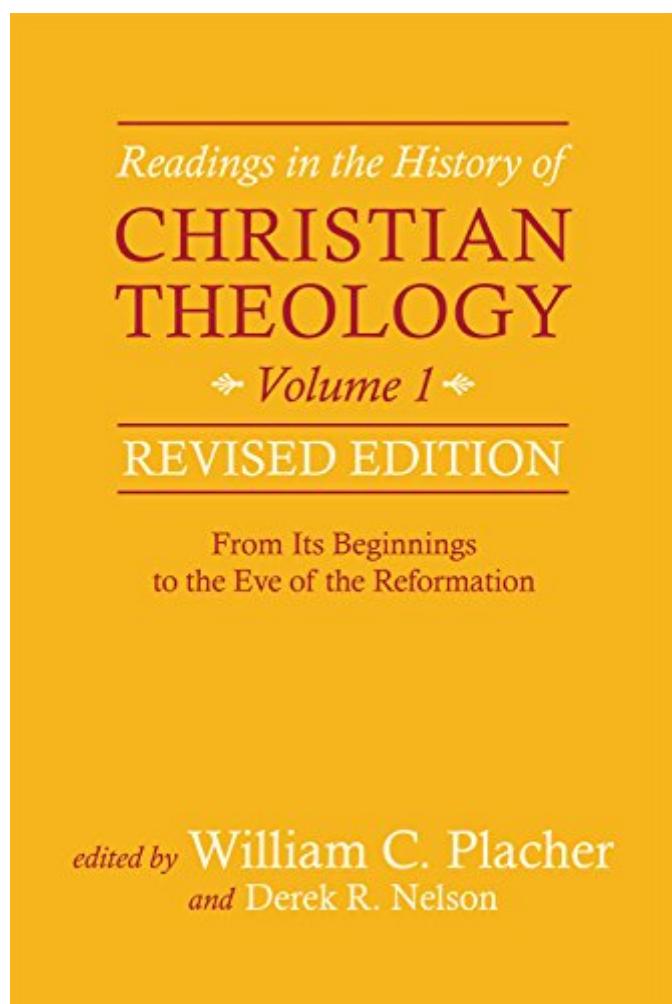


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# Readings In The History Of Christian Theology, Volume 1, Revised Edition: From Its Beginnings To The Eve Of The Reformation



## **Synopsis**

William C. Placher and Derek Nelson compile significant passages written by the most important Christian thinkers, from the early church through the Middle Ages, and up to the beginning of the sixteenth century. Illustrating the major theologians, controversies, and schools of thought, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology* is an essential companion to the study of church history and historical theology. Excerpts are preceded by the editors' introductions, allowing the book to stand alone as a coherent history. This revised edition expands the work's scope with the addition of many new texts, especially those from the voices of women and others who have been marginalized from the theological tradition. This valuable resource brings together the writings of major theologians from the church's history for a new generation of students.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

William Placher teaches religion and philosophy at a university nearby to my schools and residence; I've had the opportunity to hear him speak several times. During his time as a teacher, he has written books on religious studies, theology and history for use in classroom settings, and this

two-volume set of readings is one such useful product of Placher's. Originally intended to be reader companions to his earlier work, 'A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction' (1983), Placher discovered to his surprise and delight that these books are able to stand alone without the earlier volume as a useful narrative of the development of Christian ideas. The first volume deals with Christianity from the earliest days in Apostolic times to the late Middle Ages, immediately prior to the Reformation. The first few chapters deal with the earliest Church Fathers, who were writing at a time Christianity was still trying to form an identity, often over and against beliefs commonly referred to as heresies. The first chapter deals with Gnosticism and opponents -- Placher pulls in writings from Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, Eusebius, and a few anonymous pieces (the Gospel of Thomas, for example). The second chapter moves forward a century into more elaborate developments of Christian thought; Placher chose writings from Justin Martyr, Clement, Origen, and especially Tertullian. The third chapter deals with the Trinitarian and Christological issues that pushed forward through the various credal formulations -- here, Placher draws from a wide range of writers, including the Cappadocian fathers, writers on 'losing' sides such as Arius and Nestorius, and text from the creeds themselves. Chapters 4 and 5 highlight East and West.

'Readings in the History of Christian Theology, Volumes 1 and 2' edited by William Placher are almost exactly the sort of thing I was looking for when I was planning an 'advanced' Sunday School study group examining major commentators on Christian doctrines throughout the last 2000 years. I say almost, because the editing policy which selects small fragments from a large number of documents is really not what I had hoped. A second weakness is that oddly, some major documents were left out. On the first point, an important discussion topic may be the Nag Hammadi documents, their reflection of Gnostic doctrines, and their relevance to Christian orthodoxy of the first 200 years of the Common Era. The editor includes the most important of these Gnostic gospels, the 'Gospel of Thomas'. Unfortunately, the editor only sees fit to include a scant 12 out of the 114 verses printed in, for example, Bart D. Ehrman's 'Lost Scriptures'. This is not nearly enough to accurately contrast this document with the canonical gospels on all major points such as the nature of Jesus and the Gnostic cosmology story, which is distinctly different from the one early Christians inherited from the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament). On the second point, there are important highlights which I really wish would have been included such as the text of Martin Luther's 95 Theses and the writings of Jonathan Edwards on Free Will, especially as the snippet from Augustine is on the subject of Free Will and the topic comes up again in the selection from Blaise Pascal's 'Pensees'. On the whole, the book tries to cover all bases, even if that means the coverage is as thin

as a leaf of phyllo dough.

"We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, by whose grace we see farther than they. Our study of the works of the ancients enables us to give fresh life to their finer ideas, and rescue them from time's oblivion and man's neglect." (Peter of Blois, 12th century) Christian Theology: "Christian theology is a series of footnotes to St. Paul." (Sydney Ahlstrom) A definition by John Leith states briefly but clearly that, "Christian theology is critical reflection about God, about human existence, about the nature of the universe and about faith itself in the light of the revelation of God recorded in Scripture and particularly embodied in Jesus Christ, who is for the Christian community the final revelation, that is, the definitive revelation which is the criteria of all other revelations." Historical Theology: "The history of philosophy, especially that philosophy which hired itself out as a handmaiden to theology is a succession of conflicting views and of attempts to reconcile them...theology, which occasionally stoops to speak the language of ordinary men, would describe it as a process of peacemaking between mutually misunderstood friendly opinions. But while in theology peacemakers are pronounced blessed and are they who inherit the kingdom of dogma, ..." Harry Wolfson, Religious Philosophy. "Christians have always disagreed about what they ought to believe, and both sides in those disagreements have often made a persuasive case. The study of the history of theology teaches that diversity within Christianity is nothing new. Studying the history of theology on its own terms, rather than only when theology touches on some other branch of history, also teaches greater respect for the intellectual coherence of the theological tradition.

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