

sacrifice in the temple; and myrrh was a sign of his forthcoming death, in that he would be wrapped in clothes soaked in this oil.

This way of thinking eventually developed into what is usually called "the threefold office of Christ," which became particularly influential in reformed theology during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (although its ideas can be traced back much earlier than this). Christ, it is argued, brought to fulfillment the three great "offices" or "roles" of the Old Testament – the prophet, the priest, and the king.

These three categories were seen as a convenient summary of all that Jesus of Nazareth had achieved in order to redeem his people. Jesus is a prophet (Matthew 21: 11; Luke 7: 16), a priest (Hebrews 2: 17; 3: 1) and a king (Matthew 21: 5; 27: 11), bringing together in his one person the three great offices of the Old Testament. Jesus is the prophet who, like Moses, will see God face to face (Deuteronomy 17: 15); he is the king who, like David, will establish a new people of God and reign over it in justice and compassion (2 Samuel 7: 12–16); he is the priest who will cleanse his people of its sins. Thus the three gifts brought to Jesus by the Magi were to be seen as reflecting or prefiguring these three functions. The great nineteenth-century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge declared that fallen humanity needed "a Savior who is a prophet to instruct us; a priest to atone and to make intercession for us; and a king to rule over and protect us."

### Grace

A central theme in the Bible is that God's choice of a people or of individuals is not determined by their merits but by God's love and that it comes about through God's will. This can be seen particularly in God's decision to choose Israel as his people. The Old Testament regularly affirms that Israel was chosen not because of anything it had to offer, but solely through the grace of God (Deuteronomy 7: 7; Isaiah 41: 8–9; Ezekiel 20: 5). This, of course, was not understood to abrogate Israel's responsibility to live up to its responsibilities as God's people. Many of the Old Testament prophets stressed the conditionality of Israel's election. Unless Israel behaved in ways appropriate to its identity and calling as God's chosen people, that status would be revoked.

Our attention in this section focuses on the idea of God's being gracious and generous. Salvation is not understood to be the consequence of human merit or achievement. This idea is often expressed through the concept of "grace." For Paul, Christians are saved through grace, not through works (Ephesians 2: 1–10). In other words, their salvation does not depend upon their achievements but upon the generosity and graciousness of God. Through grace, salvation is made possible for those who have neither the merit nor the intrinsic capacity to secure it for themselves. Hence grace affirms God's sheer generosity and goodness.

Such ideas were developed and clarified in the long process of wrestling with the Bible within the Christian church. Initially this process of reflection focused on the person of Christ and on the doctrine of the Trinity. The question of what it means to speak of a "gracious God" did not receive detailed attention until the late fourth and early fifth centuries. One especially important debate helped crystallize Christian perceptions of how best to systematize the New Testament's teaching on grace: the Pelagian controversy of the early fifth century.

### The Pelagian controversy of the fifth century

The central figure in the controversy was Augustine of Hippo. Augustine had been converted to Christianity after a long struggle with a series of questions concerning the meaning of life – such as the origin of evil and how the good life may be lived out in practice. In Augustine's view, humanity was totally dependent upon God for its salvation. Human nature is frail, weak, and prone to becoming lost; it needs divine assistance and care if it is to be restored and renewed. Grace, according to Augustine, is God's generous and quite unmerited care for humanity, through which this process of healing may begin. Human nature requires transformation through the grace of God, so generously given. An integral aspect of Augustine's thinking at this point is the idea of "original sin" – that is, the idea that humanity was contaminated by sin from the moment of its first appearance.

For Augustine, humanity is universally affected by sin as a consequence of the fall. The human mind has been darkened and weakened by sin. The human will has been weakened (but not eliminated) by sin. Using the gospel's analogy of Christ as the physician, Augustine argues that Jesus of Nazareth both diagnoses the human situation (sin) and offers humanity a cure that it cannot secure by itself (grace). It is through the grace of God alone that this illness is recognized for what it is and that a cure is made available.

So what are the implications for our understanding of human nature? For Augustine, humanity is now imperfect: it is wounded and has been robbed of grace. God may have made humanity perfect; as a consequence of sin, humanity is now diseased and needs to be healed. One of the symptoms of sin that Augustine discusses in detail is the captivity of the human free will. For him, human freedom has been compromised by sin. Our desires and longings, which should have been directed toward God, are misdirected toward things of the world. "We look for happiness not in you," Augustine wrote in a prayer, "but in what you have created." The human free will has been weakened and incapacitated – but, to repeat, not eliminated or destroyed – through sin. In order for that free will to be restored and healed, the operation of divine grace is required.

In order to explain this point, Augustine uses the analogy of a pair of scales with two balance pans. One balance pan represents good, and the other evil. If the pans were properly balanced, the arguments in favor of doing good or doing evil could be weighed and a proper conclusion drawn. But, asks Augustine, what if the balance pans are loaded? What happens if someone puts several heavyweights 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 it really can make decisions – just as the loaded scales still work. But, instead of giving a balanced judgment, it is seriously biased toward evil. Using this and related analogies, Augustine argues that the human free will really exists in sinners but is compromised by sin.

Augustine's essential point is that humanity ultimately does not have control over its own behavior and abilities. He understands humanity to be born with a sinful disposition; an inherent bias toward acts of sinning is part of human nature. Augustine develops this point with the help of three important analogies: original sin as a "disease," as a "power," and as "guilt."

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.

The second analogy treats sin as a power that holds humanity captive and from whose grip people are unable to break free by themselves. 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.

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

But some were deeply uneasy about Augustine's ideas, feeling that they downplayed, or possibly even denied, human freedom and responsibility. The Pelagian debate centered on these themes. Augustine's opponent in this debate was Pelagius, a British Christian who had settled in Rome in the late fourth century. Pelagius was disturbed by the moral laxity of Roman Christians and argued vociferously against Augustine's doctrine of grace, which, he argued, failed to acknowledge the need for Christians to actively seek perfection. For Pelagius, there was nothing wrong with human nature. If God told people to be perfect, they were capable of being perfect. Where Augustine argued that sinfulness frustrated the human desire to be good and to do good, Pelagius argued that real problem was a lack of commitment.

In AD 413 Pelagius wrote a lengthy letter to a Roman woman of high birth named Demetrias, who had recently decided to turn her back on wealth in order to become a nun. In this letter Pelagius made clear the consequences of his views on human nature and free will. God has created humanity and knows precisely what it is capable of doing. Hence all the commands given to us can be 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 asks of it what it can manage.

Pelagius went on to make the somewhat uncompromising assertion that, since perfection is possible for humanity, it is obligatory. As things turned out, the moral rigor of this position and its unrealistic view of human nature served only to strengthen Augustine's hand, as he developed the rival understanding of a tender and kindly God attempting to heal and restore a wounded human nature.

Perhaps the sharpest contrast between Augustine and Pelagius is the one concerning the basis of salvation. What do people need to do in order to be saved? The two writers offer very different answers. To summarize them briefly: Augustine emphasizes trusting God's promises and receiving what fruit; Pelagius emphasizes living a good life and securing salvation through moral integrity and good works.

For Augustine, humanity is saved through an act of grace: even human good works are to be seen as the result of God's 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 of Nazareth, God is enabled to deal with fallen humanity in

this remarkable and generous manner, giving us what we do not deserve (salvation), and withholding from us what we do deserve (condemnation).

For Pelagius, on the contrary, 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 of Nazareth reveals, by his actions and teaching, exactly what God requires of the individual if that individual is to be saved. Salvation is thus the result of following the moral example of Jesus.

### The Reformation debates of the sixteenth century

In the end, the western church opted for Augustine's approach. Many historians suggest that the basic issues of the Pelagian controversy are regularly replayed throughout the history of the church. The Reformation of the sixteenth century is widely regarded as taking up the basic issues of the Pelagian debate; but this time the language of "justification by faith" rather than that of "salvation by grace" is being used.

Earlier Christian theologians – such as Augustine – had given priority to those New Testament texts that use the language of "salvation by grace" (e.g., Ephesians 2: 5). However, Martin Luther's wrestling with the issue of how God was able to accept sinners led him to focus on those passages in which Paul spoke primarily of "justification by faith" (e.g., Romans 5: 1–2). Although it can be argued that the same fundamental point is being made in both contexts, the language used to express that point is different.

Martin Luther's program of reform for the church was based largely on his belief that the church had lost sight of any meaningful notion of grace. For Luther, the great question of life was, fundamentally, "How can I find a gracious God?" As a younger man, being terrified of hell and convinced of his own sinfulness, Luther gave an answer that was widespread in the popular Christian culture of his day: if you want to get right with God, make yourself into a good person. Humanity has the capacity to make itself righteous; when this happens, God endorses this transformation and accepts the transformed person into a relationship with him. This only happens through the institution of the church, which provides the God-given structures that lead securely and inevitably to salvation.

Yet Luther changed his mind and moved away from these early views. He developed a doctrine of justification through faith alone, which offered a radical alternative to the popular idea of making yourself good in order to secure divine acceptance. Luther came to the view that, when Paul speaks of the "righteousness of God" being revealed in the gospel, he does not mean that humanity is told what standards of righteousness it must achieve in order to be saved. Rather God provides the righteousness required for salvation as a free, unmerited gift. God's love is not conditional upon human transformation; it is rather the other way round – personal transformation follows divine acceptance and affirmation.

More radically still, Luther insisted that the believer was "at one and the same time a righteous person and a sinner" (*simul iustus et peccator*). While Luther admired Augustine for his emphasis on the unconditional love of God, he suggested that Augustine had become muddled when it came to the location of the gift of righteousness. Augustine considered this gift to be located within humanity, as a transforming reality; Luther argued that it was

located outside us, being “reckoned” or “imputed” to humanity – not imparted. Humanity is like a patient under the care of a wise physician and on the way to recovery.

This approach was developed by other Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, particularly by Philip Melancthon and John Calvin. Two themes became characteristic of Protestant understandings of justification in the sixteenth century:

- 1 Justification is “by faith alone” (*sola fide*). It is not based on any human achievement, but on the graciousness of God.
- 2 Justification is an event in which the believer is declared to be righteous; this is followed by a process of renewal, generally referred to as “sanctification.”

This understanding of justification differed at important points from that offered by Catholic writers; in consequence the doctrine of justification became a major source of disagreement between Protestant and Catholic writers. It is often seen as the great issue that divides these two major branches of Christianity, although this is probably a simplification of a complex situation.

Yet both sides in this debate affirmed that salvation is based on divine grace, not on human achievement. The divergence between them concerned what they meant by “justification” and how they thought it best to think about “justifying righteousness.” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes a statement about grace that most Christians would have little difficulty in accepting: “Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is *favour*, the *free and undeserved help* that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.”

## The Church

The Apostles’ Creed includes a clause that declares that Christians believe in the church. What is meant by this? How is the church to be defined, and what is its purpose? This area of Christian belief is traditionally designated “ecclesiology” (from the Greek word for “church,” *ekklesia*, which originally meant “gathering” or “assembly”). Although Christianity appeals to individuals, it is important to note the strongly communitarian aspects of the Christian faith. Christians prefer to gather together for worship rather than worshipping God individually at home.

So what do Christians understand by this word, “church”? The best way of exploring this theme is to pick up a statement of the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.” These four adjectives – “one,” “holy,” “catholic” (or universal), and “apostolic” – are often referred to as the “four notes” or “four marks” of the church. What do they tell us about Christian thinking on the nature of the church? In what follows we shall explore this matter.

### The unity of the church

The New Testament actually uses the word “church” in two somewhat different senses. At many points it designates individual Christian congregations – local visible gatherings of believers. For example, Paul wrote letters to churches in the cities of Corinth and Philippi. The book of Revelation makes reference to the “seven churches of Asia,” probably meaning

seven local Christian communities in the region of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). These would almost certainly have been “house churches” – clusters of believers who met in a home, being unable to meet in public for fear of arrest.

Yet at other points in the New Testament, especially in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, we find the term “church” being used in a wider, more general sense, meaning something like “the total body of Christian believers.” The distinction between the local and the universal senses of “church” is of considerable importance and needs careful examination. How could both aspects be maintained?

Traditionally, this tension is resolved by arguing that there is one universal church, which is embodied or disclosed in local communities. On the basis of this approach it is possible to argue that there is one universal church, which consists of all Christian believers but takes the form of individual local churches in any given region.

One influential way of conceiving this distinction is due to the sixteenth-century writer John Calvin (1509–1564), who drew a distinction between the “visible” and the “invisible” church. At one level, the church is the community of Christian believers – a visible group. It is also, however, the fellowship of saints and the company of the elect – an invisible entity. In its invisible aspect, the church is the invisible assembly of the elect, known only to God; in its visible aspect, it is the community of believers on earth. The former consists only of the elect; the latter includes both good and evil, elect and reprobate.

The importance of this way of thinking (and of others like it) is best appreciated by considering the following question. How can anyone talk about “one” Christian church, when there are so many different Christian denominations? Faced with an apparent tension between a theoretical belief in “one church” and the observable reality of a plurality of churches, Christian writers have developed a number of approaches designed to allow the later to be incorporated in the framework of the former.

Some have adopted a basically Platonic approach, which draws a fundamental distinction between the empirical church (that is, the church as a visible historical reality) and the ideal church. Others have favored an eschatological approach. On this understanding, the present disunity of the church will be abolished on the last day. The present situation is temporary and will be resolved on the day of judgment. This viewpoint lies behind Calvin’s distinction between the “visible” and “invisible” churches, which we considered above.

Some have found a biological approach helpful: they compared the historical evolution of the church to the development of the branches of a tree. This image, proposed by the eighteenth-century German Pietist writer Nicolas von Zinzendorf and taken up with enthusiasm by Anglican writers of the following century, allows the different empirical churches – for example the Roman Catholic, the Orthodox, and the Anglican – to be seen as possessing an organic unity, despite their institutional differences. The various churches are thus seen as branches on the same root – that is, as having a fundamental unity despite their diversity.

### The holiness of the church

One of the most interesting debates over the doctrine of the church concerns whether its members are required to be holy. The debate is seen to be at its most intense during the Donatist controversy of the fourth century, which focused on the question of whether

church leaders were required to be morally pure. 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 conversion 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].” One such *traditor* was Felix of Aptunga, who later consecrated Caecilian as Bishop of the great North African city of Carthage in 311.

Many local Christians were outraged that such a person should have been allowed to be involved in a consecration, and they declared that they could not accept the authority of Caecilian. The new bishop's authority was compromised, it was argued, on account of the fact that the bishop who had consecrated him had lapsed under the pressure of persecution. The hierarchy of the Catholic church was tainted as a result of this development. The church ought to be pure; it should not be permitted to include such people. By 388, when Augustine of Hippo – destined to be a central figure in the controversy – returned from Rome to North Africa, a breakaway faction had established itself as the leading Christian body in the region, with strong support from the local African population.

The Donatists believed that the entire sacramental system of the Catholic church had become corrupted on account of the lapse of its leaders. How could the sacraments be validly administered by people who were tainted in this way? It was therefore necessary to replace these people with more acceptable leaders, who had remained firm in their faith under persecution. It was also necessary to rebaptize and re-ordain all those who had been baptized and ordained by the lapsed leaders. The faction that Augustine found on his return was larger than the church from which it had originally broken away.

Augustine responded by putting forward a theory of the church that he believed was more firmly grounded in the New Testament than the Donatist teaching. In particular, Augustine emphasized the sinfulness of Christians. The church is not meant to be a “pure body,” a society of saints, but a “mixed body” (*corpus permixtum*) 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 weeds (or “tares,” to use an older English word familiar to readers of the King James Bible). 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 contained both wheat and weeds. What could be done about it? It would be foolish to attempt to separate the wheat and the weeds while both were still growing, as the farmer would probably damage the wheat while trying to get rid of the weeds. But at harvest all the plants – whether wheat or weeds – could be cut down and sorted out, thus avoiding any damage to the wheat. The parable suggests that the separation of the good from the evil takes place at the end of time, not in history.

For Augustine, however, this parable refers to the church rather than the world. The church must expect to find itself comprising both saints and sinners. 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 then, in what sense is the church holy? For Augustine, the holiness of the church is not that of its members, but that of Christ. In this world the church cannot be a congregation of saints, because its members are contaminated by 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. Donatists, Augustine suggests, were just as capable as Catholics of getting drunk or beating people up.

Yet the Donatist vision of a “pure body” remains attractive to many. As so often happens in theological debates, the evidence is never entirely on one side of the argument. A strong case continues to be made for the idea of the church as a “pure body,” especially in denominations that trace their identity back to the more radical wing of the Protestant Reformation, often known as “anabaptist.” The radical Reformation conceived of the church as an “alternative society” within the mainstream of sixteenth-century European culture. For Menno Simmons, the church was an assembly of the righteous, at odds with the world, and not a “mixed body,” as Augustine argued.

It will be clear that there are strong parallels with the Donatist view of the church as a holy and pure body, isolated from the corrupting influences of the world and prepared to maintain its purity and distinctiveness by whatever disciplinary means prove to be necessary.

Other writers have pointed out how “holiness” is often equated with “morality,” “sanctity,” or “purity,” which often seem to bear little relation to the behavior of fallen human beings. Yet the Hebrew term *kadad*, which underlies the New Testament concept of “holiness,” has a rather different meaning, bearing the sense of “being cut off” or “being separated.” There are strong dedicatory overtones: to be “holy” is to be set apart for, and dedicated to, the service of God.

A fundamental element – indeed, perhaps *the* fundamental element – in the Old Testament's idea of holiness is that of “something or someone whom God has set apart.” The New Testament restricts the sphere of holiness almost entirely to personal holiness; it applies “holy” to individuals, declining to pick up the idea of “holy places” or “holy things.” People are “holy” in that they are dedicated to God; and they are distinguished from the world on account of their calling by God. A number of theologians have suggested a correlation between the idea of “the church” (the Greek word for which can bear the meaning of “those who are called out”), and “holy” (that is, those who have been separated from the world on account of their having been called by God).

To speak of the “holiness of the church” is thus primarily to speak of the holiness of the one who called that church and its members. The church has been separated from the world in order to bear witness to the grace and salvation of God. Therefore the term “holy,” taken in this sense, affirms both the calling of the church and of its members and the hope that the church will one day share in the life and glory of God.

#### The catholicity of the church

The Christian creeds refer to the church as “universal” or “catholic.” The term “catholic” derives from the Greek phrase *kath' holou* (“wholly, in its entirety”). The Greek words subsequently found their way into the Latin adjective *catholicus*, which came to have the

meaning "universal" or "general." (The word "universal" is now often used as an alternative to "catholic," particularly within Protestant denominations.) This sense of the word is retained in the English phrase "catholic taste," which means "wide-ranging taste" rather than "taste for things that are Roman Catholic." Older versions of the English Bible often refer to some of the New Testament letters (such as those of James and John) as "catholic epistles," meaning that they are directed to all Christians (unlike those of Paul, which are generally directed to the needs and situations of individually identified churches, such as those at Rome or Corinth).

The developed sense of the word is perhaps best seen in the fourth-century catechetical writings of Cyril of Jerusalem. In his eighteenth catechetical lecture, Cyril teases out a number of senses of the word "catholic":

The church is thus called "catholic" because it is spread throughout the entire inhabited world, from one end to the other, and because it teaches in its totality [*katholikōs*] and without leaving anything out every doctrine which people need to know relating to things visible and invisible, whether in heaven and earth. It is also called "catholic" because it brings to obedience every sort of person – whether rulers or their subjects, the educated and the unlearned. It also makes available a universal [*katholikōs*] remedy and cure to every kind of sin.

It will be clear that Cyril is using the term "catholic" in four ways, each of which deserves comment a little further:

- 1 Catholic is to be understood as "spread throughout the entire inhabited world." Here Cyril notes the geographical sense of the word. The notion of "wholeness" or "universality" is thus understood as a mandate for the church to spread into every region of the world.
- 2 Catholic means "without leaving anything out." With this phrase, Cyril stresses that the "catholicity" of the church involves the complete proclamation and explanation of the Christian faith. It is an invitation to ensure that the totality of the gospel is preached and taught, not just the sections of the creed that a catechist or a preacher happens to prefer.
- 3 Catholic means that the church extends its mission and ministry to "every sort of person." Cyril here makes the essentially sociological point that the Christian gospel and church are intended for all kinds of human beings, irrespective of their race, gender, or social status. We can see here a clear echo of St. Paul's famous declaration that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3: 28).
- 4 Catholic means that the church offers and proclaims "a universal remedy and cure to every kind of sin." Here Cyril makes a soteriological statement: the gospel, and the church that proclaims that gospel, can meet every human need and distress. Whatever sins there may be, the church is able to offer an antidote.

#### The apostolicity of the church

Fourth and finally, the church is declared to be "apostolic." What does this mean? The fundamental sense of the term is "originating with the Apostles" or "having a direct link with the Apostles." This epithet is a reminder that the church is founded on the apostolic

witness and testimony. In the New Testament, the word "apostle" has two related meanings:

- 1 someone who has been commissioned by Christ and charged with the task of preaching the good news of the kingdom;
- 2 someone who was a witness to the risen Christ, or someone to whom Christ revealed himself as risen.

In declaring the church to be "apostolic," the creeds emphasize the historical roots of the gospel, the continuity between the church and Christ through the Apostles whom he appointed, and the continuing evangelistic and missionary tasks of the church.

The church can therefore be thought of as being "apostolic" in three ways, each laying emphasis on a different aspect of the church's history, calling, and function.

- 1 Historically, the origins of the church are to be traced back to the apostles. The New Testament tells something of this historical development, especially in the Acts of the Apostles, and brings out the critical role played by the apostles, as Christ's appointed representatives, in the expansion of the church.
- 2 Theologically, the church is "apostolic" in that it maintains and transmits the teaching of the apostles. Earlier we noted how the first Christians, when agreeing on the contents of the New Testament, regarded apostolic authorship as being of major importance. The New Testament can be thought of as a repository of apostolic teaching. In declaring that the church is "apostolic," the creeds are insisting that faithfulness to the apostolic tradition is an integral part of the church's task and an essential precondition for its right to call itself "Christian." This theme can be seen in some of the later writings of the New Testament, which are especially concerned with maintaining Christian faithfulness in the post-apostolic period. Thus Paul asks his successor Timothy to remain faithful to what he has been taught and to pass it down to those who will succeed him:

Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

(2 Timothy 1: 13–14)

- 3 The church is apostolic, in that it is charged with the responsibility of carrying on the succession of apostolic ministry. The patterns of ministry found in the New Testament, although in an emerging form – for example, deacons, presbyters or "elders," and bishops – are to remain normative for Christianity. More importantly, the tasks entrusted by Christ to the apostles – such as pastoral care for the poor and the needy, teaching, and the preaching of the gospel to the world – are passed down within the church to their successors within the church.

Among the tasks passed down to the apostles' successors is Christ's command to do certain specific things, both as a reminder of his life, death, and resurrection and as a celebration

and proclamation of his ongoing presence in the church. In view of the importance of these "sacraments" to the life of the church, we may consider them in some detail.

### The Sacraments

The word "sacrament" is widely used to refer to certain acts of worship that are understood to possess special importance in maintaining and developing the Christian life. The term derives from the Latin word *sacramentum*, which originally meant "sacred oath," such as the oath of obedience that a Roman soldier might swear to the people and Senate of Rome. The third-century theologian Tertullian used this parallel as a means of bringing out the importance of sacraments in relation to Christian commitment and loyalty within the church. Baptism, for example, can be seen as a sign both of allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth and of commitment to the Christian community.

There has been considerable debate within the Christian community over the identity and function of sacraments, as well as over what to call them. The fundamental Christian practice of using bread and wine to recall the Last Supper is referred to in different ways by different Christian groups. The most commonly encountered descriptions are the mass, the eucharist, the Lord's Supper, and the Holy Communion. Generally speaking, Protestantism tends to accept only two sacraments – baptism and the eucharist – where Roman Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy recognize seven. The seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church are generally grouped together in three categories: the sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation, and the eucharist), the sacraments of healing (reconciliation or penance, and the anointing or "unction" of the sick), and sacraments of vocation (marriage and ordination). The Greek Orthodox church also recognizes these seven sacraments, while using the term "chrismation" in place of confirmation.

#### What is a sacrament?

Although earlier Christian writers often refer to the sacraments, we find relatively little reflection on what determines whether something is a sacrament or not. The word was used somewhat uncritically, without any attempt to achieve theological precision on what the concept entailed. Augustine of Hippo is generally regarded as having laid down the general principles relating to the definition of sacraments. These principles can be set out as follows:

- 1 In the first place, a sacrament is fundamentally a sign. When applied to divine things, signs are called sacraments.
- 2 In the second place, this sign must bear some relation to the thing that is signified. If sacraments did not resemble the things of which they are the sacraments, they would not be sacraments at all.

These definitions, though useful, are still imprecise and inadequate. For example, does it follow that every "sign of a sacred thing" is to be regarded as a sacrament? Augustine himself understood by "sacraments" a number of things that are no longer regarded as

sacramental in character – for example, the creeds and the Lord's Prayer. As time passed, it became increasingly clear that the definition of a sacrament simply as "a sign of a sacred thing" was inadequate. It was during the theological renaissance of the earlier Middle Ages that further clarification took place.

In the late twelfth century, the Parisian theologian Peter Lombard developed Augustine's definition, giving it a new clarity and precision. Peter's definition in his widely used and authoritative theological textbook *The Four Books of the Sentences* takes the following form:

A sacrament bears a likeness to the thing of which it is a sign. ... Something can properly be called a sacrament if it is a sign of the grace of God and a form of invisible grace, so that it bears its image and exists as its cause. Sacraments were therefore instituted for the sake of sanctifying, as well as of signifying.

This definition embraces each of the seven traditional sacraments noted above and excludes such things as the creed.

The rise of Protestantism ended this consensus within the western church. Martin Luther challenged this way of thinking about the sacraments, insisting that there were three basic elements that were essential to the definition of a sacrament: a physical sign; a divine promise; and an explicit command from Jesus of Nazareth that this physical sign should be used in this way. Luther's more radical definition limited the list of sacraments to two: baptism and the eucharist.

#### The function of sacraments

What do sacraments do? From what has already been said it can be seen that, in Christian theology, sacraments have universally been understood as signs. Sacraments thus signify divine grace. But this is only a partial answer. Do sacraments do more than simply signify the grace of God? Are the sacraments merely signs, or are they a special kind of sign – such as an effective sign, which causes what is being signified?

Traces of this view may be found in the second century. Ignatius of Antioch declared that the eucharist was "the medicine of immortality and the antidote that we should not die, but live for ever in Jesus Christ." The idea is, clearly, that the eucharist does not merely signify eternal life, but is somehow instrumental in effecting it. This approach was developed subsequently by many writers, and especially by Ambrose of Milan in the fourth century (c. 340–397). Ambrose argued that, in baptism, the Holy Spirit "coming upon the font or upon those who are to be baptized, effects the reality of regeneration."

In medieval theology a distinction was carefully drawn between the "sacraments of the Old Covenant" (such as circumcision) and the "sacraments of the New Covenant" (such as baptism). Early medieval theologians held that the sacraments of the Old Covenant merely signified spiritual realities, whereas the sacraments of the New Covenant actualized or caused what they signified. The thirteenth-century Franciscan writer known as St. Bonaventure (Giovanni di Fidanza, 1221–1274) made this point as follows, using a medical analogy:

In the Old Law, there were ointments of a kind, but they were figurative and did not heal. The disease was lethal, but the anointings were superficial. ... Genuinely healing ointments must

bring both spiritual anointing and a life-giving power; it was only Christ our Lord who did this, since through his death, the sacraments have the power to bring to life.

These views remain characteristic of modern Catholicism. Sacraments are understood to convey or enact the grace that they represent. However, many theologians add a qualifier here, noting that it is possible for an individual to resist this grace by placing an obstacle in its path. Thus the Second Vatican Council, while continuing to emphasize the effective causality of sacraments, noted the importance of believers' responding appropriately to them:

Because [sacraments] are signs, they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen and express it. That is why they are called "sacraments of faith." They do indeed confer grace, but in addition the very act of celebrating them most effectively disposes the faithful to receive this grace to their profit, to worship God duly, and to practise charity.

Protestantism found itself divided over the question of what the sacraments achieved. Luther was prepared to allow that sacraments caused what they signified. In his *Shorter Catechism* (1529) he made it clear that baptism brought about both the signification and the causation of divine forgiveness:

QUESTION	What gifts or benefits does Baptism bring?
ANSWER	It brings about the forgiveness of sins, saves us from death and the devil, and grants eternal blessedness to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare.

These views remain generally characteristic of Lutheranism to this day.

Other Protestant writers, however, were suspicious of such an approach, which they regarded as coming close to a magical view of sacraments. The Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli insisted that sacraments were signs, and nothing more:

Sacraments are simply the signs of holy things. Baptism is a sign which pledges us to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Remembrance shows us that Christ suffered death for our sake. They are the signs and pledges of these holy things.

Zwingli therefore argues that both baptism and the eucharist (which he here refers to as "the Remembrance") are external signs of spiritual realities, which have no power in themselves to bring about what they signify. Baptism is thus a sign, but not a cause, of God's forgiveness of sins. This viewpoint remains influential within parts of modern Protestantism, and is especially found in modern evangelicalism.

Yet a third Protestant approach was set out by John Calvin and his successors in the reformed tradition. Calvin's approach can be seen as a mediating approach, roughly halfway between Luther's causative view and Zwingli's representationalist view of the sacraments. Calvin defines a sacrament as "an external symbol by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good will towards us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith." Yet, although the sacraments are external signs, he argues that there is such a close connection between the symbol and the gift it symbolizes that we can easily pass from one to the other. The sign is visible and physical, whereas the thing signified is invisible and

spiritual – yet the connection between the sign and the thing signified is so intimate that it is permissible to apply the one to the other. Calvin was thus able to maintain the difference between sign and thing signified, while insisting that the sign really points to the gift it signifies.

In what follows we shall explore some questions linked to each of these sacraments that continue to be debated and discussed within Christian circles.

#### Debates about baptism

Should children be baptized? Matthew's gospel records Jesus Christ as commanding his disciples to go and make disciples and to baptize them (Matthew 28: 17–20). But what about children? Does this command extend only to adults, or does it include infants? The New Testament makes no specific references to the baptism of infants. However, it does not explicitly forbid the practice either, and there are also a number of passages that could be interpreted as condoning it – for example, references to the baptizing of entire households, which would probably have included infants (Acts 16: 15, 33; 1 Corinthians 1: 16). Paul treats baptism as a spiritual counterpart to circumcision (Colossians 2: 11–12). So if Jews were able to mark their male children as belonging to the household of faith in this way, why should not Christians also mark their children – male and female – by baptism?

Most mainline Christian churches accept that the baptism of infants is a valid practice, with roots in the apostolic period. Martin Luther and John Calvin, though severely critical of the Catholic church over many points of doctrine and practice, held that infant baptism was an authentic biblical practice. The reasons given for infant baptism vary. Augustine of Hippo argued that, since Christ is the savior of all people, all people require salvation. As baptism is a recognition both of the need for human salvation and of God's gracious willingness to provide it, all should be baptized. After all, he argued, little children were as much in need of salvation as adults.

Another line of defense of the baptism of infants can be found in the Old Testament, which stipulated that male infants born within the bounds of Israel should have an outward sign of their membership of the people of God. The outward sign in question was circumcision – that is, the removal of the foreskin. Infant baptism was thus to be seen as analogous to circumcision. It was a sign of belonging to a covenant community.

Writers such as Huldrych Zwingli argued that infant baptism affirmed publicly the more inclusive and gentle character of Christianity. The more inclusive character of Christianity was publicly demonstrated by the baptism of both male and female infants; Judaism, in contrast, recognized only the marking of male infants. The more gentle character of the gospel was publicly demonstrated by the absence of pain or blood shedding in the sacrament. Christ suffered – in being circumcised himself, in addition to his death on the cross – in order that his people need not suffer in this manner.

But not all are persuaded by the case for infant baptism. Many Baptist writers reject the traditional practice of baptizing infants. Baptism was to be administered only when an individual showed signs of grace, repentance, or faith. The practice of baptizing infants is held to be without biblical foundation. It may have become the norm in the post-apostolic period, but not in the period of the New Testament itself. It is also argued that the practice of infant baptism leads to the potentially confusing idea that individuals are Christians as a result of their baptism, thus weakening the link between baptism and Christian discipleship.

## Debates about the eucharist

At the Last Supper Jesus commanded his disciples to remember him through bread and wine. It is clear that this was done from the earliest of times. The New Testament itself makes reference to the first Christians obeying Jesus Christ's command to remember him in this way (1 Corinthians 11: 20–27). This act of celebration and remembrance is referred to in different ways in the Christian churches: the mass, the Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, and the eucharist (this last term derives from the Greek word for "thanksgiving").

An important debate within Christianity concerns whether, and if so in what manner, Christ may be said to be present at the Lord's Supper. This issue is often linked with the words spoken by Christ at the Last Supper. Taking the bread, he told his disciples: "this is my body" (Matthew 26: 26). What does this mean? The majority opinion within global Christianity is that Christ's words can only mean that, in some sense, Christ's body is present in the bread of the Lord's Supper.

One way of understanding this idea is the doctrine of "transubstantiation," which was formalized in 1215. This doctrine holds that the outward appearance of the bread remains unchanged, whereas its inward identity is transformed. In other words, the bread continues to look, taste, smell, and feel as if it were bread; at its most fundamental level, however, it has been changed. By a similar argument, the wine is held to have become the blood of Christ. This position is often stated using the Aristotelian distinction between "substance" (that which gives something its inward identity) and "accidents" (mere external appearances). On this view, the substance of the bread and wine is changed, but their accidents remain unaltered. Although this position is especially associated with the Catholic church, related viewpoints can be found in eastern Orthodoxy.

Martin Luther developed a somewhat different idea, often known as "consubstantiation," which holds that the bread remains bread but is additionally the body of Christ. Luther illustrated this notion by pointing to how a piece of iron, when placed in a hot fire, becomes red-hot. Although remaining iron, it has heat added to it. In the same way, the bread of the Lord's Supper remains bread, but additionally contains or conveys the body of Christ.

Not all Christians take this position. Some, following John Calvin, argue that the bread is an "efficacious sign." In other words, although the bread is not the body of Christ, it represents it in such a way that what is signified is effectively conveyed. Others follow the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli, who argued that the bread symbolized Christ's body. The bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper are there to help believers recall the events of Calvary and to encourage them to recommit themselves to the church, to God, and to each other. Others still adopt another approach of Zwingli's, sometimes known as "memorialism," which holds that there is no objective change in either the bread or the wine. Any change that occurs is subjective, taking place in the mind of the beholder, who now "sees" the bread as a sign of Christ's body and as a reminder of his sacrifice upon the cross.

These, of course, represent only a few positions that Christians have defended. Nevertheless, they illustrate the ongoing debates within Christianity over how best to interpret both the biblical witness to the Last Supper and the long Christian history of repeating the actions Christ commanded, as a "reminder" (Greek *anamnēsis*) of him.

## The Christian Hope

Finally, we come to the theme of the Christian hope – an idea often expressed through the phrase "the last things" (Greek *ta eschata*, from which derives the word "eschatology," meaning "understanding of the last things"). Christianity is a religion of hope, which focuses on the resurrection of Jesus as the ground for believing and trusting in a God who is able to triumph over death and to give hope to all those who suffer and die. Cyprian of Carthage (died 258), a martyr bishop of the third century, tried to encourage his fellow Christians in the face of suffering and death at times of persecution by holding before them a vision of heaven in which they would see the martyrs and the apostles face to face. More than that; they would be reunited with those whom they loved and cherished.

Cyprian here conceives of heaven as the "native land" of Christians, from which they have been exiled during their time on earth. The hope of return to their native land, there to be reunited with those whom they knew and loved, was held out as a powerful consolation in times of trial and suffering.

We regard paradise as our native land ... Many of our dear ones await us there, and a dense crowd of parents, brothers, children, is longing for us, already assured of their own safety, and still longing for our salvation. What gladness there will be for them and for us when we enter their presence and share their embrace!

Cyprian himself was martyred for his faith in 258, presumably being consoled by precisely the ideas with which he sought to console others.

The word "heaven" is traditionally used to refer to the hope of dwelling in the presence of God forever. It is not understood geographically or spatially, as if it referred to a country or a region of the world. Its dominant sense is relational – that is, the word is used to designate the state of dwelling with God, without any particular understanding of precisely where this dwelling is located.

The Christian vision of heaven is shaped by a number of controlling images or themes, of which two are particularly important: the New Jerusalem, and the restoration of creation. A radical transformation of all things will bring about a new order, reversing the devastating effects of sin upon humanity and upon the world. The image of resurrection conveys the ideas of both radical change and continuity: the new order of things, though utterly different from what we currently know and experience, nevertheless demonstrates continuity with the present order. The present age will be transformed and renewed, just as a seed is completely transformed in becoming a living plant.

In this closing section we shall focus on Christian beliefs concerning heaven, the most important of these "last things."

## The New Testament and Christian hope

The eschatology of the New Testament is complex. However, one of its leading themes is that something that happened in the past has inaugurated something new, which will reach its final consummation in the future. The Christian believer is thus caught up in this tension



between the "now" and the "not yet." In one sense, heaven has not yet happened; in another, its powerful lure already impacts upon life in a dramatic and complex fashion, as Christians are at one and the same time excited at its prospect and rendered dejected by knowing that they are not yet there.

The term "heaven" is used frequently in the Pauline writings of the New Testament to refer to Christian hope. Although it is natural to represent heaven as a future entity, Paul's thinking appears to embrace both a future reality and a spiritual sphere or realm, which coexists with the material world of space and time. Thus "heaven" is referred to both as the future home of the believer (2 Corinthians 5: 1-2; Philippians 3: 20) and as the present dwelling-place of Jesus Christ, from which he will come in final judgment (Romans 10: 6; 1 Thessalonians 1: 10; 4: 16).

As we shall see, one of Paul's most significant statements concerning heaven focuses on the notion of believers being "citizens of heaven" (Philippians 3: 20) and in some way sharing in the life of heaven in the present. The tension between the "now" and the "not yet" is evident in Paul's statements concerning heaven, which make it very difficult to sustain the simple idea of heaven as something that will not come into being until the future or cannot be experienced at all in the present. For Paul, the hope of heaven impacts upon life in the here and now, even though heaven, in all its fullness, remains to be consummated in the future.

The image of the "New Jerusalem" has exercised a decisively important influence over Christian reflection on heaven down the centuries. The origins of this image lie primarily in the book of Revelation, the closing book of the Christian Bible. Its powerful imagery has saturated Christian hymnody and theological reflection on how heaven is to be visualized. The consolation of heaven is here contrasted with the suffering, tragedy, and pain of life on earth. "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21: 1-5).

The theme of the New Jerusalem is here integrated with motifs drawn from the creation account – such as the presence of the "tree of life" (Revelation 22: 2) – suggesting that heaven can be seen as the restoration of the bliss of the garden of Eden (Genesis 2), when God dwelt with humanity in harmony. The pain, sorrow, and evil of a fallen world have finally passed away, and the creation is restored to its original intention.

Probably the most helpful way of construing the New Testament's affirmations concerning heaven is to see the latter as a consummation of the Christian doctrine of salvation, in which the presence, penalty, and power of sin have all been finally eliminated and the total presence of God in individuals and in the community of faith has been achieved. This idea is clearly expressed in the vision of heaven set out in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness."

The New Testament parables of heaven are strongly communal in nature. Heaven is here portrayed as a banquet, a wedding feast, or a city – the new Jerusalem. Eternal life is thus not a projection of an individual human existence, but is rather to be seen as sharing, with the redeemed community as a whole, in the community of a loving God.

#### The nature of the resurrection body

What do resurrected individuals look like? To put this in somewhat simplistic terms, what sort of people will walk the streets of the New Jerusalem? Many early Christian writers

argued that the "citizens of heaven" would be naked, re-creating the situation of human innocence in paradise. This time, however, nakedness would give rise neither to shame nor to sexual lust, but would simply be accepted as the natural and innocent state of humanity. Others, however, argued that the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem would be clothed in finery, which would reflect their status as citizens of God's chosen city.

It was clear to many writers that the final state of deceased believers was not of material importance to their appearance in heaven. The issue emerged as theologically significant during a persecution of Christians in Lyons around the years 175-177. Aware that Christians believed in the resurrection of the body, their pagan oppressors burned the bodies of those they had just martyred and threw their ashes in the River Rhône. This, they believed, would prevent the resurrection of these martyrs, in that there was now no body to be raised. Christian theologians responded by arguing that God was able to restore or reconstitute the bodies of believers, especially those who died violently or whose corpses have been destroyed by burning.

Methodius of Olympus (died c. 311) offered an analogy for this process of reconstitution that would prove highly influential in discussing the question. The resurrection could, he argued, be thought of as a kind of "rearrangement" of the constituent elements of humanity. It is as if a statue were melted down and reforged from the same material – yet in such a manner that any defects or damage are eliminated.

A similar argument is found in the *Four Books of the Sentences*, the masterpiece of the great twelfth-century theologian Peter Lombard. This book, which served as a core textbook for just about every medieval theologian, took the view that the resurrected body was basically a reconstituted humanity from which all defects had been purged.

A final question that has caused considerable debate among Christian theologians concerns the age of those who are resurrected. If someone dies at the age of 60, will she appear in the streets of the New Jerusalem as an old person? And if someone dies at the age of 10, will he appear as a child? This issue caused the spilling of much ink, especially during the Middle Ages. By the end of the thirteenth century an emerging consensus can be discerned. As each person reaches his or her peak or perfection around the age of 30, each person would be resurrected as (s)he would have appeared at that time – even if (s)he never lived to reach that age or died long afterwards. Peter Lombard's discussion of the matter is typical of his age: "A boy who dies immediately after being born will be resurrected in that form which he would have had if he had lived to the age of thirty." The New Jerusalem will thus be populated by men and women as they would appear at the age of 30 (the age, of course, at which Jesus of Nazareth was crucified) – and with every blemish removed.

#### Christian burial or cremation?

A further issue concerning the form of the resurrection body became especially important during the twentieth century, when the practice of cremation was increasingly common among Christian nations, partly on account of the prohibitive cost of burial. Was cremation inconsistent with belief in the resurrection? Was our resurrection to eternal life dependent on being buried intact? The question, as we have already noted (p. 119), had been debated in earlier periods. Christian theologians argued that God would not be troubled by this

inconvenience. God would still be able to reconstitute the bodies of those whose bodies have been dismembered or destroyed.

For centuries cremation was expressly forbidden by the Catholic church. Two reasons were often invoked. In the first place, cremation was seen as a pagan practice that denied the doctrine of the resurrection. Second, the body was believed to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. However, some significant changes in the Catholic practice took place in the twentieth century. In 1963, the Vatican lifted the ban on cremation for Catholics. Still, no allowance was made for any prayer or rituals to be used with the cremated remains. This meant that all funeral services were to occur in the presence of the body, while cremation was to take place afterwards. In 1997 the Vatican granted permission for the cremated remains of a body to be brought into church for the liturgical rites of burial. It is still, however, the official church's preference for the funeral rites to take place in the presence of the body and for cremation to follow afterwards.

In Protestant circles perhaps the most influential answer to this question was offered by the famous American evangelist Billy Graham in a nationally syndicated newspaper column:

In Corinthians 5, Paul makes the contrast between living in a tent, a temporary home that can be pulled down and put away, and living in a permanent home that will last forever. Our bodies are our temporary tents. Our resurrected bodies will be our permanent homes. They are similar in appearance but different in substance. Cremation is therefore no hindrance to the resurrection.

Graham's point was clear: the Christian hope of resurrection is grounded in the trustworthiness of the divine promises, not in the precise circumstances of a person's funeral arrangements. These ideas are important in a number of respects, not least in relation to Christian funeral services. We shall consider these services in a later chapter.

### Conclusion

This brief overview of Christian beliefs is little more than a sketchy map of a complex and fascinating landscape, which deserves much more extensive exploration and discussion. Happily there are many guides available to you, if you wish to explore this field further. Some suitable starting points are noted in the Further Reading section, which will help you take things further.

We now turn to provide an overview of Christian history. The next chapter surveys some of the major themes in the history of Christianity, from the apostolic age to the present day.

## 4

# Christian History

## *An Overview*

It is impossible to understand the present state and forms of Christianity without a knowledge of its history. To study Christian history is not about retreating from the present into the past, but about providing a lens that brings the present into sharper focus. The long shadows of past debates, discussions, and personalities figure large in contemporary Christianity. Given the importance of this history, we shall accord it careful attention. This large chapter considers the history of Christianity under five broad sections, as follows:

- 1 the period of the early church, sometimes referred to as the "patristic period," during which the Christian faith began to gain a significant following throughout the Mediterranean world;
- 2 the Middle Ages, a period of Christian history in Western Europe that witnessed significant cultural and intellectual developments: the complex cultural phenomenon known as the Renaissance is included in this period;
- 3 the age of reformation in Western Europe, which witnessed the birth of Protestantism in certain parts of Europe and the consolidation of Catholicism in others, eventually leading to the Wars of Religion;
- 4 the modern age: this section looks at the development of Christianity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with particular reference to developments in Western Europe and North America that culminated in the outbreak of the Great War (later known as the "First World War") of 1914–1918;
- 5 the twentieth century: this final section considers the dramatic changes in the shape of global Christianity in the century following the end of the Great War; it includes discussion of important developments in Africa, South America, and Asia.