



Christian Theology

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

To some people theology is something a bunch of tweed jacket ivory tower academics smoking pipes sitting around contemplating things that are cerebral and impractical. Theology is just some dry, boring, irrelevant thing. Theology is a composite of two Greek Words:

- Theos → God
- Logos → Word or idea or logic

Theology is the study of the idea or word or the concept or the logic of God. As one writer has put it,

*"Theology is disciplined reflection on God's self-revelation."*¹

I love this definition: *"Theology is an effort to make definitive statements about God and his implications in an accurate, coherent, relevant way, based on God's self-revelations.... Theology is learning to think God's thoughts after Him."*²

Good lovers are good knowers of the beloved. You cannot separate knowledge from love.

It refers not merely to God but also to everything that God touches.

study of the Bible (Bibliology), the study of Christ (Christology), the study of sin (Hamartiology), the study of salvation (Soteriology), the study of the church (Ecclesiology), the study of last things (Eschatology).

Theology long ago was known to be the Queen of the Sciences. The word "science" comes from the Latin word *scientia*, meaning "knowledge." It was considered to be the central science that grounded and bound all other sciences or forms of knowledge.

This is a deeply significant topic for any true thinking and feeling believer, especially in the times we find ourselves!

Another important word to know is DOCTRINE. It comes from a Greek word *didaskalia* which means an act of teaching or that which is taught.

In short THEOLOGY is the really the systematizing, reflecting, rationalizing, and synthesizing of DOCTRINES (teachings).

There is a methodology to doing theology well. It involves:

- Collecting
- Synthesizing
- Understanding
- Summarizing

The teachings of scripture so that believers can have a clear understanding of what to believe and how to live in light of that understanding.

¹ Bruce Riley Ashford and Keith Whitefield, *Theological Method: An Introduction to the Task of Theology*, in *A Theology for the Church* edited by Daniel L. Akin, pg. 39

² Comes from: ESV Study Bible index article entitled "Biblical Doctrine: An Overview" (pg. 2505)

This means having an understanding of what the text of scripture actually says and means. This therefore involves EXEGESIS: the process of seeking to get the correct interpretation of a particular passage of scripture.

This means understanding original languages, historical contexts, literary styles, and authorial personalities.

Because of this THEOLOGY has a definite human element which means it is susceptible to error, reworking, correction, and the like. Thus in a very real sense it is a "science."³ It also has other various similarities to "science" in that it:

- Deals with an objective testable subject matter
- Has various paradigms or models or theories that consider new or adapted information or data for reflection
- Is subject to the rules of logic and rational reflection
- It shares borders with other important fields of study, such as literary studies, history, and philosophy

There are different types of theology. For over simplification consider these:

- NATURAL THEOLOGY
- HISTORICAL THEOLOGY
- BIBLICAL THEOLOGY
- SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

These different theologies work in tandem many times to help give a broader and richer understanding of biblical and theological understandings.

ALL OF LIFE IS THEOLOGICAL

In fact I would argue — All of life is deeply theological. What you think about God is at the core of many of the big beliefs in our lives:

- Anthropology — What does it mean to be human? What is mankind anyways?
- Sociology — How should humans organize? What is
- History — Is there a purpose to existence? Is history going somewhere?
- Morality — How should we live our lives? What is right and wrong? What is justice?

And these kinds of beliefs shape many of the big issues going on today in the areas of:

- Identity
- Rights & Ethics
- Sexuality & Marriage
- Meaning & Purpose

You can see this in our day and age of the link of theology to practical issues! Ever heard someone say, "Don't judge people! You should just love people and not judge," or "God wants you to be happy," or "Jesus just loved people. Love is love is love"?

If so then you will notice, or need to notice, that these are all theologically loaded phrases. They each have a particular view about truth, love, justice, Jesus, and God. Where do these views come from? Is there a correct view or not a correct view?

³ R.C. Sproul, *Everyone's A Theologian*, pg. 8-9 AND Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd Ed, pg. 35-36

BUT WHY THEOLOGY AND DOCTRINE?

Some may say isn't relationship with God deeply existential, personal, mystical even? The answer is yes and no. Yes faith is about relationship and trust but it is not merely that. Faith is also epistemological in nature. In short it is a belief system that has rational components to it.

Why focus on all this airy-fairy high-falutin theology stuff? Doesn't that just cause conflict and wars? Aren't we just supposed to: "BE A GOOD PERSON and LOVE GOD"? After all didn't Jesus say that is the greatest commandment?

My answer to those questions is a set of question: How do you define GOOD? How do you define PERSON? How do you define LOVE? How do you define GOD? My point is you cannot even fulfill the seemingly "simply adage" unless there are definitional parameters to the words your using! In other words you are already doing THEOLOGY when you make the assumptions about what God wants, who God is, and what we are to do.

Every Christian should learn theology. And the reason I say this is upon these few points:

1. **Theology reveals your faith** → In virtue of being a Christian you have a set of predisposition and ideas (either knowingly or unknowingly) about God, Jesus, sin, salvation, sanctification and the like. In short every believer is a theologian. The question is whether your theology is (a) biblical, and (b) logical, (c) coherent, and (d) historical. As C.S. Lewis said,

If you do not listen to Theology, that will not mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you have a lot of wrong ones
C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

2. **Theology broadens your faith** → When you study theology you come to realize that it is not merely "Me-and-Jesus" like you are some island unto yourself in your religion. You and I stand upon the shoulders of 2,000 years of worth of thinking, believing, rationalizing, philosophizing, hymn-writing, defending, debating, and creedifying the great ideas within the Faith. Christianity is not some mystical experience, it is a distinctly historical faith. Thus studying theology makes you rooted, it broadens your understanding of how The Church has held onto the faith.
3. **Theology enriches your faith** → When you study theology it has an effect of richly deepening your faith to make it more than just a mystical emotionalism. Separating knowledge from love only makes you more susceptible to error. It makes you irrational and irrational people are unstable people. We live in a day and age in which people are seeking after experiences — they crave "the spiritual." Theology has a way of intellectually edifying the mind of the believer so we are far more well rounded as believers. We understand our own "system-of-thought" or "system-of-practice" as it were. Theology helps us frankly not be ignorant of our own traditions and history!

C.H Spurgeon made the point very clear on the significance of studying theology when he said,

It has been said by someone that "the proper study of mankind is man." I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God's elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.

There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, "Behold I am wise." But when we come to this master science, finding that our plumbline cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass's colt; and with solemn exclamation, "I am but of yesterday, and know nothing." No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God....

But while the subject humbles the mind, it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe.... The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and Him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity....

I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.⁴

⁴ Quoted in J.I. Packer (but adapted), *Knowing God*, 17-18

WHAT DO WE DO WITH WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED?

A very big question confronts us then. What do I do with the knowledge that I acquire on these subjects? What do I do with all of this theology stuff that I have acquired?

I would ask you to consider the words of the writer of Proverbs who said this about acquiring knowledge about God:

² making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
³ yes, if you call out for insight
and raise your voice for understanding,
⁴ if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures,
⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.
Proverbs 2:2-5 (ESV)

Notice that this is not about airy-fairy cerebral knowledge about God. This is about understanding the faith and fundamentally to understand who God is, who we are, and what His desire is for us. It's about knowing Him. The knowledge of God is not merely mind but heart-and-mind. It is the beautiful interweaving of intellectual study and existential application.

Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD!
² Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
who seek him with their whole heart,
³ who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways!
...
¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you;
let me not wander from your commandments!
¹¹ I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you.
¹² Blessed are you, O LORD;
teach me your statutes!
¹³ With my lips I declare
all the rules of your mouth.
¹⁴ In the way of your testimonies I delight
as much as in all riches.
¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts
and fix my eyes on your ways.
¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.
Psalm 119:13 & 12-16

Our aim is not to know things about God. The Devil and demons know stuff about God. The goal is to KNOW HIM PERSONALLY. So it's a big difference between knowing about Him and knowing Him. For example I could say I have found the perfect person for you! I can show you pictures, I can describe them in every detail possible physically and personality wise, I could even perhaps give you a clip of them speaking or interacting with other people's so you could get mannerisms and some personality. But all of these descriptions – all the information – doesn't mean you truly know them. That requires time, energy, and sacrifice which in time humbles you and leads to the freedom of commitment.

Now this is important to understand! In a theology class I cannot make you “know God” What I can do is help you “know about Him” and even give application, reflection, and meditation. But just like me introducing you to the future lover, I can tell you about them all day but until you take the initiative no true personal “knowing” will ever take place.

We were made to KNOW HIM and be KNOWN BY HIM! As J.I. Packer has said,

“What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the eternal life that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. . . . What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment, than anything else? Knowledge of God. . . . [Knowing God] provides at once a foundation, shape and goal for our lives, plus a principle of priorities and a scale of values.”⁵

May we become as the Apostle Paul who said after listing off a long description of his scholarly life and religious positions,

Whatever gain I have, I count all as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him. . . . ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection. . . .
Philippians 3:7-10 (ESV)

When you come to know Him you will not see Him merely as an emotional experience or a cerebral level of esoteric knowledge. We will be a balanced people who are both knowledgeable and love filled.

² May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. ³ His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.
2 Peter 1:2-8 (ESV)

It is interesting to note the use of the word “to know God.” Consider the words of Geerhardus Vos,

It is true, the gospel teaches that to know God is life eternal. But the concept of ‘knowledge’ here is not to be understood in its Hellenic [Greek] sense, but in the Shemitic [Hebrew] sense. According to the former, ‘to know’ means to mirror the reality of a thing in one’s consciousness. The Shemitic and biblical idea is to have the reality of something practically interwoven with the inner experience of life. Hence ‘to know’ can stand in the biblical idiom for ‘to love,’ ‘to single out in love.’ Because God desires to be known after this fashion, he has caused his revelation to take place in the milieu of the historical life of a people. The circle of revelation is not a school, but a ‘covenant.’⁶

How do you determine what is central theologically and what is more a conviction or an opinion?

Here are some considerations:⁷

- (1) Clarity: How biblically clear and frequent is this particular issue concerned?
- (2) What does it say in relation to other doctrines?
- (3) God: Relevance to the character and nature of God?
- (4) Gospel: Relevance to the Gospel?
- (5) What does it reveal about the nature of God?
- (6) History: What has the broad historical understanding consistently of this been?
- (7) Effect upon personal and church life

⁵ J.I. Packer, *ibid*, 33-34

⁶ Geerhardus Vos as quoted in Michael Horton’s, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, pg. 107

⁷ Comes from: *ESV Study Bible* index article entitled “Biblical Doctrine: An Overview” (pg. 2505)