drawn, he argues, between “baptism” and “the right to baptize.” Although baptism is valid, even when administered by those who are heretics or schismatics, this does not mean that the right to baptize is indiscriminately distributed among all peoples. The right to confer baptism exists only within the church, and supremely on the part of those ministers that it has chosen and authorized to administer the sacraments. The authority to administer the sacraments of Christ was committed by him to the apostles, and through them and their successors, the bishops, to the ministers of the Catholic church.

The theological issue at stake has come to be represented by two Latin slogans, each reflecting a different understanding of the grounds of the efficacy of the sacraments.

1. Sacraments are efficacious *ex opere operantis* – literally, “on account of the work of the one who works.” Here, the efficacy of the sacrament is understood to be dependent upon the personal qualities of the minister.
2. Sacraments are efficacious *ex opere operato* – literally, “on account of the work which is worked.” Here, the efficacy of the sacrament is understood to be dependent upon the grace of Christ, which the sacraments represent and convey.

The Donatist position is consistent with an *ex opere operantis*, and Augustine’s with an *ex opere operato*, understanding of sacramental causality. The latter view became normative within the western church and was maintained by the mainstream reformers during the sixteenth century. The former was upheld by more radical sections of the Reformation and continues to be significant within some sections of Protestantism, especially those stressing the importance of holiness or charismatic gifts.

Augustine sets out his position in the following passage, taken from his treatise “On Baptism.” As we noted earlier, Augustine’s view of the church accepts that congregations and priests will include sinners as well as saints. So does this invalidate the sacraments? Against the Donatist view, which declared that only the righteous can administer and profitably receive the sacraments (an *ex opere operantis* view of sacramental efficacy), Augustine argues that the efficacy of the sacraments rests on Christ himself, not the merits of either the administrator or recipient (which, as noted above, is an *ex opere operato* view of sacramental efficacy).

In the matter of baptism, we should consider not the identity of the one who gives it, but what it is that he gives; not who he is that receives, but what it is that he receives. ... When baptism is administered by the words of the gospel, however great the evil of either minister

or recipient may be, the sacrament itself is holy on account of the one whose sacrament it is. In the case of people who receive baptism from an evil person, if they do not receive the perverseness of the minister but the holiness of the mystery, being united to the church in good faith and hope and charity, they will receive the forgiveness of their sins.

Augustine here draws a fundamental distinction between the one who gives the gift and the gift that is given. The personal qualities of the “giver” (in this case, the minister of the sacrament) have no bearing on the quality of what is given (that is, the sacrament itself). Sacraments thus derive their efficacy from “the one whose sacrament it is.” In other words, whatever a sacrament does results from the holiness of God, not from the holiness (or lack of it) on the part of the minister.

This can be contrasted with the views of Petilian, a noted Donatist writer who was active at the beginning of the fifth century. Petilian, the Donatist bishop of Cirta (a city in North Africa), circulated a letter to his priests warning against the moral impurity and doctrinal errors of the Catholic church. Augustine’s reply, dated 401, led Petilian to write against Augustine in more detail. In this letter, dating from 402, from which Augustine quotes extracts, Petilian sets out fully the Donatist insistence that the validity of the sacraments is totally dependent upon the moral worthiness of those who administer them. Petilian’s words are included within citation marks within Augustine’s text.

”What we look for is the conscience,” [Petilian] says, “of the one who gives [the sacraments], giving in holiness, to cleanse the conscience of the one who receives. For anyone who knowingly receives ‘faith’ from the faithless does not receive faith, but guilt.” And he will then go on to say: “So how do you test this? For everything consists of an origin,” he says, “and a root; if it does not possess something as its head, it is nothing. Nor can anything truly receive a second birth, unless it is born again from good seed.”

Note that Petilian argues that the holiness or guilt of the minister affects the person who receives the sacraments from that minister. It is therefore essential that ministers should be holy and unblemished if their ministries are not to be compromised through the contaminating effect of sin.

The Donatist controversy was of major importance to the development of the western church during the fourth century. A second controversy to break out in this region of the church – also centering on Augustine of Hippo – concerned the whole issue of the interaction of divine grace and human freedom. It is to the Pelagian controversy that we now turn.

Case Study 1.7 Grace: The Pelagian Controversy

The Pelagian controversy, which erupted in the early fifth century, brought a cluster of questions concerning human nature, sin, and grace into sharp focus. Up to this point, there had been relatively little controversy within the church over human nature. The Pelagian controversy changed that and ensured that the issues associated with human nature were placed firmly on the agenda of the western church. The controversy centered

upon two individuals: Augustine of Hippo, based in North Africa, and Pelagius, based in Rome. The controversy is complex, at both the historical and theological levels, in that “Pelagianism” seems to incorporate ideas associated with Pelagius himself, Caelestius, Rufinus of Syria, and also the later writer Julian of Eclanum.

Given the impact of this controversy on western Christian theology, we will consider the basic themes that were debated under four headings: (1) the understanding of the “freedom of the will”; (2) the understanding of sin; (3) the understanding of grace; (4) the understanding of the grounds of justification.

The “Freedom of the Will”

For Augustine, the total sovereignty of God and genuine human responsibility and freedom must be upheld at one and the same time, if justice is to be done to the richness and complexity of the biblical statements on the matter. To simplify the matter, by denying either the sovereignty of God or human freedom, is to seriously compromise the Christian understanding of the way in which God justifies man. In Augustine’s own lifetime, he was obliged to deal with two heresies that simplified and compromised the gospel in this way. Manichaeism was a form of fatalism (to which Augustine himself was initially attracted) that upheld the total sovereignty of God but denied human freedom, while Pelagianism upheld the total freedom of the human will while denying the sovereignty of God. Before developing these points, it is necessary to make some observations concerning the term “free will.”

Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Widely regarded as the most influential Latin patristic writer, Augustine was converted to Christianity at the northern Italian city of Milan in the summer of 386. He returned to North Africa, and was made bishop of Hippo in 395. He was involved in two major controversies – the Donatist controversy, focusing on the church and sacraments, and the Pelagian controversy, focusing on grace and sin. He also made substantial contributions to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and the Christian understanding of history.

The term “free will” (Latin: *liberum arbitrium*) is not itself biblical, but derives from Greek philosophical movements, especially Stoicism. It was introduced into western Christianity by the second century theologian Tertullian. Augustine retained the term, but attempted to restore a more Pauline meaning to it by emphasizing the limitations placed upon the human free will by sin. Augustine’s basic ideas can be summarized as follows. First, natural human freedom is affirmed: we do not do things out of any necessity, but as a matter of freedom. Second, Augustine argues that human free will has been weakened and incapacitated – but not eliminated or destroyed – through sin. In order for that free will to be restored and healed, it requires the operation of divine grace. Free will really does exist; it is, however, distorted by sin.

In order to explain this point, Augustine deploys a significant analogy. Consider a pair of scales with two balance pans. One balance pan represents good and the other evil. If the pans are properly balanced, the arguments in favor of doing good or doing evil could be weighed, and a proper conclusion drawn. The parallel with the human free will is obvious: we weigh up the arguments in favor of doing good and evil, and act accordingly. However, what, asks Augustine, if the balance pans are loaded? What happens if someone puts several heavy weights in the balance pan on the side of evil? The scales will still work, but they are seriously biased toward making an evil decision. Augustine argues that this is exactly what has happened to humanity through sin. The human free will is biased toward evil. It really exists and really can make decisions – just as the loaded scales still work. But instead of giving a balanced judgment, a serious bias exists toward evil. Using this and related analogies Augustine argues that the human free will really exists in sinners, but that it is compromised by sin.

For Pelagius and his followers (such as Julian of Eclanum), however, humanity possessed total freedom of the will and was totally responsible for its own sins. Human nature was essentially free and well created, and was not compromised or incapacitated by some mysterious weakness. According to Pelagius, any imperfection in man would reflect negatively upon the goodness of God. For God to intervene in any direct way to influence human decisions was equivalent to compromising human integrity. Going back to the analogy of the scales, the Pelagians argued that the human free will was like a pair of balance pans in perfect equilibrium and not subject to any bias whatsoever. There was no need for divine grace in the sense understood by Augustine (although Pelagius did have a quite distinct concept of grace, as we shall see later).

Pelagius. A British theologian who was active at Rome in the final decade of the fourth and the first decade of the fifth centuries. No reliable information exists concerning the date of his birth or death. Pelagius was a moral reformer, whose theology of grace and sin brought him into sharp conflict with Augustine, leading to the Pelagian controversy. Pelagius' ideas are known mostly through the writings of his opponents, especially Augustine.

In 413, Pelagius wrote a lengthy letter to Demetrias, who had recently decided to turn her back on wealth in order to become a nun. In this letter, Pelagius spelled out with remorseless logic the consequences of his views on human free will. God has made humanity and knows precisely what it is capable of doing. Hence all the commands given to us are capable of being obeyed and are meant to be obeyed. It is no excuse to argue that human frailty prevents these commands from being fulfilled. God has made human nature and only demands of it what it can endure. Pelagius thus makes the uncompromising assertion that since perfection is possible for humanity, it is obligatory.

[Instead of regarding God's commands as a privilege] ... we cry out at God and say, "This is too hard! This is too difficult! We cannot do it! We are only human, and hindered by the

weakness of the flesh!” What blind madness! What blatant presumption! By doing this, we accuse the God of knowledge of a twofold ignorance – ignorance of God’s own creation and of God’s own commands. It would be as if, forgetting the weakness of humanity – his own creation – God had laid upon us commands which we were unable to bear. And at the same time – may God forgive us! – we ascribe to the righteous One unrighteousness, and cruelty to the Holy One; first, by complaining that God has commanded the impossible, second, by imagining that some will be condemned by God for what they could not help; so that – the blasphemy of it! – God is thought of as seeking our punishment rather than our salvation. ... No one knows the extent of our strength better than the God who gave us that strength. ... God has not willed to command anything impossible, for God is righteous; and will not condemn anyone for what they could not help, for God is holy.

Note especially the argument that God knows our weakness and therefore asks nothing of us that we cannot achieve. A demand on the part of God therefore corresponds to a human ability to fulfill that demand.

The Nature of Sin

For Augustine, humanity is universally affected by sin as a consequence of the Fall. The human mind has become darkened and weakened by sin. Sin makes it impossible for the sinner to think clearly and especially to understand higher spiritual truths and ideas. Similarly, Augustine argues that the human will has been weakened (but not eliminated) by sin. For Augustine, the simple fact that we are sinners means that we are in the position of being seriously ill and unable to diagnose our own illness adequately, let alone cure it. It is through the grace of God alone that our illness is diagnosed (sin) and a cure made available (grace).

The essential point that Augustine makes is that we have no control over our sinfulness. It is something that contaminates our lives from birth and dominates our lives thereafter. It is a state over which we have no decisive control. We could say that Augustine understands humanity to be born with a sinful disposition as part of human nature, with an inherent bias toward acts of sinning. In other words, sin causes sins: the state of sinfulness causes individual acts of sin. Augustine develops this point with reference to three important analogies: original sin as a “disease,” as a “power,” and as “guilt.”

1. The first analogy treats sin as a hereditary disease, which is passed down from one generation to another. As we saw above, this disease weakens humanity and cannot be cured by human agency. Christ is thus the divine physician, by whose “wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5), and salvation is understood in essentially sanative or medical terms. We are healed by the grace of God, so that our minds may recognize God and our wills may respond to the divine offer of grace.
2. The second analogy treats sin as a power that holds us captive and from whose grip we are unable to break free by ourselves. The human free will is captivated by the power of sin and may only be liberated by grace. Christ is thus seen as the liberator, the source of the grace that breaks the power of sin.

3. The third analogy treats sin as an essentially judicial or forensic concept – guilt – which is passed down from one generation to another. In a society that placed a high value on law, such as the later Roman Empire, in which Augustine lived and worked, this was regarded as a particularly helpful way of understanding sin. Christ thus comes to bring forgiveness and pardon.

For Pelagius, however, sin is to be understood in a very different light. The idea of a human disposition toward sin has no place in Pelagius' thought. For Pelagius, the human power of self-improvement could not be thought of as being compromised. It was always possible for humans to discharge their obligations toward God and their neighbors. Failure to do so could not be excused on any grounds. Sin was to be understood as an act deliberately committed against God. Pelagianism thus seems to be a rigid form of legalism or moral authoritarianism – an insistence that humanity is under obligation to be sinless and an absolute rejection of any excuse for failure. Humanity is born sinless and only sins through deliberate actions. Pelagius insisted that many Old Testament figures actually remained sinless. Only those who were morally upright could be allowed to enter the church – whereas Augustine, with his concept of fallen human nature, was happy to regard the church as a hospital where fallen humanity could recover and grow gradually in holiness through grace.

The Nature of Grace

One of Augustine's favorite biblical texts is John 15:5, "apart from me you can do nothing." For Augustine, we are totally dependent upon God for our salvation, from the beginning to the end of our lives. Augustine draws a careful distinction between the natural human faculties – given to humanity as its natural endowment – and additional and special gifts of grace. God does not leave us where we are naturally, incapacitated by sin and unable to redeem ourselves, but gives us grace in order that we may be healed, forgiven, and restored. Augustine's view of human nature is that it is frail, weak, and lost, and needs divine assistance and care if it is to be restored and renewed. Grace, according to Augustine, is God's generous and quite unmerited attention to humanity, by which this process of healing may begin. Human nature requires transformation through the grace of God, so generously given.

Pelagius uses the term "grace" in a very different way. First, grace is to be understood as the natural human faculties. For Pelagius, these are not corrupted or incapacitated or compromised in any way. They have been given to humanity by God and they are meant to be used. When Pelagius asserts that humanity can, through grace, choose to be sinless, what he means is that the natural human faculties of reason and will should enable humanity to choose to avoid sin. As Augustine was quick to point out, this does not seem to be what the New Testament understands by the term.

Second, Pelagius understands grace to be external enlightenment provided for humanity by God. Pelagius gives several examples of such enlightenment – for example, the Ten Commandments and the moral example of Jesus Christ. Grace informs us what

our moral duties are (otherwise, we would not know what they were); it does not, however, assist us to perform them. We are enabled to avoid sin through the teaching and example of Christ. Augustine argued that this was “to locate the grace of God in the law and in teaching.” The New Testament, according to Augustine, envisaged grace as divine assistance to humanity, rather than just moral guidance. For Pelagius, grace was something external and passive, something outside us. Augustine understood grace as the real and redeeming presence of God in Christ within us, transforming us – something that was internal and active.

The Basis of Salvation

For Augustine, humanity is justified as an act of grace: even human good works are the result of God working within fallen human nature. Everything leading up to salvation is the free and unmerited gift of God, given out of love for sinners. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God is enabled to deal with fallen humanity in this remarkable and generous manner, giving us that which we do not deserve (salvation) and withholding from us that which we do deserve (condemnation).

Augustine’s exposition of the Parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–10) is of considerable importance in this respect. As we shall see, Pelagius argued that God rewarded each individual strictly on the basis of merit. Augustine, however, points out that this parable indicates that the basis of the reward given to the individual is the promise made to that individual. Augustine emphasizes that the laborers did not work for equal periods in the vineyard, yet the same wage (a denarius) was given to all. The owner of the vineyard had promised to pay each individual a denarius, providing he worked from the time when he was called to sundown – even though this meant that some worked all day and others only for an hour.

Augustine thus draws the theologically important conclusion that the basis of our justification is the divine promise of grace made to us. God is faithful to that promise and thus justifies sinners. Just as the laborers who began work in the vineyard so late in the day had no claim to a full day’s wages, except through the generous promise of the owner, so sinners have no claim to justification and eternal life, except through the gracious promises of God, received through faith.

For Pelagius, however, humanity is justified on the basis of its merits: human good works are the result of the exercise of the totally autonomous human free will, in fulfillment of an obligation laid down by God. A failure to meet this obligation opens the individual to the threat of eternal punishment. Jesus Christ is involved in salvation only to the extent that he reveals, by his actions and teaching, exactly what God requires of the individual. If Pelagius can speak of “salvation in Christ,” it is only in the sense of “salvation through imitating the example of Christ.”

It will thus be clear that Pelagianism and Augustinianism represent two radically different outlooks, with very divergent understandings of the manner in which God and humanity relate to one another. Augustinianism would eventually gain the upper hand within the western theological tradition; nevertheless, Pelagianism continues to exercise influence over many Christian writers down the ages, not least those who felt that an

emphasis upon the doctrine of grace could too easily lead to a devaluation of human freedom and moral responsibility.

The general lines of Augustine's position can be studied from the following extract from his treatise "On Nature and Grace," originally written in 415. Augustine here identifies the consequences of the Fall for human nature. Originally created without any fault, human nature is now contaminated by sin and can only be redeemed through grace.

Human nature was certainly originally created blameless and without any fault; but the human nature by which each one of us is now born of Adam requires a physician, because it is not healthy. All the good things, which it has by its conception, life, senses, and mind, it has from God, its creator and maker. But the weakness which darkens and disables these good natural qualities, as a result of which that nature needs enlightenment and healing, did not come from the blameless maker but from original sin, which was committed by free will (*liberum arbitrium*). ... But God, who is rich in mercy, on account of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead through our sins, raised us up to life with Christ, by whose grace we are saved. But this grace of Christ, without which neither infants nor grown persons can be saved, is not bestowed as a reward for merits, but is given freely (*gratis*), which is why it is called grace (*gratia*).

In the first part of the passage, Augustine uses primarily medical imagery to describe the impact of sin on human nature – as seen in his use of the terms "physician," "healthy," "healing." Note especially the emphasis on the original integrity of creation (line 1). Augustine's concern here is to defend God against any charge that God is somehow responsible for sin or evil within the world. The present imperfection of the world does not result from God's creation, but from original sin and the abuse of human free will. Augustine then establishes a connection between the Latin words *gratis* ("freely" or "without cost") and *gratia* ("grace"). He then uses this point to reinforce his argument that salvation cannot be considered to be a reward, somehow earned through human merit, status, or achievement; rather, it is a gift.

Case Study 1.8 Faith and Philosophy

Christianity had its origins in Palestine. However, it soon began to expand along the borders of the Mediterranean Sea. Christian expansion into regions such as Egypt, Asia Minor, and Greece raised important issues for Christian writers. One of the most significant concerned the relationship of Christianity and classical philosophy. Much of the civilized world in this region spoke Greek and had at least some degree of familiarity with the ideas of classical Greek philosophy, whether this took the form of classical Platonism, Middle Platonism, or occasionally revived versions of classical paganism. The question therefore arose: how does the Christian gospel relate to these ways of thinking? Does it totally contradict them? Or were these classical ways of thinking in some way a form of preparation for the Christian gospel, which built on their foundations? To anticipate a question raised by Tertullian: what does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?

A description of the early confrontation between Christianity and classical paganism is found in Paul's Areopagus address at Athens, documented in Acts 17:16–34. In this address, Paul appears to argue that the Christian gospel resonates with and builds upon central Stoic philosophical beliefs. What the Greeks held to be unknown, possibly unknowable, Paul argues to have been made known through Christ. A deity of whom Greek philosophy had some implicit or intuitive awareness is being made known to them by name and in full. The God who is known indirectly through the creation can be known directly and more fully in redemption.

Approaches along these lines can be found in the writings of patristic theologians active in cultural situations in which various forms of classic Greek philosophy were a significant presence. In what follows, we shall explore the approaches associated with Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, both of whom were concerned to demonstrate that Christianity was consistent with certain forms of Platonism.

Justin Martyr (c.100–c.165). One of the most noted of the Christian apologists of the second century, with a concern to demonstrate the moral and intellectual credibility of Christianity in a pagan world. His First Apology stresses the manner in which Christianity brings to fulfillment the insights of classical philosophy, especially Middle Platonism.

In his two apologies for the Christian faith, written in Greek at Rome at some point during the period 148–161, Justin sets out a vigorous defense of Christianity, in which he seeks to relate the gospel to secular wisdom. The idea of the “Logos” is of major importance to Justin and needs to be considered. The Greek term “Logos” (best translated as “Word”) was used within Middle Platonism to refer to the mediating principle between the world of ideas and the everyday world. The term is applied to Jesus Christ in John's gospel (see John 1:14, which declares that “the Logos became flesh, and dwelled among us”). Justin uses this statement to argue that all wisdom derives from the Logos, which is fully revealed in Jesus Christ, although it is not restricted to him.

Christ is the firstborn of God, and we have proclaimed that he is the Logos, in whom every race of people have shared. And those who live according to the Logos are Christians, even though they may have been counted as atheists – such as Socrates and Heraclitus, and others like them, among the Greeks. ... Whatever either lawyers or philosophers have said well, was articulated by finding and reflecting upon some aspect of the Logos. However, since they did not know the Logos – which is Christ – in its entirety, they often contradicted themselves. ... Whatever all people have said well belongs to us Christians. For we worship and love, next to God, the Logos, who comes from the unbegotten and ineffable God, since it was for our sake that he became a human being, in order that he might share in our sufferings and bring us healing. For all writers were able to see the truth darkly, on account of the implanted seed of the Logos which was grafted into them.

A central theme in Justin's argument is the idea that God has scattered "the seeds (spermata) of his Logos" throughout the world before the coming of Christ, so that secular wisdom and truth can point, however imperfectly, to Christ. It follows that those who tried to live according to this "Logos" before the coming of Christ can be thought of as Christians, even though they would not have thought of themselves in this way. This aspect of Justin's teaching would be repudiated by most other writers of the patristic period, who felt that he had gone too far in his attempts to relate faith and philosophy.

Note especially the following points:

1. Justin argues that Jesus Christ is the Logos. All true human wisdom derives from this Logos, whether this is explicitly recognized or not. Philosophical tensions and contradictions arise through incomplete access to the Logos – but such full access is now possible through Jesus Christ.
2. Anyone who tries to act according to this Logos can be thought of as a Christian – including Socrates. This aspect of Justin's teaching proved controversial.
3. Anything that is good and true in secular philosophy may therefore be accepted and honored by Christians, in that it derives from the Logos.

Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215). A leading Alexandrian writer, with a particular concern to explore the relation between Christian thought and Greek philosophy.

A related approach is adopted a little later by Clement of Alexandria, who aims to bring out the way in which classical philosophy can be thought of as preparing the way for the gospel. Clement argues that God gave philosophy to the Greeks as a way of preparing them for the coming of Christ, in more or less exactly the same way as he gave the Jews the law of Moses. While not allowing that philosophy has the status of revelation, Clement goes beyond Justin Martyr's suggestion that the mere seeds of the Logos are to be found in Greek philosophy.

Until the coming of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it assists those who come to faith by way of demonstration, as a kind of preparatory training for true religion. For "you will not stumble" (Proverbs 3:23) if you attribute all good things to providence, whether it belongs to the Greeks or to us. For God is the source of all good things, some directly (as with the Old and the New Testaments), and some indirectly (as with philosophy). But it might be that philosophy was given to the Greeks immediately and directly, until such time as the Lord should also call the Greeks. For philosophy acted as a "schoolmaster" to bring the Greeks to Christ, just as the law brought the Hebrews. Thus philosophy was by way of a preparation, which prepared the way for its perfection in Christ.

Note especially the following points:

1. Classical philosophy is seen as having a definite place in the “economy of salvation.” In other words, Clement argues that, in the providence of God, philosophy had a place in preparing the way for the coming of Christ.
2. After the coming of Christ, philosophy retains an important role as a “kind of preparatory training.” Clement clearly regards philosophy in a positive light and sees it as a route leading to, rather than a rival worldview leading away from, Christianity.
3. Note the analogy between philosophy and the Old Testament. Clement’s argument seems to be that, just as God provided the Old Testament law to prepare Israel for the coming of Christ, so God provided philosophy to prepare the Greeks for his coming.
4. Christ is thus seen as the perfection and fulfillment of philosophy.

Tertullian (c.160–c.225). A major figure in early Latin theology, who produced a series of significant controversial and apologetic writings. He is particularly noted for his ability to coin new Latin terms to translate the emerging theological vocabulary of the Greek-speaking Eastern church.

Yet not all early Christian writers shared such a positive attitude to classical philosophy. The third century Roman writer Tertullian is an example of a patristic writer who had serious misgivings concerning the place of philosophy within Christian thought, arguing that it could be profoundly misleading at points. Philosophy, he argued, was pagan in its outlook and its use in theology could only lead to heresy within the church. In his “On the Rule of the Heretics,” written in Latin in the first years of the third century, Tertullian sets up a celebrated contrast between Athens and Jerusalem, symbolizing the tension between pagan philosophy and the revelation of the Christian faith. Note that reference to the “Academy” is not a general reference to the academic world, but specifically to the Platonic Academy at Athens. For Tertullian, the pagan ideas of “the Academy” have no place within Christianity.

Philosophy provides the material of worldly wisdom, in boldly asserting itself to be the interpreter of the divine nature and dispensation. The heresies themselves receive their weapons from philosophy. It was from this source that Valentinus, who was a disciple of Plato, got his ideas about the “aeons” and the “trinity of humanity.” ... What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem and between the Academy and the church? Our system of beliefs comes from the Porch of Solomon, who himself taught that it was necessary to seek God in the simplicity of the heart.

Tertullian argues that, as a matter of historical fact, heresies seem to derive many of their leading ideas from secular Greek philosophy. This, in his view, is enough to raise

very serious questions concerning the use of such philosophies in theology. So why should Christianity pay any attention to philosophy, when it is so clearly biased toward secular ideas? What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Platonic Academy got to do with the Christian church?

Tertullian's points could, of course, be met by arguing for the need to critically appropriate the ideas of philosophy. It could be argued that Justin and Clement were perhaps unduly optimistic in their attitude toward secular philosophy, while Tertullian was too negative. Not every idea found in Greek philosophy was right, just as not every idea was wrong. It is this kind of approach that we find in the early writings of Augustine, to which we now turn.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Widely regarded as the most influential Latin patristic writer, Augustine was converted to Christianity at the northern Italian city of Milan in the summer of 386. He returned to North Africa and was made bishop of Hippo in 395. He was involved in two major controversies – the Donatist controversy, focusing on the church and sacraments, and the Pelagian controversy, focusing on grace and sin. He also made substantial contributions to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and the Christian understanding of history.

In his work “On Christian doctrine,” originally written in Latin around 397, Augustine deals at some length with the relation between Christianity and pagan philosophy. Using the exodus from Egypt as a model, Augustine argues that there is no reason why Christians should not extract all that is good in philosophy and put it to the service of preaching the gospel. The analogy that he uses to justify this approach is found in the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament, which tells of the circumstances under which Israel left Egypt – an event that is universally known as “the Exodus.” Israel was oppressed while in Egypt; on escaping, the people left behind those burdens, yet carried off the treasures of their former oppressors. Therefore, Augustine argues, just as Israel left behind the burdens of Egypt, while carrying off its treasures, so theology can discard what is useless in philosophy and exploit what is good and useful.

If those who are called philosophers, particularly the Platonists, have said anything which is true and consistent with our faith, we must not reject it, but claim it for our own use.... Pagan learning is not entirely made up of false teachings and superstitions. It contains also some excellent teachings, well suited to be used by truth, and excellent moral values. Indeed, some truths are even found among them which relate to the worship of the one God. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and their silver, which they did not invent themselves, but which they dug out of the mines of the providence of God. ... The Christian, therefore, can separate these truths from their unfortunate associations, take them away, and put them to their proper use for the proclamation of the gospel.

Augustine's argument proved to be both influential and productive. In effect, he advocates a method of "critical appropriation" of the ideas and methods of secular philosophy. Where they are right and helpful, they can be adopted; where they are wrong or destructive, they are to be ignored. Christians can filter out what is good and true from secular philosophy and put it to the service of the Christian gospel.

It is widely agreed that the movement within Christianity that explored the relation between Christian faith and philosophy to greatest effect was "scholasticism," a movement that flowered during the Middle Ages, and enjoyed a resurgence within Protestantism in the period following the deaths of Martin Luther and John Calvin. We shall explore this rich intellectual tradition in Case Study 2.1. Before that, however, we turn to the general exploration of this major period in the history of Christian thought.