

**THINKING**  
THE FAITH  
**LIVING**  
THE FAITH

*An Introduction to Christian Theology*

Christopher C. Walker

# Praise for *Thinking the Faith, Living the Faith*

In this very readable book Chris Walker offers an overview of Christian faith with the wisdom of one who has spent a lifetime preaching, teaching and living it. I will certainly be recommending it widely, especially to people who are new to the faith or who are ready to explore it a little more deeply. When Chris Walker invites us into ‘the household of faith’, he doesn’t just leave the key under the mat. He opens the door himself and greets us with warmth and sincere hospitality. The kettle’s on and the scones are fresh from the oven. I encourage you to accept the invitation.

*Rev Prof Andrew Dutney, Principal, Uniting College for Leadership and Theology,  
Professor, Flinders University School of Theology, SA*

Chris Walker’s book provides a clearly articulated reflection on core themes of the Christian faith.

It is a wonderful resource for people who are seeking to grow deeper in their faith, and for those who are exploring Christian faith for the first time.

The invitational and open questions at the end of each chapter encourage people to reflect more deeply on what they believe.

This book will be a source of encouragement for those who are seeking ways that they may faithfully witness to the love, reconciliation, and hope that God desires for us all.

*Dr Deidre Palmer, Educator and Counsellor, President-Elect, Uniting Church in Australia*

*Thinking the Faith, Living the Faith* invites the reader to experience faith as something to be intellectually processed and also lived. It is a wonderful introduction to theology. I loved reading it.

As an introduction to the Christian faith it is so helpful and I love that it reflects the Uniting Church. Chris Walker’s own conclusion to the cross and what Jesus did is just excellent. The glossary at the back is very useful.

*Rev Bronwyn Murphy, Consultant, Uniting Mission and Education, NSW/ACT Synod*

As an experienced Christian disciple, minister, teacher and leader, Chris Walker is well placed to write this introduction to theology from the context and perspective of the Uniting Church in Australia. This book is a reliable guide to Christian theology in contemporary life and addresses some of the questions that both faithful disciples and atheists rightly raise.

Reading the book arouses many rich conversations that I would love to hold with Chris and other faithful disciples. The book enables these conversations by providing questions for consideration.

I commend this book for both personal reading and group discussion as a solid foundation for an exploration of the Christian faith, and a reliable guide through many questions that arise in thinking and living the Christian faith today.

*Rohan Pryor, Lay Leadership Educator, Centre for Theology and Ministry,  
Uniting Church in Vic & Tas*

*Thinking the Faith, Living the Faith* is easy to read and grasp the concepts. Chris Walker is always clear and concise. I would recommend this book for use in theological colleges, for lay preachers and for study groups.

*Rev Dr Amelia Koh-Butler, Director Mission Resourcing, Presbytery and Synod of SA*

# Preface

This book was written after the encouragement of a couple of different people to write an introduction to Christian theology from a Uniting Church in Australia perspective. I was pleased to be prompted to do so and hope that what I have written will be helpful to many people especially but not only those connected with the Uniting Church. It is I trust an introduction to Christian theology that many people will find useful. It considers the main beliefs or themes of the Christian faith and draws on theologians and Christian thinkers from a range of traditions. It is offered as my thinking on these subjects and invites others to reflect on them in the light of what I present.

I have wanted to emphasise that all Christians are called to follow the way of Jesus which involves both thinking and action. Anyone who reflects on their faith is doing theology. All who seek to live as disciples of Jesus necessarily not only live out their faith but have to consider what they believe. Action/reflection or better reflection in action is how Jesus lived and how we are to also. Hence the title of this book, *Thinking the Faith, Living the Faith*. While the emphasis is on thinking about the faith, I have sought to give indications of what living the faith involves also in relation to each subject. Sometimes Christians can hold to beliefs about God, Jesus, the Spirit, etc. and yet not readily connect these convictions to how they make decisions and live their daily lives.

Living the faith means following the way of Jesus in every part of our lives. We have to think about our faith carefully in order to assist us to do so. We also need the assistance of the Spirit who enables us to respond to the call of God to follow Jesus in the first place and then to grow and live as disciples. The discernment of the Spirit is required to interpret the Bible and hear God's word for our lives. The Spirit can help us to make up our minds in relation to the issues we face. We do so in relation to others as living the faith and thinking the faith is necessarily done not just as individuals but as members of the community of faith, the church.

We are all influenced by our faith tradition more than we often realise, so it is helpful to be self-conscious about our own Christian tradition

in order to appreciate this and also to critique it. Some of our received beliefs may need consideration in order to really affirm them for ourselves while others may need to be modified in the light of our experience or coming up against the thinking of others.

What is offered here are my considered views on basic Christian convictions which lead us to live in a way that is in accord with the way of Jesus for our time and culture. We are in a post-modern, post-Christendom context in Australia which has its challenges and opportunities. God calls us to be faithful to Jesus in our situation. We are to be thoughtful disciples of Jesus who seek to do the will of God and witness to Jesus as the one to follow also through our words and actions.

I want to express my appreciation to those people who read the draft manuscript and made helpful comments on it. I have also valued the encouragement and assistance of Ian Price the chief executive officer and Alan McKee of MediaCom the publisher.

Christopher C. Walker

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## Introduction

This book is an exploration in Christian theology. Theology as the name implies, coming from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *logos* (word), is words about God or discourse about God. Anyone who thinks about their faith and reflects on it is doing theology. I will do so drawing on those who have given a great deal of thought to the Christian faith.

I come from a Uniting Church perspective. The Uniting Church came from the joining together of Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches in June 1977. So it has both Reformed and Methodist theological traditions in its make-up. Presbyterian and Congregational Churches share the Reformed tradition with the main difference being the emphasis on the local congregation in Congregationalism. Methodism was a major part of the Evangelical Revival in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the United Kingdom and was also taken to America where it flourished. The Uniting Church is often spoken of as having a 'Reformed and Evangelical' tradition. I prefer now to use the term 'Methodist' rather than 'Evangelical' tradition as the latter term has been taken on by others, especially in the United States but also in the Anglican Church, and does not adequately represent the Methodist tradition. These are living traditions that influence the Uniting Church which is also developing its own tradition. The Uniting Church is a member of both the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the World Methodist Council. It is also a member of the World Council of Churches. It is actively involved in these world bodies.

In this book I will offer what I trust is a faithful presentation of basic Christian theology from a Protestant perspective. I will do so at times pointing out the particular emphases that the Uniting Church has with reference to both the Reformed and Methodist traditions. To a much lesser extent I will refer to Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Pentecostalism is a newer form of the Christian church and I will occasionally make reference to its emphases. The Uniting Church is consciously ecumenical and part of the 'one holy catholic and apostolic Church' (Nicene Creed). So what is offered is in the spirit of 'receptive ecumenism'.

In what follows I will also be emphasising that the Christian faith is a matter of living the faith as well as thinking the faith. Jürgen Moltmann says, “Christ is perceived and known not only with the mind and heart but through the experience and practice of the whole of life.”<sup>1</sup> In fact theology is ‘second order thinking’, namely that living the faith is primary and theological reflection is thinking carefully about our faith and discipleship. It is a matter of reflection in action. In considering how we understand God, creation, Jesus, salvation, the Spirit, the church, discipleship and Christian hope, I will be pointing to how our beliefs link with the way we should live as followers of Jesus Christ. Belief, belonging and behaving go together in Christianity. What we understand about the Christian faith needs to be thought through and relate to our time and context. We seek to live out our faith as disciples of Jesus following his way and endeavouring, with the aid of the Spirit, to become more like him. We do so not just as individuals but as part of the community of faith, the disciple community, which is the church. We necessarily live our faith as part of a local community of faith but conscious that we are part of the church that goes back to the apostles and is found around the world in different forms.

## **Ways into the household of faith**

One of the many expressions or images used of the church in the New Testament is “the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10 RSV, NEB). Lesslie Newbigin picked up on this expression in his exceptional book on the church, *The Household of God*.<sup>2</sup> In this image the church is pictured as a house or household. The word ‘household’ refers to a house and its occupants.

I want here to use this image as a way of pointing out that there are different ways into the household of faith. I am not just referring to ways into the church, though living as a Christian does imply being a member of the church as an institution, but becoming a member of the community of faith, of all those who seek to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. I propose that there are different ways into the household of faith and that people do so according to their own particular personality. While we use all the doors into the house one is likely to be the main one especially initially.

**Four doors into the house of faith:** thinking, belonging, experiencing and doing

### **1. thinking**

One, but certainly not the only way, into the house of faith is by thinking, by becoming convinced of the truth and significance of the Christian message. People who like to be clear as to their thinking and consider themselves as rational people need to be satisfied that the Christian faith makes sense, that it is coherent and consistent. They do not need to put aside their questions and doubts but are able to explore these until they are satisfied. Following Jesus is something they can rationally understand and express even as they appreciate that faith is more than a matter of rational argument.

A biblical example of this might be Thomas who needed to see the marks on the risen Jesus' hands and side before he would believe (John 20:24-29). Rather than be critical of Thomas, we do better to see him as a person who was not willing to go along with others until he was convinced himself.

This book will be an exploration of the basics of the Christian faith, an introduction to its key concepts concerning God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and discipleship. It will provide rational explorations as to what we understand about God and creation, what we say about Jesus and salvation, how we perceive the work of the Holy Spirit and the church, what it means to live as disciples of Jesus in our time and Christian hope. Nevertheless in this introduction I want to point out the other doors into the household of faith also.

### **2. belonging**

For many people they become followers of Jesus through belonging. By participating in the household of faith, by sharing with and being encouraged by people of faith, they come to be followers of Jesus Christ also. Often they cannot say exactly when they became disciples of Jesus for they were guided into it by feeling a part of the family of God. Not just their own parents but others in the household of faith took an interest in them, mentored them and made them feel part of the community of

faith until they affirmed faith for themselves and regarded themselves as members. Often such people were baptised as infants and were welcomed into the household of faith from a very young age. People in the community of the church took seriously their responsibility to nurture them into discipleship.

However, it is not just those who grew up in the church who may have belonging as their primary door into the household of faith. People who are spiritually searching may join a Christian community to explore the possibility of faith. In doing so they find that the welcome and acceptance they are given leads them to a sense of belonging to that group of Christian people even before they affirm faith for themselves. Belonging comes before believing for them. The door into the household of faith is via belonging to a particular group of Christians first. Then they use the other doors.

Timothy was a person who grew up in the faith and belonged to the Christian community no doubt prior to his affirming it for himself. The author of Timothy, a veteran missionary writing to a younger colleague, says, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, in you” (2 Timothy 1:5).

### **3. experiencing**

Some people have an experience of God and as a result seek out a Christian community in order to follow up on that experience. In colloquial terms God just ‘shows up’ in their life in a way that never happened before and they are struck by the experience. Or it may be that they are connected to the household of faith to some extent but it is not till they have a particular experience of God that their faith comes alive. Then they affirm their faith and become convinced of the reality and presence of God in their lives. Those who have such experiences of God are likely to express them in somewhat dramatic terms and can clearly recall when and where they were at the time. Others who may have been in the church for a long time can sometimes feel they have missed out when people speak in such ways. Or they may diminish such people’s experience by playing it down or regarding the person as emotionally less

mature. Yet clearly some people do have such dramatic experiences of God which leads them to faith.

The most obvious choice for a dramatic experience of the risen Jesus is Paul. Luke in Acts mentions it three times. While on the way to Damascus Paul was blinded by a light from heaven and fell to the ground. He heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:3-5).

#### **4. doing**

Then there are those who only really come to enter the household of faith having become involved in doing something significant with others of faith. This is more than belonging. It is doing something that matters. Such people want to make a difference and in being involved in something that does so results in deepened commitment and faith. It may be that a person gets involved in a team of people who engage in a community project. It could be an activity such as a beach mission. It may be a production which is then taken to other churches which leads to affirming faith in a way that was not the case previous to that activity. It might be a mission trip in which they went to a different culture and were involved in a building project. Being exposed to a different context and seeing what a group of Christians can do for others and perhaps experiencing the faith of those being helped leads to entering the household of faith.

For a biblical example of doing we might think of the seventy who Jesus sent out in pairs to engage in the ministry he was doing, namely teaching, healing and exorcism. We are told they returned with joy, saying, "Lord in your name even the demons submit to us!" (Luke 10:1-17).

#### **Faith**

Faith is the response a person makes to the Christian message. One is not born into Christian faith, though some cultures have assumed people are Christians. In Western society the long period of Christendom was such that people assumed their nation was Christian. Nevertheless, there

were periods of revival in which people came alive to faith and did not consider it to be culturally given. In 18<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain John Wesley was criticised for suggesting that many people were not Christians or only ‘almost Christians’ until they made a personal profession of faith. Christian faith then is not a matter of culture or ethnicity but is a personal response to God in Jesus Christ.

In his own Jewish culture and time Jesus proclaimed the coming kingdom of God and called people to respond. Mark provides us with a brief summary of his message. “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.’” (Mark 1: 14-15) His message was about the reign of God, God’s rule of love, justice and peace which he was inaugurating. The response called for was repentance and belief, which is to change one’s ways and have faith in what God was doing through Jesus.

Following the resurrection of Jesus the early disciples proclaimed Jesus as the one to give allegiance to for he was affirmed as God’s Messiah and Lord. Jesus embodied the kingdom of God. So to follow him meant entering the reign of God and serving its purposes. Paul says he was set apart for the gospel of God which he described as follows, “the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 1: 3-4). Paul saw his task as an apostle was to bring Gentiles to the obedience of faith and into the community of Jesus’ disciples. Paul emphasised that the initiative was with God, God’s grace, which enabled people to receive the message about Jesus Christ and respond in faith. In writing to the Corinthians he said, “no-one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3).

There are a number of words related to ‘faith’, such as trust, confidence, reliance, conviction, belief, assurance, loyalty, allegiance, commitment and dedication. Each of these words can be used of faith. Belief has often been a primary one for the New Testament does speak of believers and of the need to believe in Jesus. Belief, however, can give the impression that

faith is primarily about intellectual assent to the Christian message. In the past this has often been an emphasis. In Catholic tradition children were not admitted to the Eucharist until they were confirmed and could affirm the catechism they were taught and the Apostles' Creed. Traditional Catholic theology emphasised faith as the acceptance of doctrinal propositions. Early Protestants gave primacy to faith as personal trust in God, though later Protestantism also took a propositional turn. There is a growing consensus that faith is primarily personal and relational but there is necessarily a reflective component.

Some have suggested that a way to resolve the issue is by a three-fold analysis of faith using three Latin words that relate to faith: *fiducia* (trust), *notitia* (knowledge of what is to be believed), and *assensus* (assent). Faith is primarily trust. We trust in God who is characterised by faithfulness and steadfast love. Such trust does require some knowledge of God and assent to that knowledge. So while faith is primarily a matter of reliance on God, there is a necessary intellectual element. Unfortunately faith is often regarded as belief in God in a way that lacks intellectual grounding. Faith is perceived as unfounded or even irrational confidence.

In the theology of both John Calvin and John Wesley there is careful reasoning provided concerning faith and also confidence that is given through the Holy Spirit. John Calvin defined faith as, "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit".<sup>3</sup> John Wesley described his experience of assured faith in his diary of 24 May, 1738. "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone, for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death".<sup>4</sup> The *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church says: "To God in Christ all people are called to respond in faith. To this end God sent forth the Spirit that people may trust God as their Father and acknowledge Jesus as Lord".<sup>5</sup>

In this book faith will be regarded as primarily trust and its related words such as confidence and assurance. There is also the component of allegiance and dedication to the way of Jesus. H. Richard Niebuhr spoke of faith as trust and loyalty. He said trust is the passive aspect and loyalty is the active side. <sup>6</sup> We trust in God who has revealed God's self to us as trustworthy and loving. The supreme instance of this is Jesus' life and teaching, his death and resurrection. Our response is also one of loyalty. We commit ourselves to follow the way of Jesus Christ and to seeking the reign of God he inaugurated. We give our primary allegiance to Jesus and endeavour to do the will of God in our lives guided and enabled by the Spirit.

So faith comes about in response to God's initiative, God's grace reaching out to us, supremely through Jesus Christ. Yet we have to respond to the gift by accepting it and affirming it in trust and reliance. There is also the element of decision and commitment resulting in loyalty. Nevertheless, there should be the recognition that faith does not come first from the human side but from God who loves us, holds faith out and invites a response. For faith to be well founded there has to be an encounter with the living God and some knowledge of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit leads us to Jesus and to God enabling us to respond in faith and love.

## **Sources for Theology**

The primary sources for theology are as follows: Scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

**Scripture** is preeminent because it records the experience and understanding of God in ancient Israel, in Jesus Christ and the first witnesses to him. The *Basis of Union* says, "The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated" (BU par 5). Through scripture God speaks to the Church. The Church's proclamation is necessarily controlled by the Biblical witnesses as this provides its foundation.

Theology is an ongoing activity and so **tradition** is an important source of theology. Roman Catholic theology gives Thomas Aquinas and papal statements a great deal of attention while the Orthodox look to the early fathers as their main authorities. The Uniting Church continues to learn from the witness of the Reformers expressed in various confessions and to John Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons (BU par 10). It also is guided by the *Basis of Union* and has its own developing tradition.

**Reason** involves not only rational reason but also story. In fact we are more influenced by narrative than by abstract logical reasoning. Stories impact us in a way that goes beyond just the intellect. The Bible itself is primarily narrative though it contains many forms of discourse including history, myth, law, poetry, wisdom literature, prophecy, gospels and letters.

**Experience** is not only personal but cultural. It is not just our own personal experiences as individuals, as men and women, but as members of particular cultures and groups that influences how we understand the world. In the Uniting Church a new preamble was added to the Constitution. It affirms that indigenous people through their culture had already encountered God. Christian indigenous people continue to be influenced by their culture as well as by the biblical witness. Culture is of course also to be critiqued by the gospel. The same is true for all of us whether our primary culture is Western, Asian or Pacific Islander for example. Cultures also interact so we have various influences upon us. We need to come to appreciate biblical culture to enable it to help us to discern God's will amid competing voices.

My approach to theology will be to give priority to the biblical narrative as I develop my theology. Theology was strongly influenced by Greek philosophy in the early church. In the medieval period theology was impacted by the rediscovery of Aristotle. More recently existential philosophy and process philosophy has been drawn upon by different theologians. Without ignoring these, my own preference is to stay close to the biblical accounts, especially the gospels, using more concrete terms than the abstract ones of philosophy for the most part. In doing so, I draw upon the biblical and theological scholarship especially of the last hundred years in coming to my conclusions.

## Context

This book will explore what we mean by God and what we can with confidence say about God knowing there is always a mystery to do with God. God is always greater than human beings and their concepts. God is 'other' than we are. The prophet Hosea in ancient Israel in speaking for God wrote, "I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst" (Hosea 11:9). So humility is fitting for the task of theology. We seek to understand faith but recognise we do so with limited human capacity in the presence of the vast mystery we call God. Theology is an ongoing task for there is always more to learn, critiques of past attempts, new issues, and changes in language. It is always a matter of 'faith seeking understanding'.

Theology is necessarily carried out from a particular context. In the past some theologians assumed they were offering a universal perspective not recognising how situated their theology in fact was. They inevitably wrote in the context of their time and culture and church tradition. So this book of theology is self-consciously done from an Australian context in a particular church, the Uniting Church in Australia. As stated above I am offering a Uniting Church perspective drawing on our Reformed and Methodist traditions though not limited to them.

I am also conscious that I am writing in postmodern Australia in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Australia no longer has a Christendom culture. Though it never really was Christendom with the church at the centre, it certainly is not now. It is a Western society that is primarily secular, individualistic and consumerist though it is also multicultural and multi-religious.<sup>7</sup> The church is regarded by people in the wider society with ambivalence, some negativity, and general ignorance as to its beliefs and activities apart from its social services. The challenge for the churches is to present the Christian message in a way that connects with people so they see its relevance and significance. Becoming a follower of Jesus and part of his community is counter cultural just as Jesus' message of the kingdom of God contrasts to the way the world of politics and economics typically function.<sup>8</sup>

I will endeavour to present a basic understanding of Christian theology that relates to the reality and deeper issues that Australia and societies in general face in our global world. It is a global context in which the media bring us news from around the world and people can tap into all kinds of information from their smart phones and computers. I am convinced that the Christian faith continues to be the best way in which one can understand life and live a meaningful and worthwhile existence. This is based on the belief that God is the Creator who came to reveal God's purposes in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit would lead us towards the fulfilled reign of God. In the present we can know we are the loved sons and daughters of God. We can co-operate with God and others towards making God's reign of compassion, justice and peace more of a reality on earth.

## Questions

At the end of each chapter, I have provided some questions for consideration. These are given to assist people to do their own theological reflection in the light of what has been presented. I would encourage people to begin with a time of prayer asking God's Spirit to assist as they explore the topics. The questions could be discussed in a small group or considered by individuals. Responses could be written in a journal and returned to at the end of reading the book by way of revision. It may be interesting to see if there have been any changes in outlook that have come about so that the responses would now be somewhat different.

## Endnotes

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1990) p119
2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God*, (London: SCM, 1953)
3. John T. McNeill (ed.), *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2 Vols (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 3: 2: 7, p551
4. Percy Livingstone Parker (ed.), *The Journal of John Wesley* (Chicago: Moody, 1960) p64
5. *Basis of Union* par 3
6. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, (NY: Harper, 1943, 1960) p18

7. For more on the Western context see Christopher C. Walker, *Seeking Relevant Churches for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Melbourne: JBCE, 1997) p11-14
8. See Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984)

### **Questions for consideration**

What is the main door(s) through which you came to faith?

What do you understand faith to involve?

Which of the sources of theology are most important for you?

How would you describe your context?